

# Hidden Histories: Conflict, massacres and colonisation of the Pilbara

## Summary Report

Dr. Malcolm Allbrook and Dr. Mary Anne Jebb

### *1. Introduction*

Wangka Maya decided to apply for funds to research hidden histories of the Pilbara after two Walmajarri women from Fitzroy Crossing returned a series of song lines to Nyangumarta people living in the Pilbara and Bidyadanga. The songs were dreamed by a Walmajarri man in Nyangumarta language, and tell of dreams in which the old man saw people from places in Nyangumarta country, including Boningarra (Pardoo Spring), a big freshwater place at the time white people first came to the country, and Wallal (Wandari). At these places, a lot of Nyangumarta people were said to have been killed, and this old man saw them and heard their songs in the spirit world.<sup>1</sup> The old man taught these songs to Daisy Andrews and Nada Rawlins who in 2002 brought them back to Nyangumarta people in the Pilbara.

Like many Aboriginal people in the Pilbara, Wangka Maya Board members had grown up with stories about conflicts of the 'early days' in which their old people had often faced violence and in many cases lost their lives. Almost every Pilbara family can tell of this history, a time in which their community lifestyles were severely disrupted by arrival of Europeans to settle in their country and dispossess their old people.

Some Aboriginal people in the Pilbara believe it is time to forget a past about which their old people expressed incredible pain and focus instead on the future. At the same time, they agree that these stories need to be told, and that it is time for them to take their place in the way history of the Pilbara is written.

Wangka Maya understood that these stories are often extremely sensitive but that many Aboriginal people want them to be told because they represent a true version of history. Telling this history will help people to understand what their old people experienced. Many younger people do not know these stories and wonder why their old people are sometimes afraid of white people. Many white people too are ignorant about this history and do not understand that it explains a lot about how Pilbara Aboriginal people live today.

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<sup>1</sup> Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre CD, 'Nyangumarta Massacres Song Lines', 2002.

Wangka Maya believes that telling this history will help today's black and white populations to understand each other better, and that it will help to bring reconciliation by repairing a fractured past.

## 2. *Hidden Histories Project*

In October 2008, Wangka Maya employed two historians Dr. Malcolm Allbrook and Dr. Mary Anne Jebb to research historical documents of the Pilbara and to start to collect oral histories from older Aboriginal people who carry stories from their old people about bad things that happened in the early days.

This was a difficult job because a lot of things that happened in the early days have been covered up or were never written down. Sometimes people writing reports concealed the truth because they were afraid they would get into trouble if the Perth government knew what they were really up to. Sometimes reports have been lost or files destroyed. Only a few police files describe in detail the kind of things that were going on in the bush.

In 1882, a police man named Patrick Troy investigated a massacre in Upper Gascoyne near Middalya Station. He reported that four Aboriginal people had been killed and described the evidence in great detail including that the Aboriginal people were shot in the back which did not match with the report by the pastoralists. This was a very violent event: 'The natives appear to have taken shelter under the only covering they could find – the branches of trees, and in that position they could not have effectively used their weapons had they been inclined to do so.'<sup>2</sup> The policeman knew who had done these things, but the government in Perth decided not to press charges. The police were told to keep a close eye on two white pastoralists because 'once having drawn blood makes men indifferent about shedding it again on the semblance of a fight, as I know from experience.'<sup>3</sup>

Reporting in Troy's level of detail is rare. It is likely that a lot of bad things that happened were never found out and never reported to authorities, so there is no record of them at all other than the stories and memories of some of the older people who heard about these events. There was often no-one to watch some of the white people who went into the bush. Often they were rough and hard people used to fending for themselves and were quick to pull out a gun. Even one of the respected historians for the colonial government who wrote about the European settlement of the Pilbara as a celebration of European pioneering, a man named J.S. Battye wrote that these things happened:

Men who undertook the burdens of pioneering and went out into unknown country carried their lives in their hands, and to shoot quickly was often their only safeguard.

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<sup>2</sup> PC Patrick Troy to Magistrate Robert Fairbairn, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1882, CSR 1504, Vol. 2, emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> Colonial Secretary, 11<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1882, CSR 1504, Vol. 2.

Such men may have been technically guilty of murder, but even that was preferable to being stalked like game and treacherously slain by bloodthirsty savages.<sup>4</sup>

The researchers spent a lot of time in the Battye Library and State Records Office in Perth looking at old documents from the times when white people first came to the Pilbara. They looked at records of many things that happened in the early days including:

- Battles and massacres, and how the old people tried to resist white people taking over their country.
- How white people set up sheep and cattle stations, and forced Aboriginal people to work for them.
- Early days of the pearling industry that used to run out of Cossack, and how many Aboriginal people from all around the Pilbara were captured and forced to work on pearling boats.
- Police records and how white people in the early days tried to control Aboriginal people.
- How Aboriginal people responded to all these things, and ways in which they tried to hang on to their traditional way of life.

The researchers looked at the way the history of the Pilbara has been written and published in books. Many of these histories are written from the point of view of white people and tell stories in a way not always fair to Aboriginal people. They paint them as trouble makers who deserved what they got if they resisted, but if they played the white man's game, they would be looked after and given food, work and a place to live. They saw Aboriginal people as a cheap source of labour and did not understand their ways and respect them as people with a rich cultural life and a strong religious connection to the lands their ancestors had lived on since time immemorial.

Not all of these written histories are like this. Some historians have tried to be fair to Aboriginal people and understand what was happening in these early days of colonisation. Tom Gara has written the story of the Flying Foam massacres and spoke with many old people about their memories.<sup>5</sup> Kay Forrest looked at old documents and letters to try and understand what happened to the old people in the Ashburton.<sup>6</sup> Noel Olive wrote about the pearling industry and methods used by white people in the early days around Roebourne to control Aboriginal people.<sup>7</sup> Most of these books are in libraries in South Hedland and Karratha.

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<sup>4</sup> Battye, 1915, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> This story is in a book by Peter Veth 1993, 'Burrup Peninsula Aboriginal Heritage Project: A Report to the Department of Conservation and Land Management 1993', Perth

<sup>6</sup> Kay Forrest 1996, *The Challenge and the Chance: The Colonisation and Settlement of North West Australia 1861 - 1914*, Hesperian Press, Perth

<sup>7</sup> Noel Olive 1997, *Enough is enough: A History of the Pilbara Mob*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle

Some Aboriginal people have told their stories about these early days. Some, like Peter Coppin, Alice Smith and Peter Stevens have written books about their lives and their ancestors.<sup>8</sup> Aboriginal organizations such as Wangka Maya, Juluwarlu and Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation in Roebourne have been working with old people on their oral histories and have published books to put some of these stories into print.<sup>9</sup> There have been some films about the history of Aboriginal people in the Pilbara. One of the best known is *Exile and the Kingdom* which was made in 1991, but more and more films are being made, many by Aboriginal organizations.

So there are some good things happening in the effort to correct the way Pilbara history has been told and Pilbara Aboriginal people are leading the way in this. Wangka Maya hopes that this Hidden Histories project will contribute to these efforts in an important way, and bring more people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to an understanding of what really happened in the early days.

### 3. *Early days stories: what really happened*

The researchers have produced a detailed report for Wangka Maya which provides historical evidence for many things that happened in the early days. This report is a summary. If people are interested in finding out more, they can get a full report from Wangka Maya.

The full report provides documentary evidence for the historical events described below:

### 4. *Exploration accounts by white people*

One of the first white people to visit the Pilbara coast was a British naval officer Phillip Parker King. In his diary, he writes about how he captured an Aboriginal man on the islands off Dampier and Burrup Peninsula. He chased an Aboriginal man who was trying to get away on his log. The man jumped into the water and swam under the boat:

It was four or five minutes before he was caught, which was at last affected by seizing him by the hair ... and dragging him into the boat, against which he resisted stoutly, and, even when taken, it required two men to hold him to prevent his escape. The cutter was anchored near the central island, where a tribe of natives were collected, consisting

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<sup>8</sup> Jolly Read and Peter Coppin 1999, *Kangushot: The Life of Nyamal Lawman Peter Coppin*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra; Alice Bilari Smith 2002, *Under a Bilari Tree I Born: The Story of Alice Bilari Smith*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle; Loreen Brehaut and Anna Vitenbergs (eds.) 2001, *The Guruma Story: Told by Guruma Elders led by Peter Stevens*, IAD Press, Alice Springs

<sup>9</sup> There are books such as *Listen to the old people* and *Wumun Turi* available at Wangka Maya and Juluwarlu in Roebourne has some good oral history books such as *Know the country, know the song*.

of about forty persons. The whole party appeared to be overcome with grief, particularly the women, who most loudly and vehemently expressed their sorrow.<sup>10</sup>

Setting their captive free, King saw him meet his family, who examined his body carefully and listened to his story. Then, 'they all got up, and, after shouting and hallooing to us, they went to the opposite side of the island, leaving our presents on the beach, after having carefully examined them.'<sup>11</sup>

In 1861 a man named F.T Gregory came into the Pilbara over land looking for pastoral country in the areas where white people had not travelled. Gregory was worried about being attacked and always had his guns ready. One day near the Harding River before Roebourne existed, he ran into some people who tried to get him to leave their country:

... they watched their opportunity, and suddenly set fire to the grass in several places at once around the camp, and ran off as hard as they could. As this was an open act of hostility that was necessary to be chastised for, although I did not wish to seriously hurt them, they were allowed to run a suitable distance, when a charge of small shot was fired after them, a few of which taking effect on the rear of the principal offender, induced him ... to make an apology, and try to lay the blame on the theft of the previous day on the dogs.<sup>12</sup>

After a small settlement had been established at Roebourne in 1866, the Resident Magistrate, a man named Robert Sholl, sent out exploration parties to look for good land to set up stations. These men always had guns and were quick to use them if they felt threatened. They write about running into traditional owners who sometimes tried to help them find water or showed them a way through their country. At other times they tried to force the white people to leave.

A man named Alexander McRae was on one of these expeditions. At Curlew River, he wrote that he was surrounded by between 30 and 40 'natives, painted white, each carrying a large bundle of spears.' Deciding that it was 'time to stop their advance', Trevarton Sholl (son of the Resident Magistrate) ordered P.C. James to fire at them, which he did and cut the spears out of one man's hand':

... but this had not the desired effect, as they still came on and tried to surround us in a thicket through which we were passing. Their yells had brought another tribe to their assistance, making our position rather critical, encumbered as we were with the pack-horses. Another shot was now fired, which struck the foremost man below the left

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Parker King 1969, *Narrative of a Survey of the Intertropical and western coasts of Australia performed between the years 1819 to 1822*, Adelaide Libraries Board, Adelaide, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> F.T. Gregory, 'North West Australian Exploring Expedition' in *Exploration Diaries*, Battye Library, AN PR 5441.

breast, which had the effect of causing a hasty retreat on his part, followed by the others, and we saw no more of them.<sup>13</sup>

#### 5. *De Grey River*

A story by Nyamal elder Teddy Allen tells of a massacre in the early days at De Grey River. Allen was born in the 1920s, and heard these stories from people who had been kids at the time:

And when the white man come into the land, course he had a gun with him, and soon as he come into the camp, so they all rush into him and try to spear him, ... and then he fire a shot, and start shooting them. When he start shooting them, so they fight back and trying to throw a spear on him ... So what happen, he shoot the lot of them and just about wipe the camp clean off then. Nothing left of it.<sup>14</sup>

The first white man to have a station on De Grey was Charles Nairn who arrived in 1863. He wrote in his diaries that there was often conflict between white people and traditional owners. He was not afraid to use his gun to maximum effect:

As for shooting to frighten savages by the noise, I always did and always will protest against it. If you must fire, fire to hit them or something pretty close to them to let them see the noise has another property belonging to it.<sup>15</sup>

It is hard to know for sure what happened in these times on De Grey because there are large gaps in the written records. But there was definitely some killing and bloodshed. Even a white man called Charles Harper, a part owner of De Grey station could not deny this, but he reckoned only a few Aboriginal people had been killed and that they deserved it because they were threatening white people and trying to drive them off their country.<sup>16</sup> But another white man called Peter Ferrera who was there wrote a letter to *The West Australian* newspaper many years later saying that he had been in the Pilbara when white people were first trying to settle it and he saw at least forty people getting killed and that it was not their fault.<sup>17</sup>

#### 6. *Lagrange Bay 1865*

Karrajari people have grown up with stories about a massacre of their ancestors in 1865. This took place after three explorers named Panter, Goldwyer and Harding were killed near Lagrange in a fight in which it is said that fifteen Aboriginal people died. Karrajari people today say that

<sup>13</sup> Alex. McCrae, Report of Expedition to Exmouth Gulf from Port Walcott, June – July 1866, includes T.C. Sholl, Broadhurst, McCrae, J. Edgar, P.C. James & native Peter', in *Exploration Diaries*, Vol. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Wangka Maya 2003, *Listen to the Old People: Aboriginal Oral Histories of the Pilbara Region of Western Australia*, South Hedland, pp. 38 – 39.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Nairn, 'First settlement in the North West: Diary of Charles Nairn, May 1863- March 1864', typescript in Battye Library shelves, 919.413/NOR

<sup>16</sup> *Perth Gazette and WA Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1864

<sup>17</sup> *The West Australian*, 16<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1892

the killings took place because white men had desecrated a sacred place and ignored warnings to leave.<sup>18</sup>

An expedition under the leadership of Maitland Brown was soon sent out from Perth to bring back the remains of the explorers for burial and punish the killers. After tracking them for days and capturing Aboriginal people to guide them to the killers, a battle took place between his party and about seventy Aboriginal men. Brown described the fight in *The West Australian*

The fight went on without any sound but the incessant report of our rifles, the occasional whiz of their kilies and dowaks, the wobbling of their clumsy spears and the rustling to and fro of the natives and our horses. In ten minutes those of the natives who were able had gained the mangroves and all was over; six remained upon the plain dead and dying, and about twelve others stand little chance of recovery. The only damage done to our side, was a serious wound inflicted by a dowak on William's mare's head, which for some moments completely staggered her. The blow was intended for her rider but, fortunately for him, she threw up her head and received it.<sup>19</sup>

Brown counted the number of dead at six, with twelve others seriously wounded. Oral traditions say that many more than this were killed and that revenge was brutal.

#### 7. *Government presence in Cossack and Roebourne*

White people started to take up stations in the Roebourne area from 1863, when John Withnell and his family, including his twenty-one year old wife Emma and her brother John Hancock, established a station at Mt. Welcome, and John Wellard, A.R. Richardson and William Shakespeare Hall nearby at Harding River. In journals and letters, some of these settlers write that there were good relationships with traditional owners many of whom worked on their new properties. At the same time, Richardson wrote that he and his fellow colonisers 'always carry our revolvers with us just to be prepared for anything.'<sup>20</sup>

Robert Sholl arrived in 1866 and set up a government office, a police station, a court and a gaol in which most prisoners were Aboriginal. Records kept by Sholl are an important source of written information on these early times around Roebourne but, like many of the records, they are incomplete so it is difficult to be sure exactly what went on in these times. But enough remains to get a picture of what things were like for Aboriginal people. The 'Occurrence Books' are Sholl's daily record of events, documenting daily activity of the Roebourne office including the tasks of Aboriginal chain gangs and the role of individual police officers, PCs Griffis,

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<sup>18</sup> See for example the story of Trudi Ridge, a Karajarri/Yawuru woman in Singh et.al. *Aboriginal Australia and the Torres Strait Islands*, p. 414. Kay Forrest, p. 16 and Tom Austen, pp. 55 – 56, also write about these events.

<sup>19</sup> *Perth Gazette and WA Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1865.

<sup>20</sup> Journal of A.R. Richardson from April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1865, Battye Library, Microfilm, Acc 310A.

Francisco and Glover. His 'Journal' provides more information, much of it about his family life and arguments he had with other colonisers.<sup>21</sup>

### 8. *Flying Foam*

From the writings of Sholl and letters of other colonisers such as Alexander McRae, we can get an idea of what happened at Flying Foam in 1867. This story has been told by Tom Gara, a historian from South Australia.<sup>22</sup> Two posses, one travelling by land, the other by sea, were sent by Sholl to punish Yaburrara people who were believed to have murdered a police man Griffis and two of his colleagues. McRae's account in a letter to his sister uses language from those times that does not give exact names or numbers of people killed but records punishments that took place and that Aboriginal people were taught a lesson they would never forget:

The natives have been rather troublesome of late. Hitherto they confined their depredations to stealing a little flour or the odd sheep, but a few days ago murdered a Police Constable & his assistant that had been sent out [to] arrest some of them for flour stealing. Together with two men the crew of a pearling boat with whom they were camped near the coast. Two strong parties were organized to go out & give them "fitz" – one by land & the other by sea to co-operate with the land party in a craft organized by the Govt. for the purpose. I was in charge of the Land lot. Farquhar & Anderson was out with me – a great many lost the number of their mess.<sup>23</sup>

Tom Gara tried to unravel details of exactly what happened at Flying Foam and spoke to a number of Ngarluma and Yaburrara people, as well as looking at old records. Even so, details of the Flying Foam massacre remain unclear and it is likely it will never be known precisely what happened or how many people were killed. Stories of the old people tell of many people dying, and this is confirmed by some of letters from other white people. Gara found a letter from a settler called Taylor reporting that Griffis had been killed because he had stolen an Aboriginal woman. The posses carried out 'most cowardly and diabolical acts both on innocent women and children.' Another white man named David Carley, who was living in Roebourne, reported that at least sixty Aboriginal men, women and children were killed.

Later, the police man who replaced Griffis, a man called Albert Francisco, hunted down three men near Fortescue River who he believed had killed Griffis, and shot them all.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The 'Journals' and 'Roebourne Occurrence Books' are in the State Records Office of WA; Series 1750, Cons 194 and Series 1751, Cons 194

<sup>22</sup> Peter Veth 1993, 'Burrup Peninsula Aboriginal Heritage Project: A Report to the Department of Conservation and Land Management 1993', Perth

<sup>23</sup> The McCrae Letters, Battye Library, Acc 286A/1 – 28.

<sup>24</sup> 'Occurrence Books', 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1868

### 9. *Couyoupulo Station*

Francisco lost his job just a few months later when his violent behaviour against Aboriginal people became too bad for the Government in Perth to ignore. Francisco and some of his companions were accused of shooting an old man named Toonawarra at Taylor's Couyoupolo station between Roebourne and Karratha. Taylor reported the incident to Sholl:

I heard the cries of a woman. I went over to see what was the matter. Shea and Francisco were there mounted ... they had run the woman down, and were just starting the two girls alongside Francisco. Shea had his gun unslung and the girls were crying. When I went over both begged I would intercede for them, they should not be taken away, as did the blacks who were present. Toonawarra followed after them ... and when they were at the Gorge, Francisco saw him from a hill, and asked him if he had come after the woman and shot him in the back.<sup>25</sup>

Sholl tried to ignore the incident, but Taylor sent his complaint to Sholl's boss in Perth, who sacked the police officer.

### 10. *Pearling fleets*

'Black-birding' is a term used to describe the kidnapping of Indigenous people from their homelands to work on pearling boats operating out of Cossack in these early days. This caused a lot of conflict around the Pilbara. White men travelled all around catching young Aboriginal men and marching them to the coast where they would sell them to pearling boats. There was a lot of violence around this activity, and sometimes white men trying to catch Aboriginal people were killed.

In 1873, a black-birder named Robert Shea and his off-sider Miller were killed by Aboriginal people at Mukkine station on the De Grey. The *Perth Gazette & WA Times* reported that three Aboriginal men named Simon, Sharp and Anderson had been arrested for the murder. A witness named Cudemara (aka Punch) stated that Shea and Miller had travelled up the De Grey to get men for pearling fleets and had collected a large number including the three alleged murderers. Shea had been killed while he slept because he had been 'going after women'. The three men were found guilty of manslaughter as there was no evidence that they had willfully murdered Shea and Miller.<sup>26</sup>

Conditions on pearling boats were very rough, and sometimes Aboriginal men were killed trying to escape.

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<sup>25</sup> W.A. Taylor to Robert Sholl, 25<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1867, CSO, Vol. 646/89 – 91.

<sup>26</sup> *Perth Gazette & WA Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1873.

In 1868 a man called Richard Rowley was found guilty of shooting an Aboriginal man named 'Chubby' on a boat near Port Hedland and was sentenced to twelve years with hard labour. The press reported the evidence of P.C. John Watson who witnessed the killing.

I tried to persuade them not to shoot the natives but to tie them up, give them a rope's ending [flogging] and then let them go. Charles said that if he did that, the whole tribe would be upon them. Chubby then jumped off the boat and was attacked by Rowley and others. Two boats chased him and fired perhaps 20 shots. Another native was also shot. I heard the report of a gun and a splash in the water, and on turning around I saw the native rise to the surface; he appeared to be quite dead, blood and bubbles coming from his mouth.<sup>27</sup>

### *11. Ashburton*

On the Ashburton, E.T. Hooley established a station in 1868 over 200 miles from Roebourne, and this area became the scene of persistent conflict between colonizers and Aboriginal people. Hooley asked Sholl to send police to the area and in July 1869 a police party

... went up and down the river 40 miles each way & made an example of several natives. In one of the encounters Hooley was nearly speared, the weapon passing within an inch of his back as he stooped down to avoid it. Just before the party arrived, a camp of hostile natives had been surrounded & routed by Hooley's men.<sup>28</sup>

This was the so-called 'Battle of Minderoo' in which Sholl reports that 21 Aboriginal people were shot. It is probable that this is less than the real number of people killed or injured, because Sholl says that the police party travelled up and down that river 'making an example of several natives'. This may mean that an aim of the posse was to clean out Aboriginal people from all around the area. There was never any inquest into these deaths.

Oral histories of some descendants of these people at Minderoo say that a massacre took place near Duck Creek, which is one of the most significant sacred sites in the region and is regularly visited by people from all around. The old people wanted to keep white people away from these places and were said to have repeatedly warned colonizers to stay away, warnings that were not listened to.

Even after this massacre, the Ashburton was a rough place for traditional owners for some years. In 1888, *The West Australian* reported;

an affray ... between the police and a number of natives on the Upper Ashburton while attempting to arrest natives for cattle stealing. One of the natives was shot dead. The

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<sup>27</sup> *Perth Gazette and WA Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1868

<sup>28</sup> 'Occurrence Books', 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1869

police were obliged to retire, the natives being in very considerable numbers and very determined.<sup>29</sup>

In 1892, *The West Australian* reported another violent incident involving David Bresnahan who was working at Ashburton Downs station:

The natives numbered 38 and the musterers, the two white men ... and their eight native assistants. Bresnahan and Nicholson and all their men were wounded, and the party finding themselves outnumbered and in imminent danger of losing their lives were compelled to fire their revolvers, with the result that three natives were killed and two severely wounded.<sup>30</sup>

### *12. Controlling Aboriginal populations: police activity*

After Robert Sholl retired in 1881, the next two resident magistrates, Edward Laurence (1881 – 1883) and Edward Angelo (1883 – 1886), were more sympathetic to Aboriginal people and tried to make sure they were treated fairly by police and the justice system. For this they were criticized by local white settlers who claimed they were biased against them.<sup>31</sup> Local Justices of the Peace were usually local businessmen, pearlers and pastoralists. At Cossack, police sergeant Payne said that it was hard to get a fair hearing for Aboriginal people because they had a vested interest. In 1886 he wrote:

It is almost impossible to get any white evidence in these cases, the feeling being so strong against the police for taking any steps against the pearlers in favour of the natives. And if any Justices sit with the Govt. Resident, it is impossible to get a conviction, as all the Honorary Justices are very deeply interested in the pearling & Native questions.<sup>32</sup>

Police correspondence files and occurrence books between 1886 and 1888 show that police activity was aimed at keeping in check the level of conflict between Aboriginal and white people. Cossack and Roebourne occurrence books are full of reports of Aboriginal people being charged and imprisoned, mostly for absconding from the service of pastoralists and pearlers, and for drunkenness and 'loitering'.<sup>33</sup> They provide evidence of the level of scrutiny and control exerted by authorities over Aboriginal people in the township. Most were either imprisoned for short periods for 'absconding' or drunkenness, or sent back to stations to which they are tied on 'contract'.

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<sup>29</sup> *The West Australian*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1888

<sup>30</sup> *The West Australian*, 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1892.

<sup>31</sup> *The West Australian*, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1881

<sup>32</sup> Police Correspondence File, SROWA Cons 430, File No. 26/87, 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec. 1886.

<sup>33</sup> Cossack Police Station Occurrence Books, SROWA Cons 430, Acc 366 1 – 3.

The police often sent patrols around the region, arresting Aboriginal people for activities such as sheep and cattle killing, or leaving their place of 'employment'. Often, when these people were arrested, police would pick up witnesses, chain them up with prisoners, and march them back to Roebourne for a court hearing. When court was over, these witnesses were set free and left to find their own way back to their homelands.

There are many examples of this activity in police files. In 1888, a police man called Best went to the Hamersley Ranges to investigate claims of cattle killing. The patrol captured a large number of alleged offenders and detained witnesses, who were all kept chained during the day and at night. One witness, a man named 'Anderson' escaped during the night but was recaptured. Payne could not understand how this escape had taken place:

Native Anderson ... was chained around the neck which was fastened with a handcuff. The other natives were fastened to the same chain and the end of the chain was fastened to a tree. He was also chained by the ankle to native Peter.<sup>34</sup>

### 13. The 1890s

By the 1890s, a lot of the violence of the early days around Roebourne and the coast was settling down. Most Aboriginal people were by this time tied to station labour by contracts. But as colonisation spread throughout the Pilbara, new inland mining centres like Marble Bar and Nullagine saw a lot of violence as Aboriginal people who had not yet encountered white people found themselves displaced from their country. New police stations were set up to control the Aboriginal and mining populations in Nullagine and Marble Bar. A lot of conflict came about when desert people tried to stop white people and Aboriginal station people from other parts of the Pilbara coming on to their lands.

In August 1892, six Aboriginal station workers, including a part Aboriginal man named James Coppin and a child were killed near the Hamersley Ranges by desert Aboriginal people. A police party went into the Oakover area to punish the offenders and reported killing four Aboriginal people.

It appears that PC Crockett and Mr. Mitchell were putting on, or removing, the natives' chains. Mr. Ball being a short distance away filling a water bag, when the natives got PC Crockett and Mr. Mitchell down, and nearly strangled them. Mr. Ball hearing the cry, rode up and fired on the natives, killing four, one of the bullets going through a native and nearly through Mr. Mitchell, entering his right breast and lodging in his shoulder.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Police Correspondence File, SROWA Cons 430, File No. 1184/88.

<sup>35</sup> *The Nor'-West Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1893.

#### *14. Bendhu murders*

In 1897, a white man Earnest William Anderson was found guilty of murdering three Aboriginal people at Bendhu station near Bamboo Creek. His crime were described as 'particularly brutal', as he and his brother murdered 'Spider', 'Polly' and 'Biddy', and assaulted three others, 'Kandy', Louie' and 'Minnie', two of whom were children aged 12 and 8. The story was that the six had been employed on Bendbu, had escaped to Redbank, but returned when they ran out of water. On their return they were tied up and flogged with a knotted rope, and kicked. In sentencing E.W. Anderson to life imprisonment for manslaughter, Chief Justice Onslow called it a 'deliberate, base and cruel murder of a man and two women, and the inhuman flogging of two mere girls besides.'<sup>36</sup>

#### *15. Braeside*

In 1899, a doctor from Marble Bar, Dr. Frederick Vines, was killed by Aboriginal people while visiting Braeside station on the Oakover River. This incident was described by a witness, Ferdinand Beurteux who was employed at the station. The killers had come into the station from the desert aiming to kill the station manger Mr. Hodgson. Beurteaux said that Hodgson was 'the hardest cruel despicable wretch I have ever seen', who he had seen flogging his Aboriginal workers with pick handles and kicking them.<sup>37</sup> Oral accounts by two Aboriginal people, Mr. Bruce Thomas and Mrs. Doris Mitchell, say that after this, the killers were pursued by police and a massacre took place at a place inland from Braeside called Waguliguli. Anthropologist Norman Tindale interviewed a man named Windapu, who marked the spot where this had happened on a mud map. Mrs. Mitchell, whose late husband was a child on Warrawagine station at the time, said that Hodgson had been targeted because he mistreated a pregnant woman at the station. Her husband then went and got the desert people, telling them to 'get that man, the white one'.

#### *16. Conclusion*

Even though a lot of evidence has been lost or was never recorded properly, there is still plenty to prove that the words of the old people about conflict and killings in the early days are true. There was a climate of violence in these times with the aim of controlling Aboriginal people and intimidating them. Sometimes there were large scale massacres of Aboriginal people, but it is difficult to know for sure exactly where these happened and how many people died. We may never know exact details of what really happened. Official reports and Aboriginal accounts of these episodes are often very different. But even so, written evidence shows that there were likely to have been massacres at De Grey River, Flying Foam, and along the Ashburton. There were many other incidents in which Aboriginal people died that happened throughout the region.

The main question is what does all this bad history mean in today's world?

<sup>36</sup> *The West Australian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct. 1897, 5<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1897; 'The Coolgardie Miner', 21 & 22 Dec. 1897

<sup>37</sup> Letter, Ferdinand Beurteux to his mother from Braeside, Feb. 22 1899', Battye Library Acc 1262A

There is no doubt that the old people suffered a great deal and tried to stand up for their country and their culture and lost their lives in the battle. But it is important to remember that many Aboriginal people resisted colonisation and adapted their ways of life so that they and their children could survive as a people. The old files show, that even in these hard times, many Aboriginal people used their own strategies to survive and make their own way in the new world that came after white people came to this country. The challenge now is to use this history to build a better place in today's world.

How can this be done when there are still so many problems for Aboriginal people in white society?

One important strategy is for Aboriginal people in the Pilbara to take control of their own history and make sure that the true story is told. The words of the old people have rarely been heard in the historical record but there is no reason why this should continue. It is important to respect what the old people experienced by making sure that their stories are heard and become a part of the way Pilbara history is told.

The researchers suggest that Wangka Maya starts on this job immediately so that older people of the Pilbara can be a part of it. They recommend that Wangka Maya apply for funding to run a major oral history program so that anyone who wants to record their stories can do so. Some Aboriginal organizations have already started on this very valuable work, but there is much more that needs to be done.

An oral history program should involve all the Aboriginal organizations of the Pilbara so that younger people can be trained to operate recording equipment and sit with their old people to record their stories. In this way, stories will be preserved for future generations and the kids will be able to understand what their old people went through and why they lived their lives the way they did.

Many of the old people have already died taking their stories with them so Wangka Maya should not wait long to do this. Otherwise these stories of the early days will be lost forever.

Once this oral history program is underway, people will be able to decide the best way to honour and remember their old people and heal their country. Some might decide to put up memorials to ancestors who died. This has happened in one or two places in Australia. Others might decide they want to put their old peoples' words into a book, on a video or the internet so that the rest of Australia can know their stories. Or they might just be happy knowing that the words of their old people have been preserved on disks for future generations. Whatever people decide, the effort will be worth it.