

WALKING ON COUNTRY

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 May 2018

A shared Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman,
Rev Clare Brockett and Gillian Hunt

Reconciliation Sunday

Voice of Jennifer: Confidential submission 437, NSW evidence to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families;

Voice of Eva Johnson forcibly removed from her mother as a child and taken to Croker Island: "A Letter to My Mother";

"The Apology Day Breakfast" Ali Cobby Eckermann; John 3: 1-8; "Lest we forget – 1918-2018" by Gillian Hunt; Isaiah 6: 1-8

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

Clare

Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls

I had heard of Aboriginal children being taken from their families. I had never personally met anyone for whom this was part of their family history. And I certainly didn't ever expect I would sit inside the home, hearing a young Wiradjuri man speak along with his grandfather, telling the stories of these girls and their families. It is a hard story, with ongoing ramifications. There is no soft way to tell it.

More commonly known as Cootamundra Girls Home, this home was operated by the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board from 1911 – 1968. Under the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, approximately 1,200 Aboriginal girls under the age of 14, were removed from their families and placed in Cootamundra, between 1912 and 1975.

Girls were taken from the Mission Stations because they were considered too expensive to keep. The supposed aim of government policy was to segregate 'part-Aboriginal' children from their families, in order to assimilate them into the mainstream community!

The girls were not allowed to remain in any contact with their families and many would go and sit quietly on the cap of the well, gazing longingly down the driveway in hope of seeing a visitor who would take them home. They didn't know why they were there, nor where they were from. This was a legacy that some would never recover from.

The girls faced segregation at school – going to the bathroom and going swimming could only happen once the white mainstream kids had been. It was hammered into them to fear Aboriginal men – relationships or becoming pregnant was the last thing the Welfare Board wanted. The Motto of the home was *'Think white, act white, be white.'*

The girls were later sent to work as domestic servants in the homes and farms of middle class white people. The irony is not lost that once in domestic service, a number of the young girls become pregnant, only to have their children in turn removed and institutionalised.

Some girls from the home, aged around 16/17 were put on a train to Sydney Central Train Station, with no physical or monetary resources. No-one to meet them at the other end, no idea of where they were, where to go, how to live or survive, let alone who to trust or ask for help.

In 2004, some of the girls, now women, joined in a reunion, titled 'Journey to Reclaim our Childhood.' Some couldn't bear the pain of returning to Cootamundra and the home. Some had pieced together more of their history, others bore the obvious scars of ongoing grief and trauma. While the word was that the youngest girls were 11, it was discovered that there was a nursery - that babies and toddlers had been taken from their parents. I stood in that nursery with heavy heart, knowing that pity and helplessness was of no use. These stories need to be told.

Since Cootamundra Girls' Home closed, the 35 acre property has been passed on to the Young Local Aboriginal Land Council, who, in turn, has leased the property, on a long term lease, to the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship as a Christian vocational, cultural and agricultural centre.

It is now called Bimbadeen College and is listed as a Historic Heritage site by the NSW State Government.

Gillian

Narrandera Story

Every day we listened to stories about Indigenous communities, colleagues and groups. Stories of struggle, resistance and recognition. Stories told frankly but without rancour or bitterness.

In Narrandera it was the story of one Indigenous man's persistence to right a wrong done to his father and his grandfather. Both men had enlisted and gone to war, his dad in World War Two and his grandad in the First World War, almost a hundred years ago.

We had set off early from West Wyalong to be in Narrandera for morning tea. Our coach pulled up by a large sunny park opposite the Uniting Church. People were pleased to stretch legs, warm up in the sun, enjoy a picnic cuppa or go find a brewed coffee in the town.

We had already been told something of the story of Michael Lyons and the war memorial plaques in the nearby church so for me, it was tempting to linger outside. Our tour guide encouraged us to go in.

Having heard it, I realised his story quietly brings together Indigenous and Colonial history, Dreamtime and Christian beliefs and it speaks of one man's hard-won efforts to obtain justice.

This is my tribute to Michael.

Lest we forget

it won't take long,
come on, step in past the old church doors
the porch with plaques and portraits of war
choose a pew and listen to
a tall Wiradjuri man

talk about
his paintings on the sanctuary wall
stories of his land and law
in aqua, ochre, dots and hands
totems linked in timeless span

he's pointing out
two wooden boards inscribed with names
of soldiers gone to wars,
golden sons of this country town
farewelled together, white and brown

1918-2018

white names only
on both honour rolls, a blight he's fought
to have put right, to claim for them
an equal place and re-instate the Lyons name
despite the prejudice and fears

notice now
the Lyons names newly placed
gilding the base of each narrow frame
belated recognition
honouring the dad and grandad he reveres

lest we forget
he's picking up his painted mulga didgeridoo
singing up his story too
a hymn to his kin that brings forth tears

it only took a hundred years

Margaret

The Recovery of the Wiradjuri Language

Our Walking on Country journey began and ended in Wagga Wagga. Over a week, there had been sadness and shame: we had heard the stories of stolen children at Cootamundra girls home, the 100 years of waiting for recognition at Narrandera. We had worshipped with the communities of Condobolin and Murrin Bridge, and touched the ancient past at Mungo National Park. We heard stories of resistance at the Cummeragunja reserve where Jack Patten encouraged Yorta Yorta families to leave the government reserve to live as free people on The Flats at Mooroopna.

Our time in Wagga further rekindled hope – especially in the story of the recovery of the Wiradjuri language through a partnership of Wiradjuri elders and Charles Sturt University that led to the Wiradjuri Language and Cultural Heritage Project.

The Wiradjuri language was almost lost during the 20th century. Through the work of recovery from fragments remembered by elders, and by the pioneering work of Dr Stan Grant Sr, it has been captured in a new Wiradjuri Dictionary. The language is taught at the university, in a Graduate Certificate programme, and in many high school programmes.

We learned about the recovery at the Yalbalingada Centre, a small rural property near Wagga Wagga, where Flo Grant and other aboriginal elders teach young Wiradjuri people living skills and the Wiradjuri language and heritage.

Hearing the language spoken there, and as we did at the Cootamundra Girls home, was deeply moving. Cootamundra was established to suppress the language and annihilate traditional ways of life. Yet in that place, it was spoken fluently by a young Wiradjuri man, in the presence of his proud grandfather.

That the language has been reborn, with the support of Anglo Australian academics, like Professor Ross Chambers who joined us at Yalbalingada, at Charles Sturt in Wagga Wagga is a sign of hope and a foretaste of reconciliation.

In concluding our walking on country, we are going to watch a short 15 minutes film that is a fruit of the recovery of the Wiradjuri language, which demonstrated beautifully the way that language is the bearer of spirituality. It is an extended prayer poem about the way of life which is Yindyamarra. Yindyamarra is often translated as respect, but it has multiple meanings...to give honour to, to go slow, to take responsibility. Yindyamarra Yambuwan – Respecting Everything...

On this Reconciliation Sunday, we honour the gifts of Aboriginal culture and wisdom that are shared with all of us, with generosity we do not deserve, but which is given with grace.