

Foreword

When Jo contacted me some years ago and said she wanted to do her PhD on Palms history, I knew that this is what Palms had wanted for a long time. Bwgcoldman people needed their history documented so that their children would not forget their beginnings, their old people and their place. They needed to leave an inheritance for their children.

Of course there were pieces written about Palms throughout the years. Mostly these were written by those who had some position of authority in the administration, churches or other institutions. Bwgcoldman people poked and prodded in the name of law, God and science. Then, over the last 30 years or so, the community and individuals featured predominantly in the local rag — the *Townsville Bulletin*. But what was being said — the interpretation of events, the social, cultural and political context of Palm Island — was told by others, many of them far removed from the consequences of their words.

In some of those writings, Palm would be portrayed as a God-forsaken hellhole — a penal colony where only the savage or brave live. It was certainly not a place for nice people and definitely not a place where their children should be. Other stories were of an idyllic paradise. Balmy, carefree nights, where the fishing is good and the Aborigines received silver spoon service. A certain paradise!

But Bwgcoldman people have their own stories. These stories capture daily events of life on Palms — past and present. These stories tell of the individuals' and families' journeys to Palms made a long time ago. They tell too of the families and countries left behind. The kinship structure — who was related to whom — and importantly, who carried responsibility for what. These stories also carried people's happiness and pain. Their hopes and fears and for most, their dread. They told of psychological trauma, the impacts of degradation and subjugation and the dichotomy of powerlessness and resilience.

These are some of the stories that Jo was able to document in this book: oral history as told by the people. Jo's writing style, her pace and presentation have captured brilliantly the environment and manner in which these stories were told. As I read each chapter, I am transported into that time and all my senses are taken back then.

These stories are true. I knew them to be true before I read the supporting evidence. These are the stories I heard as I was growing up on Palms. I heard about Superintendent Curry from the mouths of people who were there. I heard about Mr Pitt in whispered conversations. The rations — I know what was in it and how little we got — because I lined up for it and grew up on it. The violence I witnessed. Not in the homes but in the streets. For crimes of 'impertinence' or 'inciting' behaviour, aka: waving to girlfriends in the dormitory or simply being late to work. These lawbreakers were beaten with pick handles because they refused to go to jail quietly. I accompanied my parents too to Bartlam's office to ask for a travel permit to Townsville for shopping. And the account of Roy Henry Bartlam! I swear I must suffer some post-traumatic stress disorder — I'm getting chest pains as I write this. He would have to have been the most controlling Superintendent on any of the Aboriginal settlements. Settlements — now that's a play on words. Bit like the 'settlement' of Australia.

As a child I felt the authority and absolute domination of this Superintendent, and I don't think I was particularly sensitive or intuitive. Yet, this was the same man who provided the Christmas dinner rations. Believe me, it was Christmas. Tinned ham, stone fruit and tinned steamed pudding. Hallelujah. This was also the crimson-faced man mountain who donned the Santa suit and us kids lined up (yes, again!) and he gave us our Christmas presents. I can tell you I wasn't the only child who was breaking out in a sweat and prepared to forfeit Christmas. But I'm not old and I had a blessed childhood. I came from a family of hardworking, law-abiding God-fearing people. If I'm feeling this way what must others feel? My age meant my experience of Palm during that period was only brief. What of people of my grandfathers' and mother's age? What do these people feel? How do they cope?

And how do other children of my generation cope? I had dormitory kids in my grade at school — from year one to year seven. Throughout these years most of these kids did not see their parents. Many had countrymen on Palms but it was the exceptional occasion that any of the kids saw their parents. Many had no one except camp people

who would take them out for the day. I didn't understand then but years later, I cried for all my mates from the dormitory. Many of them gone to an early grave. I still cry when I think of them and their stolen childhoods.

But I suppose we got our freedom of movement and in the seventies when the dormitories closed many people left to go back home. Most I know hoping to fit back in but never making it. Others never made it past Townsville. There, they met up with young men, kicked off — exiled from Palms — refusing to be tamed blacks. They slept rough, on the strand looking over the water to Palms, the only home they knew. These were the Drones. They did it hard. There were no government-funded support programs for shelter or meals. The Catholic Church provided comfort both physical and spiritual for those who came. I remember though, no matter what their circumstances, there was a real bond between the Bwgcorman Drones and a behaviour code which is lost today. I remember too, there was a special whistle and a 'hey Bwgcorman' greeting.

At this time there were also Bwgcorman people living in Townsville — now exempt from 'the Act'. These ex-Palm Island families would help each other out and they kept an open door policy for any of the 'Bwgcorman mob'.

Self-determination and self-management came with both celebration and frustration. For all the blood sweat and tears that people put in over the decades fighting for our human rights, when the administration moved out, government ensured that there was no smooth transition to community governance. Despite having total support from the then Queensland Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the churches, non-Aboriginal supporters and the 'whole world watching', control was as present and poignant on Palm Island in the 1980s as it was in the 1930s and 1950s. Meeting under cover of night was as fraught with danger in any period. Getting the message out comes with a cost.

The uprising in 2004 got the message out. No more whispered conversations. People shouted their demands for answers. The meetings were announced and open but still the threats and the exiles continued. The difference now was that the orders were not made under the 'protection' laws but under laws which are (supposed) to protect us.

These stories are our children's inheritance. The stories passed on by their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents will provide the 'fire in the belly' to move forward. This book will offer sustenance, strength and solace.

Like me, they will read this book and know the stories. They will be present in the period and feel the emotions that are stirred. P.I. Good or bad, this is our home. Oral history accounts of Palms are personal and precious. They come from within and they form who we are. Bwgcolman.

It's been an honour. Thank you Jo.

Rachael Cummins