



OLD MAN
FOG

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OLD MAN FOG

and the Last Aborigines
of Barrow Point

John B. Haviland with Roger Hart
Illustrations by Tulo Gordon

Smithsonian Institution Press
Washington and London

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Copy editor: Jean Eckenfels
Production editor: Jack Kirshbaum
Designer: Linda McKnight

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Haviland, John Beard.

Old man Fog and the last Aborigines of Barrow Point /
John B. Haviland with Roger Hart ; illustrations by
Tulo Gordon.

p. cm. — (Smithsonian series in ethnographic inquiry)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56098-913-0 (cloth : alk. paper). —

ISBN 1-56098-803-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Australian aborigines—Australia—Barrow Point (Qld.)—
History. 2. Hart, Roger. 3. Australian aborigines—Australia—
Barrow Point (Qld.)—Biography. 4. Mythology, Australian
aboriginal—Australia—Barrow Point (Qld.). I. Hart, Roger.
II. Title. III. Series.

GN667.Q4H38 1998

305.899150943—dc21

98-38563

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available

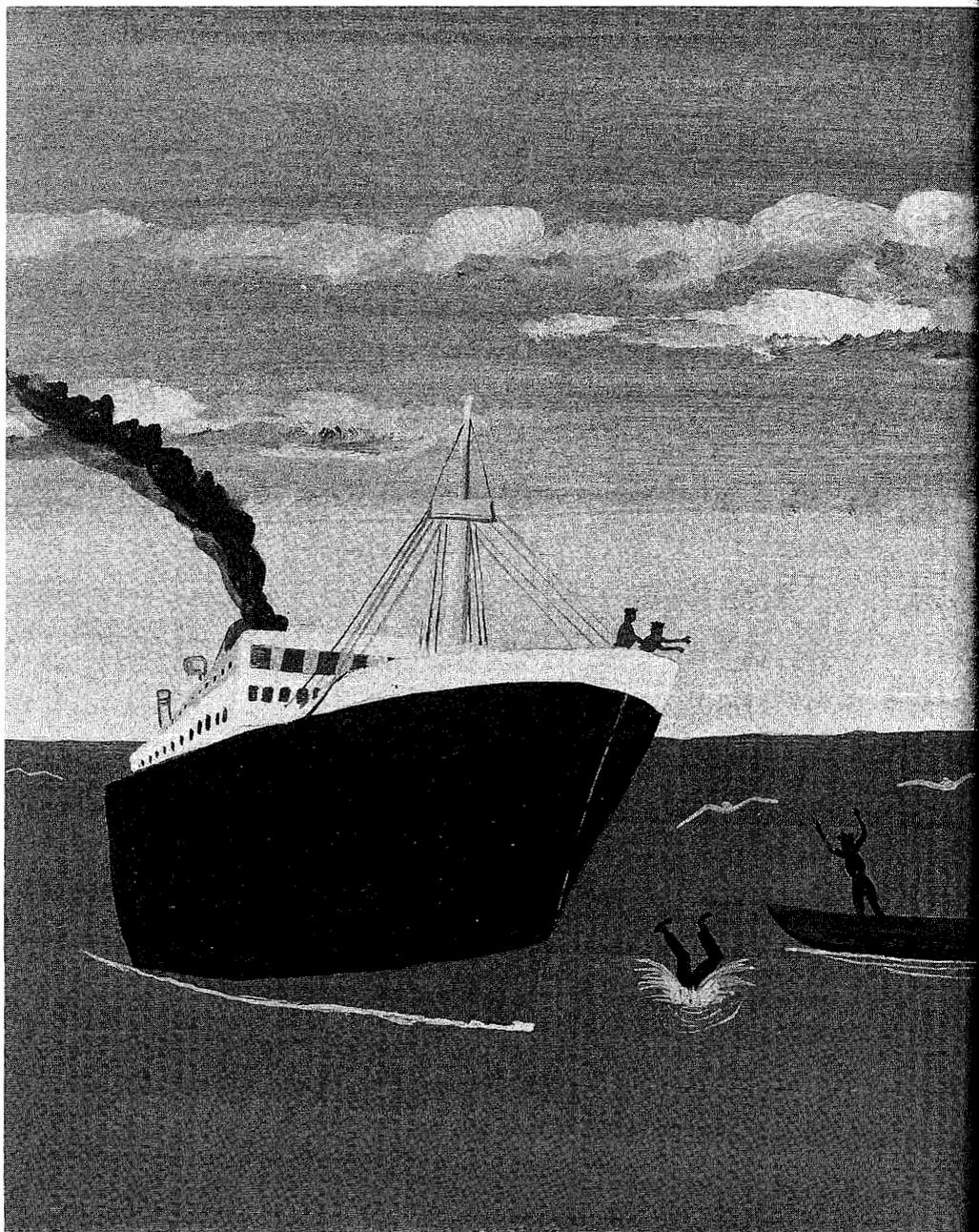
Manufactured in the United States of America
05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 5 4 3 2 1

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for Information
Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials
ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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Frontispiece (page vi): Detail from *King Harry thrown overboard* by
Tulo Gordon (figure 6)

To two cousins, Tulo *Wunba* Gordon,
thawuunh, bubu-gujin, binaal-gurraay-baga, and
Lizzie Confin Jack, *ngathu warra ngamu*,
both present throughout,
but gone too soon to see the book itself.



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FOREWORD

I was six years old when this tall American who everybody said was "half Chinaman" or "half Filipino" came to stay in Hopevale. John and Leslie Haviland were staying at old man Billy **Muunduu's** place, two doors away from our house. John was learning **guugu**, our language.

When I went next door to my **yumurr**¹ Mary McIvor's house every day to play cards or marbles under the mango tree, to listen to her daughter Amy's Charlie Pride records, or to pretend to look for **wuugul**, lice, in my old daughter Mary's head, I wondered why this white couple next door chose to live among all the black fellas, instead of with the European staff and school teachers at the top side of the mission.

Like the rest of us, they were using an outside bathroom with no hot water, the outhouse toilet, and they were eating black people's damper and **mayi**, food, all the time. What was the matter with them? Maybe they were the hippies the elders at church and Sunday school were warning us about.

John soon became formidable in his grasp of 'true Guugu Yimithirr'—as my old friend Roger would later say, "**Alu uwu mindir.**"²

In testimony to his mastery of the language, they used to tell a story (I don't know whether apocryphal) about Haviland standing with a group of men around the old curio shop (now, tragically, demolished) when a Hopevale man, newly arrived from down south, and not knowing who John was, joked to the locals, "**Ganaa ngayu yii wangarr bagal?**" (Is it all right if I just beat this white fella up?) The joker got the fright of his life when this six-and-a-half-foot American said in perfect Guugu Yimithirr: "**Nyundu nganhi baadala, ngayu warra mangaalmul!**" (Just you have a go, (and see if) I have no hands!)

I knew old man **Urwunhthin**, as Roger Hart, father of Janice and Bernard and that mob, since I was a kid. He was one of the many people who formed the social universe of my childhood and upbringing at Hopevale. I didn't see him much during the 1970s when he was out working in the cane fields at Mossman, but I knew who he was and he would have been able to tell that I was Glen Pearson's son, Charlie's grandson, and old **Arrimi's** great grandson. It's like that when you live at Hopevale. He would have known more about me than I knew about myself.

I grew up thinking that Roger Hart was just another mission man who spoke Guugu Yimithirr and, like my grandfather Charlie, was removed to the Cape Bedford Mission as a child. It was when I began to tape some oral histories of older people for my history thesis at Sydney

University in late 1985 and 1986 that I was surprised to be told by my father that I should go and talk to Roger Hart, who spoke his own language. I had known from an early age that Roger's country was **Gambiilmugu**—northern neighbors to my great grandfather's country **Bagaarrmugu** at Jeannie River. But I knew nothing about the **Gambiilmugu** language. I only knew about the language of Hopevale, Guugu Yimithirr; my mother's language, *Kuku Yalanji*; and a couple of old people who spoke *Lamalama* languages. I had not heard of the Barrow Point language being spoken by anyone in the mission.

I went to see old man Roger and there began our friendship. Our friendship started on the veranda of the Old People's Home in the company of another newly found mate, and Roger's childhood friend and relation from Cape Melville, the late Bob Flinders. It turned out that a number of the old people—including Bob, the late Leo Rosendale, and Lindsay Nipper—could speak snippets of Roger's language. I decided to learn Roger's language so I could converse with him.

Athirr wulu, alcohol, and *matheermul*, brainless, were early gains to my vocabulary. Appreciating my desire to learn, Roger generously taught me so that we had our own secret language to observe and mock those around us.

Sitting with the old men on the veranda overlooking the village, watching the mission life, we would spend hours and days yarning about language, history at the mission, history before the mission, customs, hunting, birds, animals, plants, the weather, the past, the present, the future, Christianity, the church, politics, and land rights. Roger and I would spend days under his mango tree. Like John Haviland's talks with Roger, *lipwulin*, Barrow Point, obsessed our conversation.

John's account in this book of getting to know Roger Hart, his life and that of his people and his country, resonated for me. I was greatly privileged to find this friendship, because it came at a time when identity and history and land rights were utmost in my thoughts. My long hours and days and weeks of talking with my mates, Roger, Bob, and the other old people, turned into years, during which time Roger and I mourned the steady passing of our friends.

Roger's history here is the best evocation we have of life in the wake of the devastation wrought by the violent invasion of the Cooktown hinterland after the Palmer River gold rush, that is, life on the fringes, outside of the mission. In the period from the turn of the century to World War II, remnant Aboriginal groups lived an itinerant traditional life when they could, caught between frontier cattlemen, miners, and fishermen, who inhumanely exploited them, and the government and

missionaries, who wanted to take their children away from their families and to eventually bring this camp life to an end. The government and missions eventually succeeded, and a handful of lonely old people ended their days on the reserve at the edge of Cooktown.

My great grandfather **Arrimi**, who appears in Roger's stories, inhabited my childhood dreams. He was an outlaw bushman who evaded the police and could only surreptitiously bring **mayi**, food, to my father at Cape Bedford Mission. I often wondered how he and the people who still lived the bush life managed to survive. Roger's book tells us about the last days of the bush people.

In many respects, life in these circumstances—occasional work, hunting and traveling around the countryside—might have had possibilities. If only they could have been left free. If only they had some land for themselves. If only the whites weren't so inhumane and there was no exploitation. Maybe they could have kept their families and remained in their country.

If there is much sadness and loss in Roger's story about the removal of the people from their homeland, and his eventual loneliness as the last survivor of the mob born in the bush, the land claim won by Roger and other **Yiithuwarra** people before the Queensland Land Tribunal in the early 1990s tells a hopeful story of reunion and the fact that the **Gambiilmugu** people are alive and well, and they have a future.

Work by Roger, through diligent accumulation of knowledge about his people and patient recording of this knowledge, and by other old people like the brothers Bob and Johnny Flinders, made it possible for his descendants to reclaim *lipwulin* under the land rights opportunities that have arisen in the twilight of his life.

As well as his strong memory and sharp mind, Roger is the most gracious and generous of men. My affection, which grew instantly, remains steadfast for *athunbi anggatha*, my friend, from *lipwulin*.

Noel Pearson

NOTES

1. This classificatory kinship term puts Mrs. McIvor into the category of Noel Pearson's "child" (on the patrilineal side), despite the fact that she was already an elderly woman when he was a little boy.
2. Literally, "he's a real champion for the language."

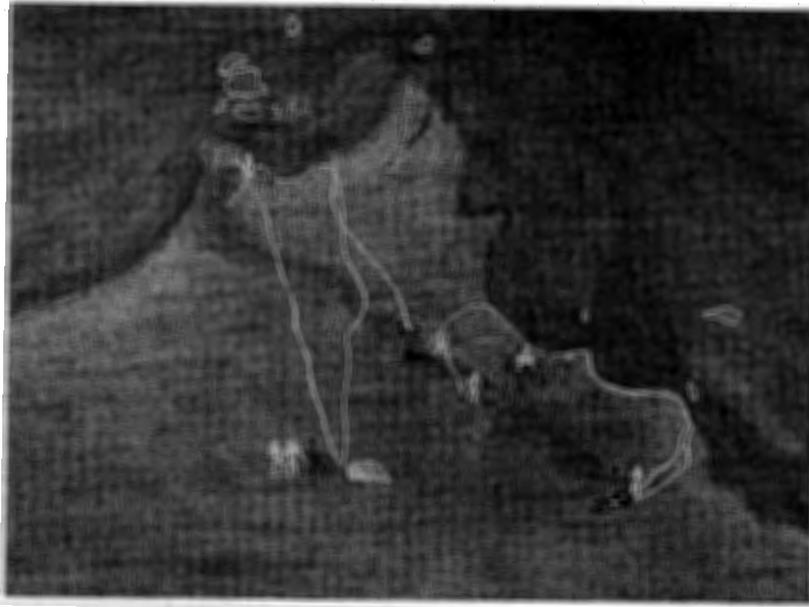


Figure 1. Tulo Gordon's story map of Barrow Point

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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At Hopevale, many people have welcomed me and other members of my family and helped us to learn about **bama** ways. For this book, most important have been Roger Hart himself and his family, especially Allen Hart, Bernard Hart, and Patsy Gibson, their families and children, along with the widely extended family of the late Tulo Gordon and his late wife Gertie, especially Helen Michael and family, the late Noeleen Michael and family, and their brothers, especially Willie, Godfrey, and Reggie. For their constant teaching, friendship, and hospitality over the years I am especially indebted to Walter and the late Lizzie Jack and all their children, my brothers and sisters; to Pastor George and Maudie Rosendale; and to Roy and Thelma McIvor. For support, encouragement, help, and company on our last trip to Barrow Point I am grateful to Merv Gibson and to Noel Pearson. Of many members of the Hopevale Council who have eased practical affairs and opened Hopevale to me, I wish especially to thank Gearhardt Pearson, Lister and Leonard Rosendale, and Peter and David Costello.

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Acknowledgments

people have helped with removing some of the awkwardnesses from the texts; I especially thank Sharon Larisch, Dick Bauman, and anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

Over the years of work represented in this project, we have enjoyed financial support from many sources. Initially, Haviland, Hart, and Gordon had research grants from the (then) Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, often including loans of vehicles as well as other practical help. Institutional funding of Haviland's research came from the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, from Reed College, from a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, as well as from the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group of the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and from the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)-Sureste (with funding from CONACYT-Mexico) which partially supported writing the manuscript. The Cape York Land Council, through the generous offices of Noel Pearson, also supported the final stages of the research itself. Finally, The Body Shop (Australia) and generous support from Mr. Barrie Thomas made possible the publication of the color plates that accompany the book.

For their hospitality (not to mention, cheese, fish, and prawns) during the main writing of the book, I am indebted to Arno and Ino van Ooyen of Elst, Gelderland, the Netherlands, to David and Nona Bennett of Potato Point, N.S.W., and to Jonathan Kelley and Mariah Evans, of Queanbeyan, N.S.W.

At a more personal level for their encouragement, love, and enthusiasm despite my many fits and starts while working on this project, and also for sharing many parts of the work itself at various stages of research, thinking, and writing, I wish to thank (and send my hugs to) Lourdes de León, Isabel Haviland, Maya Haviland (who was one of the earliest critics of my renditions of Roger Hart's stories into English), Sophie Haviland, Leslie Knox Devereaux, Patsy and Alex Asch, the late Roger Keesing, Shelley Schreiner, Bruce and Barbara Rigsby, Stephen Levinson, and especially the late Tim Asch for his company and inspiration on one of our last trips to Barrow Point.

INTRODUCTION: "WILL YOU WRITE DOWN MY LANGUAGE?"

There once was a reasonably large tribe of people who laid claim to the area around Barrow Point, on the coast south of Cape Melville and north of Cape Flattery in far north Queensland, Australia. Roger Hart, probably the last surviving member of the tribe to be born in the bush, came into the world sometime between 1914 and 1916 just west of Barrow Point at Ninian Bay. In this period a good-sized group of nomadic Aborigines still lived around Barrow Point. They traveled between different seasonal camps and relied for their livelihoods both on their own hunting and gathering and on government-supplied provisions or occasional work on stations or boats. Earlier in the century the area had become one of the last refuges for Aborigines north of Cooktown who had been hunted off or deported from zones where Europeans had established mines, farms, or settlements. Many people in Roger's world, including his mother, had spent time working for white settlers and farmers. Although Roger Hart's biological father was probably one of these settlers, Roger's Aboriginal father—his mother's recognized Aboriginal husband at the time of his birth—was the person who gave him his language, his traditional land, and his tribal identity.

By the early 1920s, the Barrow Point people were under attack, from police, settlers, and commercial fishermen who plied the coast in search of inexpensive Aboriginal labor. Within ten years, the Aboriginal camps at Barrow Point had been burned by government officials and the people relocated to a different area farther north. By the Second World War, most of these people too were dead, and only a few of the traditional owners of Barrow Point people survived, mostly scattered through Aboriginal communities elsewhere in Queensland.

I met Roger Hart in 1979 when he asked me if I had any "spare time" to help him "write down" his Barrow Point language, a cousin of the Guugu Yimithirr language I had gone to Queensland to study. Over the next few years we worked sporadically on the material in this book. Our collaborator was Tulo Gordon, an artist and storyteller from an area called **Nugal**, on the Endeavour River. Tulo had been one of my teachers of Guugu Yimithirr when I first went to Hopevale, an Aboriginal community north of Cooktown, in 1971. He was also one of Roger Hart's childhood friends from early mission days. Our idea was to combine Roger's autobiography, the history of his people, and the traditional stories he remembered from his childhood. Tulo Gordon, before he died in

1989, painted the illustrations that accompany the text, based on our conversations and Tulo's journeys with us to Cape Melville and Barrow Point in 1980 and 1982.

Biography, in the narrative fragments of Roger Hart's story, is equivocal, ambiguous, and interactive. The process by which we jointly induced Roger to assemble his "life history" begins with what Tulo used to call Roger's "strong memory" and continues in Roger's invention of himself, his evolving self-knowledge and sense of identity. Even the stories about old Fog that serve as the central intellectual property of the Barrow Point people are our own patchwork of conflicting versions, contested elements, themes, and morals. They derive from authoritative but contradictory retellings, using different words and, indeed, different languages—fragments of the original Barrow Point tongue, mixed with the fluent Guugu Yimithirr of Roger, Tulo, and others, and punctuated throughout by the elegant, archaic English many Hopevale people command. The story of old man Fog is legitimated by the undisputed fact of Roger's ownership, but it is also undermined by the treachery of time and memory. Roger's stories, about mythic times, about the history of his tribe, and about his own life, were richest as we approximated the contexts of old: when he and I, sometimes with Tulo's company, sat around the campfire talking about former times on our visits to Barrow Point itself.

Roger Hart's story is thus formed from little pieces of narrative that range from autobiographical remarks, slipped in over tea and biscuits in the midst of linguistic elicitation, to consciously performed historical or biographical reminiscences. Of the latter, some were filmed and others tape-recorded. They are examples of an invented genre—"telling my life story"—that people at Hopevale have become practiced at delivering. The most important source has been conversation about past life and adventures, routinely tape-recorded in the course of our visits to Barrow Point and its environs, as well as to other sites in Queensland, where Roger Hart has spent his life. Supplementing this are the haphazardly preserved archival sources that record a European view of Aboriginal affairs in the far North. Writing down the resulting "texts" belies their dependence on the particular interlocutors in each of these conversations, on the circumstances and activities of the moment, and on the momentum of history—even recent history, as claims on land and language have come to be of central importance in modern Queensland. Indeed, any account of customs, traditions, and events involving Aboriginal people in far north Queensland is likely to appear more coherent and less riddled with gaps than actual knowledge warrants. Interested parties

often want facts to be neater than they are, and recording even fragments tends to knit them together and give them form and consistency that perhaps they do not merit.

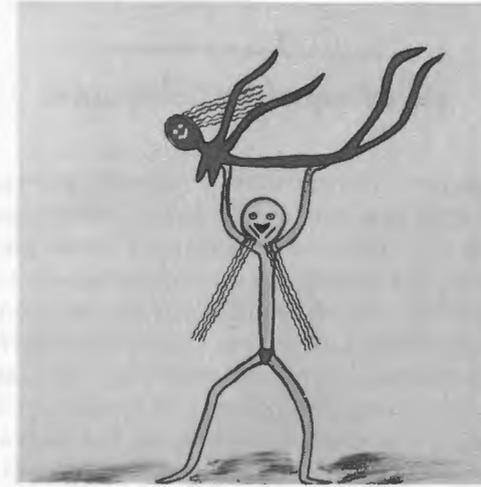
For example, one sometimes thinks of a "life story" as a sequence of events, a chronology of happenings, experienced by an individual moving through time and space. Some parts of such a story may survive only in memory; others may be inscribed in documents; others may be lost. However, in theory the absolute trajectory of events is fixed, frozen by the facts of the past. The Barrow Point lives that Roger Hart and I have managed to reconstruct are not like this. Instead they are sketchy glimpses of biography, fashioned by us in a way that perhaps resembles how people once talked about their kinsmen's exploits, around cooking fires, in wet season cave shelters, in canoes, or in the long weeks of initiation. The protagonists of such narratives are not strictly individuals, not easily separable from their kinsmen nor, indeed, from their countries. A single named man or woman may actually stand for a whole chain of relatives, defined by how they 'bite' (as one says in Guugu Yimithirr) or 'eat' (as one says in Barrow Point language)—that is, 'call' by a kin relationship term—other people in the social universe. Thus, in different tellings, the adventures of one person may merge with those of another, still remaining essentially equivalent in all the ways that matter, that is, that define who the person was. For another thing, happenings and their moral character are fused in the biographical reminiscences Roger and I gathered, which are thus not mere chronologies or sequences of events, but tales, *milbi*, 'news, stories,' usually with strong if implicit moral resonance.

As life changed with the arrival of European and other foreign invaders, the lives (and accordingly the "life stories") of people from Barrow Point became at once more complicated and more fragmentary. Kin chains were broken and their links scattered, leaving each individual both more isolated and more important than he or she would have been as part of a coherent social whole. Ways of understanding people's actions changed. Even the languages changed, as people lost their own words and began to use instead those learned from strangers. There was also a change in who one's interlocutors could be for narrating lives. As the social world was reduced and distorted by invasion, sickness, dispersal, violence, and death, the company of one's kinsmen gave way to the company of fellow displaced persons, other survivors and refugees. Their interests and abilities to assimilate and evaluate 'news' and 'stories' were radically different from those of the kinsmen who once shared a campfire or an initiation ground.

Two themes recur in Roger's story that merit special comment. The first is the massive and pervasive intervention in Aboriginal life—one could almost say its deliberate dismantling—by European society in the first half and particularly the first twenty-five years of this century. The second is a special dilemma of identity, felt most acutely by Aborigines of mixed descent, manifest in a deep personal ambivalence people like Roger Hart experience about who they are in the world. The effects of the first were already apparent, and the seeds of the second had already been sown, in Roger Hart's childhood at Barrow Point.

Words and expressions in Guugu Yimithirr, the language of Cooktown and the area north to the Starcke River, are written in **bold** when first introduced. Words in Barrow Point language are rendered in *bold italics*. A potentially confusing array of kinsmen and other characters will march across the pages that follow, and some genealogical notes about what Roger calls "relations" appear in the endnotes. In keeping with the customary practices of Aboriginal people, many references are made to places, territories, and clan estates—the traditional "runs" of different Aboriginal families and groups—and these, too, are sometimes amplified in notes. Contrary to customary etiquette, on the other hand, I have made more use of the names of people now deceased than Aboriginal propriety would ordinarily permit.

I moved away from Australia in 1985, and work finishing our book was postponed again and again. Our collaborator Tulo Gordon died in 1989, and in the following year Roger Hart began to invest his energies and his knowledge of tradition in efforts to regain his lands and those of his kinsmen under new Aboriginal land rights legislation in Queensland. Now, almost twenty years after we began, we finally bring Roger's story and Tulo's pictures to publication. It is perhaps ironic that we assembled the materials for this book in an era when the very idea of "land rights" for Queensland Aborigines was remote. Even though the book itself remained unfinished, some of the materials gathered for it were already serving as evidence in the highly charged arena of land claims in the 1990s. Let me apologize to Roger, my cous', for the fact that "writing down" his "language" has taken considerably more "free time" than any of us could have imagined when we first met on a rainy morning at the Hopevale store in 1979.



Part One

THE STORIES OF BARROW POINT



OLD MAN FOG

An Aborigine
of Barrow Point

John B. Howland with Roger Pratt
Illustrations by Gino Golden



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Figure 1. Tulo Gordon's story map of Barrow Point

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