

SKY PILOT NEWS

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Jennifer

Baulkham Hills Rotoract Club gave each child at Marella a new pair of shoes and slippers.

Photo by courtesy of
Cumberland Newspapers.

MY HOME, MY COUNTRY: From the Sky Pilot's Log, 2CH Broadcast

This story was written over forty years ago, when many of the Aborigines were still living a tribal life; conditions have changed but there is still a grim warning for us today.

Where the great river sweeps round the stony outcrop that can be seen from the Gulf of Carpentaria lies a large grassy plain on the borders of Arnhem Land. On three sides flows the river; on the fourth side is the strange, jumbled outcrop of rock, hardly large enough to be called a mountain, which is sacred to the Aborigines. There are shallow caves in this rock, worn by time and the elements, the floors of which are smooth and shiny with the feet of countless wallabies and the soft tread of reverent Aborigines.

For ages past the Aborigines have looked upon this place as their spirit home; they depend on it as the mythical Antaeus depended on his contact with the earth for his very life and strength. According to tradition the culture heroes, the tribal ancestors, had travelled through these parts and established sacred places in them. The present members of the tribe believe that their own spirits had existed here before they were incarnated, and that after death these spirits would return — probably to await re-incarnation. Here sacred ceremonies take place; here the medicine man works his magic. The natural food supply depends on the increase ceremonies held here; and the rainmaking ceremony has taken place during countless periods of drought and want.

As the sun sinks to rest the fireflies flutter like living sparks about the mangroves, and the sound of the dance — loosely termed the corroboree by the ignorant white man — rises on the evening breeze. ★ ★ ★

Jim, the old stockman who had been George's mate for years, was worried. He had lived amongst the Aborigines for over thirty years, and he knew and understood their laws and customs, sympathizing with their beliefs. In the years he had lived in Arnhem Land he had already seen the passing of many tribes; he mourned their going as a national loss. One day he came to me, his face clouded with worry. "Smithy," he said, "do you know that outcrop of rock down-river that the blacks call Nullaone?"

"Yes, I know it well. That's where most of the tribal ceremonies take place. Why do you ask?"

"Because a white man has chosen that place for a selection".

"He can't do that It's all leasehold."

"It should be, but there's a pocket between George's country and mine. We look on it as a

kind of 'no man's land.' Neither of us has bothered to take it up. When we muster it we share the cleanskins, but it rightly belongs to the Aborigines, and we don't disturb them more than we can help."

"It's too small a block to be worth running cattle on."

"I know that. We never thought anyone would try to take it up, and that's why neither of us bothered about it. Now the Lands Department has been and gorn and leased it as an agricultural block."

"But it's no good for agriculture. It's all stony outcrop and low-lying river flats. The rocks can't be cultivated, and the flats will be flooded by the first decent wet season we have."

"Yes," Jim agreed. "Me and you and George know that, but not the Lands Department; to them it's only a square on the map. I reckon that was all it was to the peanut cockie who took it up."

"Who is he? Someone I know?"

"No, he's a stranger — just out from England — that's how he fell for it."

"Couldn't we talk him out of it? I mean, if we explain about the floods he could go back and ask for a better block."

"It's no go, Smithy. Me and George has been at him about it, but he's as stubborn as a mule. He reckoned he took up the lease and it'll take more than us to put him off. Well, I guess if he gets flooded out and loses all he's got, that's his look out. He's been warned."

"But what about the Aborigines? What will they do?"

"That's just it. If Dick — that's the fellow's name — if Dick drives them away from them hills it'll be the end of the tribe; they couldn't live without them sacred places. Will you have a word with Dick and see if you can't make him see reason and justice?"

"I'm willing to try; but if you and George have failed, I can't see that I can do much more. I have no authority over that block, as the Aboriginal reserve does not extend to that side of the river."

"I know that, and Dick ain't the kind of bloke you could bluff. But come down with me and see what you can do. I've got a spare horse on the other side of the river."

"I'll come with you as soon as we've had a drink of tea. The billy's boiling now."

"That suits me fine. I've never turned down a drink o' tea yet. I could drink tea until my back teeth were under water."

We found Dick on the block he had taken up. Already he had pitched a tent, and the way it was pitched showed that he was a new chum, unused to the ways of the bush. The man himself was a weedy little fellow with a sharp nose and eyes set rather too close together. His pasty colour and shrivelled skin spoke of London fogs, slums and undernourishment as a child. During the ride down I was wondering how I could approach the subject, but Dick didn't give me a chance.

"Strike me if it ain't more visitors! I can guess what brought you 'ere. You blokes is all the same; just because I'm a Pommy you've got me set. I've taken up this land and nothin' you can say is goin' to make me shift."

"What about the floods?" Jim asked. "The first time the river comes down in a decent flood you'll be swept into the sea."

"Blimey, that's just talk," said Dick. "I don't believe the river ever comes this high. Even if it did that's my business. 'Ere I am and 'ere I'm goin' to stop. If I go broke that's my business."

"I'm sorry," I said, "that you take it that way. We know this country and the river and what Jim says is true. But, as you say, that's your business. It was Jim's duty to warn you about the flood, as he has, and if you choose to ignore the warning, that's your own look out."

"That's wot I said," Dick broke in. "This is a free country and I'll please myself."

"But," I continued, "it wasn't about the flood that I wanted to speak to you. The Aborigines in this district — that is, the Nullakun tribe — look on this place as their most sacred ground. All their beliefs and customs are bound up in association with these hills. I hope you won't interfere with them more than necessary."

Dick jumped to his feet. "Now git this straight," he almost shouted. "This block of land is mine. I paid for the lease, and everythin' on it is mine, see? I ain't sharin' it with anybody, black or white. I've only got a few miles of country, just a little agricultural block. I ain't greedy like Jim or George, who've got about 2,000 square miles each. I've hunted the blacks already. There's plenty more better country round. They're all right."

"But," I claimed, "that's not the point. They don't want better country. All their beliefs are centered in these hills. For instance, they don't believe a child is conceived: they believe that the spirit children are already dwelling in these hills, and when a lubra is ready a spirit child enters her from the stones or trees, or the water she drinks from that rock pool."

Dick laughed. "I don't care if they believe the lubra finds her baby under a gooseberry bush or

under a coolibah tree. This is my land, and if I catch a blackfellow trespassin' I'll put a bullet through 'im. Now I'm busy, and if that's all you have to say, you can clear out."

Jim gathered up the reins in his left hand. "Come on, Smithy," he said in disgust. "We're only wastin' our time arguin' with a fool like Dick. I'm not as young as I was, but my hands are itchin' to have a smack at him. If I thought it would do any good I'd give him a bashin' right now, but that wouldn't help the tribe any. Come on, let's get movin'."

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The Nullakun tribe moved away from the rocky hills that were their spirit homes. Hopeless, dejected and sad, they said farewell to everything they held most dear; but not before the white man's warning bullets had driven them from the sacred spot. True, there was plenty of good country left for them to hunt in, but what was this compared with the collapse of their social organisation? When the white man took their sacred places he destroyed their spiritual past and present, and their spiritual hopes for the future. The old men of the tribe refused to carry on the ceremonies that could only be performed at the age-hallowed places in the hills.

Young men were not initiated, increase ceremonies no longer were held; when drought smote the land there was no rain-making ceremony to give them hope and provide the needed rain. Old men went hungry, lubras squeezed flat breasts in the vain attempt to extract the life-giving nourishment before handing over the pitiful wailing infant to the man with the nulla nulla, who silenced for ever the hungry cry.

Some of the young men speared cattle, and the police took them away to be shut between four walls, where they could not see the bright sunshine or smell the gum leaves burning. Some of the younger women drifted to the construction camps of the railway gang and sold themselves for scraps of food, cast-off clothing, and a handful of tobacco. Within a few short years the Nullakun tribe had ceased to exist — and all because they had been separated from the scared places that meant so much to them.

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Several years went by and Dick prospered. For a wonder there were no heavy floods and the rich soil yielded a bountiful harvest of peanuts, cotton and vegetables. A neat galvanized-iron hut took the place of the tent. Ground that had been trodden by countless feet of worshipping Aborigines and watered by the tears of mourners and the blood of initiation was transformed into a garden bright with frangi-pani, jacaranda

and poinciana. Then came a record heavy wet season.

The north-west monsoon came soughing over the Timor Sea. It lashed the surf into foaming spray that washed Darwin's gleaming white beaches; it changed the stately palm trees into life-like creatures of tortured, thrashing leaves. Like a howling fury, it sped through Rum Jungle; whipped the bamboos and complaining paper-barks lining the Adelaide River; took the surface from heaps of mullock and scattered it from Burrundie to Pine Creek. It paused in the Katherine Valley, then with renewed fury took the rain clouds of the big wet and hurled them bodily towards the Gulf of Carpentaria.

In the north-west a steady deluge poured onto the saturated ground. The creeks and gilgais overflowed and swirled across to meet the mighty, rushing rivers. The Waterhouse was a banker; Maiwok and Flying Fox creeks became rivers; the Jalboi and Wilton were yellow stretches of swift-flowing water; the Hodson came down in flood, and all of them joined the mighty Roper, which surged on its way, angry and relentless in the biggest flood in the white history of the country.

Jim was sitting in his hut, listening to the sound of the running creek and the croak of millions of frogs. A shout from outside brought him to his feet, and he opened the door, where two Aborigines supported the drenched figure of a white man. It was Dick, more dead than alive. Jim helped the Aborigines to carry their burden into the hut, where he peeled off the wet clothes and after rubbing down the half-frozen body, put it between warm blankets in his own bunk.

"There," he said, "that's better. You rest awhile and I'll get a drink o' tea. Nothin' like a drink o' hot tea to liven up a fellow. I'm glad you're all right. I was gettin' a bit worried, an' when Smithy flew over your hut an' saw the water risin' over the flat he came on here and dropped me a letter suggestin' I send out a relief party. I'm glad I did. Don't try to talk now, just relax."

Half an hour later, with a cup of tea inside him, Dick was able to talk. "Call that a flood," he said, "not 'alf! I thought you was stringin' me on when you warned me about it. Now I've lorst everythin'. I'm ruined, broke, hopelessly in debt. Wot a life!"

"Well," said Jim in his breezy way, "thank God you are still alive."

"Thank God! Wot 'ave I got to thank Him for? He sent the flood, didn't He, and washed

me out? Why did He 'ave to pick on me? I never done Him no 'arm. It ain't fair."

"Hold your horses, Dick! I'm real sorry for your loss, and I mean that; but I don't stand for you blamin' God for what happened to you. You was warned, an' you said it was your own business."

"But I never done God no 'arm. Why does He flood me out? It ain't fair, I tell yer."

"Listen here," said Jim. "You hunted them Aborigines away from their sacred places. You broke up their laws and customs. You shot at 'em when they tried to visit them rocky hills, where they were doin' no harm. You caused the lubras to kill their children, and the young warriors to spear cattle. You wiped out that tribe. There ain't a Nullakun tribe no more. And what happened to you? You lost a few pounds and a bit of work you put in! That was all. But your selfishness brought death and ruin to men, women and children who never done you no harm. Instead of blamin' God, you ought to get down on your knees and thank Him for lettin' you off so light."

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Sometimes white people do not realise that those that take away from the Aborigines their sacred land are destroying them as effectively as others have done with bullet and poison. Given time to adjust themselves, a mythology grows up or is transplanted; but the future of a tribe is only assured so long as its members remain in tribal territory, or until they understand and accept Christianity.

And the final entry in today's Log is taken from the 50th Psalm. God said: "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself; but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes."

BRUCE LANGFORD-SMITH: As mentioned earlier, the Council of the Mission decided to build a small cottage for Bruce and his wife after they are married in August. Since then Mr. R. P. Davis, of 23 Old Castle Hill Road, Castle Hill, has very kindly donated his modern cottage to the Mission provided we can have it moved. Permission has been granted for this by Baulkham Hills Shire Council but we are having difficulty in arranging for its removal in the time before the developers require the old site. We would value your prayers that this may be accomplished satisfactorily. We feel that this is a real provision of God, as it is essential that the Farm Manager should live on the premises.