

Introduction

This is Peter Coppin's story. It is told in fragments, moments of time and memory, all shaping the span of his life.

Peter Coppin was born in 1920 under the majestic white cadjeput trees lining the banks of the De Grey River in Yarrie country, his country. It is in the vast and rugged Pilbara, which is 3.52 billion years old and holds the secrets to life buried in its ancient soils.* Scientists from around the world come here to study the unique fossilised rock formations that they say are the key to unlocking the mysteries of life on other planets. If life forms exist or existed on Mars, their analyses will be compared with those of samples taken from the Pilbara, because these are the building blocks of Earth's species.

For Peter Coppin the land held other mysteries — as far from Western science as Mars is from Earth. He, too, regarded it as special and life-giving, but for very different and significant reasons. The land is sacred in parts of his country: there are places which are out-of-bounds to women or to the uninitiated; places where only he and other lawmen could go.

Peter Coppin was the most senior elder, the top lawman, for the Pilbara's Nyamal people in Western Australia's far northwest. The Nyamal are a coastal river people whose land stretches for hundreds of kilometres inland from the sea, across the spinifex-covered plains and iron-ore encrusted outcrops. There are no fences or signs bordering the area, but Peter Coppin knew all of his country, where it started and where it finished.

At first, he was uncertain about telling the events of his extraordinary life. There was the worry of an old man's memory, and his modest view that his story was not special enough to warrant a book. Besides, 'blackfellas' as Peter said, don't need books to keep their stories intact. 'We keep 'em up here,' he'd say, pointing to his head, passing them on by word of mouth and 'through our songs'; only 'whitefellas' want things written down, as if they would be lost to the winds otherwise. 'That's your way,' he would emphasise at the start of our work together in 1994, 'not mine'.

But gradually, over many years, the tales spilled forth, the fragments building little by little, tape by tape, into a whole. Sometimes it was difficult for us. I didn't understand his Nyamal language so he had to repeat words continually and in doing so he displayed much patience, not to mention mirth. His humour, or chiding, depending on the day, helped get us through those times. So did the unfailing help and support of his family and friends, some of whom are no longer alive, who were happy to prompt, correct and fill in the gaps (and provide a roof over my head on my visits). There were others, too, whose generosity in sharing their recollections and photographs gave great support to the project, particularly John and Katrin Wilson. Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre provided reference for the **Nyamal** and **Nyangumarta** spelling to ensure its conformity to a uniform

orthography. BHP Iron Ore gave financial support halfway through the project to assist with the completion of the first edition of the book, published in 1999 when Peter was still alive.

Back then, the other major hurdle was arranging our meetings together — our homes were more than 1700 kilometres apart, separated by immense desert areas. Finding the time to match each other's schedules involved a fair amount of juggling — Peter was an extremely busy man and had many responsibilities as a respected leader. The support of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies meant that each time the vast distance between us was cut to just a few short hours by plane.

And so the work continued, and gradually over the years we became friends. Nearing the end of the initial project in 1999, Peter gave me a gift of an old boomerang he had made many years previously. He had kept it with others he'd made in an old drum in his bedroom. He used them as percussion instruments to accompany his singing during corroborees. On a last trip back to Perth to complete the first edition draft, he handed me the boomerang which he had freshly carved with the remaining letters of his name. (Previously it had the letter 'P' carved within the traditional Nyamal design.) It reminds me of him always; a great man and good friend.

This new edition takes in the years from 1999 up to his death in 2006 and the major events of his life in between.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance given by the Fortescue Metals Group to help with the research and writing of the new epilogue, as well as support from Aboriginal Studies Press, through its Director, Rhonda Black, and Editorial and Production Officer, Lisa Fuller.

As always, Kangku's family have helped enormously sharing their memories and thoughts about Mirtanya's* last years. I particularly want to thank his wife, Winnie, for her kindness and time on my last visit with her, as well as son, Barry, his wife, Charmaine, and daughter, Nyaparu Rose.**

When I look back over the past twenty years of knowing Peter and his family, I thank them sincerely for the time we have had together, the stories he shared with me and, more importantly, for showing me the rich and spiritual way Aboriginal people view their life and land, and their place in it.

I say as I did in the first edition: thanks for letting me walk with you across your land, Peter. It was such a privilege.

* Mirtanya is Nyamal for 'old fella' and a respectful way to avoid using his name since his death. However, for the purposes of this book, Kangku's family have given permission to use his Nyamal birth name, **Karriwarna**, his non-Indigenous name, Peter Coppin, and his nickname, Kangkushot or Kangku, from the Nyamal 'knee shot' which he was affectionately called because he was accidentally shot in the knee as a young stockman and the bullet was never removed.

** Likewise, Nyaparu is the common cultural way to name someone after death or to avoid, out of deep respect, using that person's name if somebody else shares it.