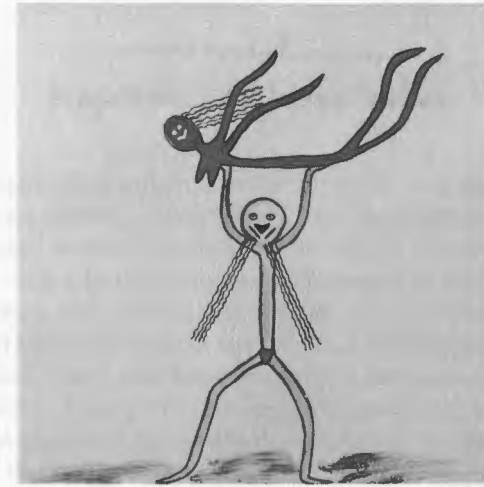


Two themes recur in Roger's story that merit special comment. The first is the massive and pervasive intervention in Aboriginal life—one could almost say its deliberate dismantling—by European society in the first half and particularly the first twenty-five years of this century. The second is a special 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

## Hopevale and Hope Valley

**T**he Hopevale Aboriginal community is the descendant of a Lutheran mission, called Hope Valley, established in 1886 in the aftermath of the Palmer River gold rush.<sup>1</sup> The original mission was located at Cape Bedford, north of Cooktown in far north Queensland. People now use the name Hopevale for the modern town, reopened inland from the original site in about 1950, when the residents of the old mission, who had been evacuated south during World War II, returned to their homeland. Hopevale people speak of the early Lutheran mission on the coast as Cape Bedford, sometimes referring to the main settlement on the southeastern tip of the cape by its original name Hope Valley. There were also important settlements on the north side of Cape Bedford at Elim as well as outstations farther north on the McIvor River.

The people living around the Endeavour River spoke a recognizable form of the Guugu Yimithirr language in 1770, when Lt. James Cook and members of his crew collected a few words from Aborigines they met in the area.<sup>2</sup> About one hundred years later gold was discovered inland on the Palmer River, and the port of Cooktown was opened at the mouth of the Endeavour to supply the diggings. The town served as the point of entry for thousands of gold miners, both European and Chinese, frantic to reach the Palmer.

The resulting devastation of Aboriginal life was total. Aborigines who lived by the rivers that were to be panned for gold or who occupied territory between the coast and the Palmer were rapidly dispossessed of their lands and often of their lives as well. Other Aborigines were driven from their homelands as European settlement extended outward from the gold routes. Surviving groups of Aborigines fled farther into the hinterlands or took up a parasitic existence on the fringes of newly sprouted towns.

Within ten years, by the mid 1880s, the scattered remnants of the original Aboriginal tribes from the Cooktown area were in a sorry state. Both church and civil authorities began to take steps to organize Aboriginal lives on lines more amenable to European hopes and plans. In 1886 Bavarian Lutheran missionaries, with support from local police and the Queensland government as well as from missionary societies in South Australia and in Germany, opened the mission at Cape Bedford. The original purpose was to educate and protect the remnants of the Aboriginal tribes who lived on barren coastal land north of Cooktown.

As early as 1881 the Cooktown police magistrate had been looking

for ways to induce people from scattered Aboriginal camps around Cape Bedford to come into Cooktown, where they might be put to some use about the town.<sup>3</sup> (The "use" the Cooktown citizens had in mind turned out to center on unpaid domestic and bush labor and sexual abuse.) The early missionaries, on the other hand, intended to set up a permanent and ultimately self-sufficient station at Cape Bedford, where they could insulate their charges from what they saw as corrupting influence from heathen bush Aborigines and "civilized" Europeans alike.

By the turn of the century, when the missionaries at Cape Bedford had been working for some fifteen years, a new government bureaucracy was installed to oversee Aboriginal life throughout Queensland. Cooktown's gold boom had waned and the economy of the north had settled into an indifferent mixture of mining, cattle, sugarcane, and fishing. The remnant Aboriginal population had long since ceased to be seen as a menace. It was regarded instead as a nuisance and an offense to public morality and civilization. The government gradually enacted legislation to allow police, through the bureaucracy of the protectors of Aborigines, first to control the movements of Aborigines, to shift them from place to place, to deport them to distant parts of the state, and ultimately to incarcerate them and to break up families by institutionalizing children.

Because of a policy of isolating young newly Christianized Aboriginal women in the mission dormitories, and by serving as a ration depot for government Aboriginal relief, the Cape Bedford Mission became a seasonal focus for the visits of otherwise seminomadic groups of heathen Aborigines, many of whom were interested in securing proper marriage partners from among the mission inmates.<sup>4</sup> By the first years of the century, the Cape Bedford missionary, Rev. Schwarz, was reporting visits from groups of people to the northwest, including previously unknown bands from as far away as Barrow Point and Cape Melville.<sup>5</sup> Out of these early contacts there grew a complex interaction between government, mission, and tribe that would ultimately bring about the demise of the Barrow Point people.

In the second two decades of the 1900s, at an accelerating rate, children in nomadic Aboriginal camps were taken from their families and bundled off to reformatories and missions. At first these were "neglected" children (a euphemism for children of mixed descent), and later *any* children found by police in Aboriginal camps, who were by law to be placed in institutions for education and training. Because the Cape Bedford Mission depended on government funds, it was to some degree controlled by the official bureaucracy for administering Aboriginal lives. Thus, when children were removed from their families in the bush, the

Lutheran missionaries were obliged to accept some of the "waifs, orphans, and strays" into the previously isolated Hope Valley community. The ranks of Hope Valley's inmates swelled from a certain proportion of such children. Roger Hart, whose life and memories of a childhood at Barrow Point form the basis for this book, was one of them. His relatives brought him from Barrow Point in about 1923 and deposited him at the Cape Bedford Mission.

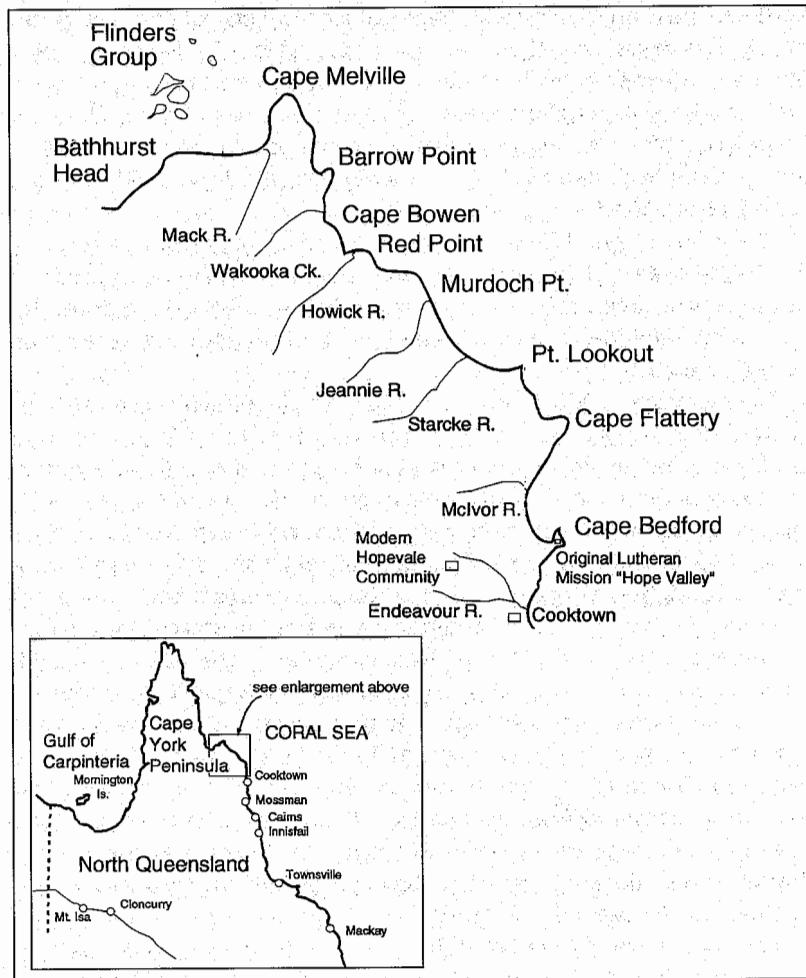
The influx of children from outside the mission continued through the 1920s and into the 1930s. During this time, Hope Valley suffered from pressing financial problems. The mission opened several outstations where families of adult Aborigines tried to subsist on their own farming efforts.

The first years of World War II were even more difficult times at Cape Bedford. Resources were scarce, and the needs of the mission community were growing. Relying heavily on a few favored Aboriginal families, the missionaries tried to establish a succession of new stations and farming operations on the limited terrain of the mission reserve. Roger Hart, who had by then married the daughter of one of the missionary's most trusted Aboriginal helpers, was part of the plan to create an autonomous and self-sufficient Aboriginal community in the Cooktown hinterlands.

The events of World War II drew closer to northern Queensland, however, and in 1942 the entire population of the Cape Bedford Mission and its outstations was evacuated without warning and transported south to an Aboriginal settlement at Woorabinda, inland from Rockhampton. The mission superintendent Rev. G. H. Schwarz, who had arrived in Queensland from Bavaria in 1887 and who had lived at Cape Bedford ever since, was interned in a camp for German aliens. He was thereafter not allowed to return to his Guugu Yimithirr congregation of, by then, more than half a century.

The experience of the next eight years in exile in the south was both traumatic and liberating for the people from Cape Bedford. Their numbers were dramatically and suddenly reduced by disease. (Roger Hart and his wife lost three children during the first months of their stay in the colder climate of the south.) Woorabinda left them disoriented and exposed, for the first time in their lives, to unmediated contact with the "outside world." People attended ordinary schools, held paid employment, traveled on "manpower" gangs to agricultural labor throughout southern Queensland, and made a wide range of new acquaintances, both black and white.

At the same time the Cape Bedford people, both at Woorabinda and on work gangs away from the settlement, remained a close-knit group.



Map 1. North Queensland, Cooktown, Cape Bedford

A few influential elder people (including Roger Hart's father-in-law) struggled to hold the community together<sup>6</sup> and to keep alive the possibility of returning to their own country in the north. With help from Lutheran authorities, at the end of the 1940s they ultimately succeeded in reestablishing an Aboriginal reserve in their homeland. The new site—50 kilometers north of Cooktown and about 25 kilometers inland

from the original Hope Valley—was named Hopevale. Roger Hart was a member of one of the groups of workers who returned from Woorabinda in the early 1950s to clear the bush and build houses, gardens, streets, and a church, in preparation for the return of families to the new community.

Most of the oldest Hope Valley people had died in the south during the war, and many families had been, if not entirely destroyed, reduced to only one or two members. Exile thus left the community's social resources radically altered. Because of a serious shortage of marriageable women, groups of young men left Hopevale periodically during the fifties in search of wives. Many women from Palm Island, Bloomfield, Yarrabah, Weipa, and even Woorabinda returned with their new husbands to raise their families at Hopevale. The community was further augmented by scattered Aboriginal people from southeastern Cape York Peninsula who had Hopevale kin. Roger Hart came once again in contact with people from the Barrow Point tribe who had managed to survive the war.

Since the 1950s, Hopevale has been a fluid community. Some people have spent long periods in "the south"—that is, in Brisbane and other Queensland towns—as part of Lutheran efforts to relocate Aboriginal families from Hopevale in the wider context of Australian society. Children and young adults began to study and work away from the mission, and people from Hopevale now participate in statewide networks of Aboriginal social life, travel, and political activity. The early missionaries' carefully constructed isolation for their Hope Valley congregation was irrevocably dismantled at modern Hopevale.

The sense of identity, however, was not. When I first arrived at Hopevale in 1970, people had no hesitation in sending me to learn from the best speakers of Guugu Yimithirr and from those who had the clearest legitimate claim to both the language and the territory. The disparate origins as well as more recent history of many people who had been brought to Cape Bedford from other parts of Queensland meant that although virtually all the residents of Hopevale spoke Guugu Yimithirr as their first language, the great majority of them did not actually claim Guugu Yimithirr as their *own* "tribal" language. For this they deferred to the experts, whose genealogies derived from true Guugu Yimithirr-speaking families and their associated clan territories. The oldest members of such families were the expert teachers to whom, all agreed, I ought to apprentice myself. These teachers—predominantly old men—were determined to teach me not only how to speak acceptable Guugu Yimithirr, but also about kinsmen past and present, about clans, totems,

places, tracts of land, plants both useful and dangerous, fish, fishing spears, and fishing spots, about how to keep directions straight,<sup>7</sup> and also how to behave with grandfathers, sisters, and mothers-in-law.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, Hopevale was in the throes of modernization. The community was beginning a transition from an externally administered Lutheran mission, dependent on church and government not only for finances but for direction and control, to the semi-autonomous Aboriginal settlement envisioned by the Queensland legislation of the era. It would still be another decade before changes in Queensland's Aboriginal land laws offered Aboriginal communities some measure of autonomy and inspired young people to revive "tradition" as a strategy for regaining control over Aboriginal lands. Instead, divisive local and family politics were the order of the day. Who controlled the community council and the government resources that funded it? Who occupied the scarce jobs at the store, office, and workshop at Hopevale? Who was entitled to employment at the lucrative silica mine at Cape Flattery, located squarely on mission territory but sending its royalties to Brisbane and its profits to Japan? Who was able to launch "private initiative" on the mission, to raise pigs, butcher cattle, operate a taxi, sell fish and chips, fishing line, or petrol? And if *your* family had some sort of power or resources, what about *mine*?

I had been trying to understand the evolution of the Guugu Yimithirr speech community, where matters of genealogy and social history were entangled with nearly every detail of social life, especially speech. My research<sup>9</sup> had concentrated on the era in mission history when the oldest people still alive had arrived, mostly as young children. However, events at modern Hopevale had drawn me into questions at opposite ends of the chronology of the community: on the one hand, fragmentary "traditions" of land and language that could be reconstructed from a time before Europeans invaded and, on the other, transformations of social life that followed the disintegration of the missionaries' planned utopian isolation, after World War II.

As the centenary of the founding of the Cape Bedford Mission approached, the social history of the mission community came more and more to permeate daily conversation. Celebrations planned for the anniversary of the arrival of Rev. Schwarz at Cape Bedford drew several of the oldest men, with me tagging along, back to the old mission site to clean up some of the ruined buildings, to label them for a commemorative visit, and to fossick<sup>10</sup> around for mementos of the early mission days. In the company of these community elders, on expeditions to sites throughout the mission reserve and beyond, history was always in the

air, and talk traced ambivalent trails. Old-time superstitions were juxtaposed against up-to-date Lutheran dogma and then against "real" fears and dangers in the bush. Newly learned words turned out to be vulgar, impolite, or taboo; others were revealed to be sacred, deferential, and "deep." The respect and propriety of the past were both mourned (as expressions of now-lapsed tribal law and authority) and condemned (as oppressive, sexist, and venal). The missionaries were portrayed with Janus faces: enlightened saviors one moment, intolerant racists the next. Old stories told yesterday as vulgar tales of the old men were today potent moral lessons and tomorrow would be quoted as ancestral territorial charters.

Elderly people at Hopevale found the turmoil in the community distressing and confusing. They mourned the loss of order and authority once imposed by church and missionary. They lamented the fading of respect for kin and Aboriginal custom under the conditions of modern life: too much grog, too many motor cars, neighbors too close. Tradition demanded that one treat one's mother-in-law with respect, for example, but at modern Hopevale, with houses lined up cheek by jowl and many young people eating from their relatives' old age pension checks, one might actually be living in her house, sitting down face to face to eat at her table. Elderly people were scandalized. "These younger people can swear or curse their mothers-in-law, but we [old folks] just *can't!*"<sup>11</sup>

It was into this heady atmosphere of learning and teaching, memory and discovery, that Roger Hart stepped one day at the Hopevale store. It was a rainy morning in June 1979, a payday, and people were flocking to use their pension, welfare, and salary checks to buy flour, tea, sugar, meat, bread, tinned milk, prawn bait, fishline, and other staples of Hopevale life. Children clamored for ice blocks and bags of chips. Adolescent boys begged cigarettes off their better-heeled kinsmen. Cousins borrowed banknotes to fill their petrol tanks. Competing with this morning socializing, an unseasonable storm blew sheets of rain up under the shallow verandah. I had joined a few old men clustered in a corner where a large mango tree offered partial shelter.

A trim gentleman approached, with bare feet, khaki pants, a baseball cap, and a short-sleeved shirt whose pocket bulged with tobacco. He was reserved as he greeted me in Guugu Yimithirr.

"Wantharra, thawuunh. How you, mate?"

I had been working at Hopevale, by then, off and on for about nine years. During that time I had met most of the oldest people at the former mission, and it was known that I was trying to write down what they could teach me of words, kin, and custom from the area around

Cape Bedford and Cooktown. Roger Hart had been absent from Hopevale during most of the time I had been working there.

"You getting on, **thawuunh** [friend]? **Ngayu** [I am] Roger Hart. You ever heard about me?"

I did not recognize the face, but I had heard the name mentioned many times to refer to the genitor of one of the large and important families on the mission. I used to spend evenings playing country music with a couple of young married men in the community, and one of them, an eager guitarist named Alan Hart, had earlier that month spoken about his father, Roger. The old man, he told me, was living off the mission, working somewhere on the coast around Mossman, north of Cairns. He had his own language, and he knew a lot of stories.

Now here was Roger, shaking my hand, and rattling off the names of anthropologist acquaintances, much the way he might compare kinsmen with an Aboriginal person from elsewhere in Queensland.

"You know Peter Sutton? He learned a bit of my language."

It turned out that just as I had heard about him, Roger had also heard about me: the American who hung around the old people and who could speak some of the Hopevale language. He knew I had been writing down stories and asking people about the past. He already knew all about the old people who had been teaching me Guugu Yimithirr.

"That old fellow, your 'father,' I call him **mugay** [uncle].<sup>12</sup> And your friend here—you're making a book with him<sup>13</sup>—he's my **thuway** [nephew]."

Roger Hart explained why he had sought me out. He was not really from around Cooktown at all. He came instead from Barrow Point, to the north near Cape Melville. He had only recently returned to Hopevale after having lived for some years "on the outside," cutting sugarcane near Cairns, where he had gone to escape the protected but confining life of the Aboriginal mission. It was true, he announced, he did have his own language. Indeed, he was beginning to fear that perhaps he alone could still speak it, since all his other childhood friends were, he thought, dead. Roger's proposal to me was pointed and straightforward.

"You think you might have some time, when you free, to write down my language?"

This was an offer that no one interested in Australian languages could refuse.

As I quickly learned, Roger had much more to teach than his language. That morning there began a conversation that continues to this day, touching on topics that range from the structure of the Barrow

Point language to the history of the Barrow Point people, from the stories Roger heard as a child to the stories he himself could tell about growing up as an Aboriginal in Queensland. Roger's desire to have his language written down was bound up with a whole history to be recorded.

When I returned to Hopevale in May of the following year, I came armed with what materials could be found about the Barrow Point language. Among these was a copy of a cassette tape recorded in Mossman in 1970 by the linguist Peter Sutton in which Roger and his old mate Toby Gordon,<sup>14</sup> jointly and in several different languages, recounted parts of a traditional story from Barrow Point about the exploits of the trickster hero **Wurrey**, or "Fog." During three months that year, and sporadically over the next four years, Roger and I worked first through Sutton's wordlists of the Barrow Point language and then on a corpus of reconstructed linguistic forms growing out of our conversations.

Far from the political squabbling, in the shade of mango trees they had planted or under verandas they had built with their own hands, elderly Hopevale men routinely engaged me in anachronistic conversations. Sitting for hours immersed in old words and stories, from Hopevale's past and sometimes from distant country like Barrow Point, about which almost no one any longer seemed to care, we had been left behind by modern Hopevale.

A few younger people were occasionally attracted by the exotic words of Roger's Barrow Point language. Many Hopevale residents retained an ancient Aboriginal preoccupation with language as a marker of identity. Although teenagers might joke and flirt in English and rarely speak "language," all the same they knew that Guugu Yimithirr abounded with alternate names for the same objects. Some words were "seaside" (coastal), others "outside" (from inland dialects), others from different languages altogether. Although young people frequently claimed not to understand the words their grandparents used, they still recognized some words as "deeper" than others: words that sounded like they were for "kings or chiefs" or that showed more (or less) respect for one's interlocutors.<sup>15</sup> My tape recordings and halting conversations with Roger in his virtually incomprehensible northern tongue were thus curiously fascinating, if a bit irrelevant, alongside their cassettes of Australian country music, American soul, and Jamaican reggae.

To people like Roger our conversational combing of the past was more than mere nostalgia. It was part of the oldest residents' search for origins and order. Roger Hart shared his memories of childhood at Barrow Point with the Hopevale artist Tulo Gordon, a friend from his earli-

est days at the mission, painting in words an image of Aboriginal bush life as Tulo painted it in acrylics. Roger's re-creation of the past was also an exploration of who he was here and now. How had he, a Barrow Point man, come to live out his life in Tulo's country? Why had he, light-skinned and abandoned by his Aboriginal father, alone of his tribal playmates survived? Where did he belong? For sixty years Roger's Barrow Point childhood had been set aside. He had received a mission education and raised a family premised on his part-European ancestry in the mission hierarchy of caste and color. Now he was trying to reconcile his earliest memories with the texture of the bulk of his life, and Roger's preoccupations began to infect both Tulo Gordon and me.

Tulo Gordon, always a restless, inquisitive, and critically minded man, wanted to make sense of his life on the mission and to understand in retrospect the events of his childhood from the perspective of Aboriginal life throughout north Queensland. As an immediate practical matter, he was fighting for a pension and needed to establish his exact age for bureaucratic reasons; he was thus fascinated by remembered events and their dates. More globally, he wanted to resolve contradictions in his feelings about the missionaries, the church, race, traditional law, territory, ownership, and modernity. These were issues about which he thought, spoke, painted, and wrote with great insight and passion until his death in 1989.

In 1982, Roger Hart, Tulo Gordon, and I made the long walk back to Roger's birthplace at Barrow Point, a spot Roger had not laid eyes on for six decades. Roger and I trekked in again in September 1984, and we returned once more by vehicle in 1989. On our trips to his birthplace as in the course of daily life, questions of origins and biography were a background as tangible as the sand, the trees, and the weather. The more we walked in Roger's memories, the more his life as a member of a now vanished "mob" of people came to dominate our conversations. Gradually his and other older peoples' recollections, as well as archival research, allowed us to sketch an interconnected series of histories that I have tried to weave together in this book.

Let us begin where Roger and I began, with the first episodes of the story of old Fog, *Wurrey*, trickster hero of the Barrow Point people. Fog's adventures trace the boundaries of the known and owned world of Roger Hart's ancestors, and at the same time they illustrate, largely in the breach, how one was supposed to behave while within those boundaries. Roger, Tulo Gordon, and I rehearsed these episodes many times. They never ceased to entertain us, but as Tulo commented, they "make you think." Meant to be heard by initiated adults, these were not mere

fulry tales about a time when animals were men. They were moral lessons about an Aboriginal world.

~~~~~  
Wurrey

**T**his story is about *Wurrbal*, old man Fog. He is called Wurrey in Barrow Point language. The story begins at his home at *Yidamugu*, Red Point.

One day he set out on a journey to the west.<sup>1</sup> He traveled until he came to the Jeannie River. There he met old lady Curlew. I call her *Yimbaarr*. She lived by herself just near the river.

Old Wurrey was carrying his fishnet with him, slung across his back. He knew that old lady Curlew had lots of fish, but she kept them all to herself. She raised many kinds in a big lagoon near her camp at the Jeannie River. (The lagoon is still there, too.) You could see their fins sticking up out of the water and their tails splashing about, sending ripples all across the surface. Old Fog had come up there to catch some of them.

As he approached Fog could see the fish down in the lagoon. He didn't say anything, though. First he hid his net in the grass so that Curlew wouldn't see it. Then he went up to the old lady.

"I am very thirsty," he told her. "Please give me some water. Perhaps I could get a drink from this lagoon over here to the east?"

"No, no, don't go over there," replied Yimbaarr. "You can have a look in my well, up there on the north side. Get a drink from there."

Fog went up to the north side of her camp where he found the well. It was a spring, what we call *athiirr thuyu*.

First he had a look back to the south where the old lady was sitting. She was paying him no attention. Then he stuck his hand down in the water and stirred it up, making the water so dirty you couldn't drink it. When the well was good and muddy he went back to old Curlew's camp.

He sang out, "**Gaw!** I can't drink that water, you know."

"Why not?"

"Because it's all muddy." He lied to her, you see.

The old lady got up and went to look in the well for herself. Sure enough, the water was full of mud.



Figure 2. Fog throws old lady Curlew down among her fish

"How did this water get so dirty?" she asked.

"I don't know, what do you suppose?" he replied.

"Oh, well, come with me then." She led him down to the south side of her camp, to the big lagoon.

"Don't make a sound," she said. "Just go down slowly and quietly, and then you can drink *that* water." She was afraid Fog might frighten the fish and make them jump about. She thought he didn't know they were there.

Then the old lady went back to her camp and sat down again, paying him no more mind.

When she was gone, Fog walked down to the lagoon. He didn't bother to have a drink, you see, since he wasn't really thirsty. He only pretended to drink. Then he went back and said to old lady Curlew, "I think I'm going away now. I'll see you next time." He kept on telling lies.

Fog went back toward the east and picked up his net from its hiding place. Then he sneaked back to the lagoon. He looked around again to make sure that the old lady wasn't watching.

He took his net and started throwing it into the lagoon, pulling up heaps of fish. They were great big fish, and they splashed about in the water.

The old lady heard the noise. She jumped up and ran to the lagoon to find out what was wrong. What could be causing the splashing?

When old lady Curlew saw Fog throwing his net and stealing her fish, she began to curse and swear at him. She called him all kinds of awful names.

It made Wurrbal angry. He left his net and ran over to the west. The old lady was standing there swearing at him. He picked her right up off the ground. He carried her back to where the fish were thrashing around in the net, and he heaved her right into the middle of them.

"Ngaanhigay!" she shrieked, "Ow, ow ow!" She howled with pain.

The fins on the fish had jabbed her in both knees. Well, those Curlew birds today have big lumpy knee joints. That's how it happened. Old lady Curlew's knees swelled up after being jabbed by the fish spines. Curlews carry that mark right until today. They still have swollen knees.

She kept on howling: "Ngaanhigaaay!"

Even now you sometimes hear Curlew sing her sad cry at nighttime. She's weeping because of the pain in her swollen knees.

That's where old Fog's story starts, at the big lagoon by the Jeannie River.

Old Fog left Curlew where he had dropped her. He was in a hurry to take his fish away. He started pulling the net, dragging it down the river. The Jeannie River never used to dry up. It used to have water all the time, although it wasn't very deep even in those days.

Well, now there were two **Duburrubun** brothers, two magpies. They used to camp with old lady Curlew. The old lady looked after them. When old Fog came around, the two brothers had gone out hunting to bring the old lady some meat.

While old Fog was dragging the fish down the river, the two Magpies came back to the old lady's camp. They heard her singing out, crying and wailing.

"What's wrong?" they asked.

"Oooh, that rotten old Fog threw me down among the fish," she said, "and their spines jabbed me in the knees."

"Where is he now?"

"He's gone down that way. He's taking my **minha** down the river."



The Magpie brothers jumped up and started after old Fog. The older brother ran down the west bank of the river, and the younger brother ran down the east bank. After a good way, they stopped, hoping to catch old Fog. But Fog was dragging his net downriver, and it caused a great flood where he passed. He was still going.

The brothers rushed farther downriver. They pulled up again to have another look. Wurrbal had already gone on, turning north now.

Off they went again. But every time they stopped to look at the water, it was still. The big flood had already passed. Old Fog was still ahead of them, pulling the fish along in his net.

Finally the two Magpies came right to the mouth of the river. They looked around. Where was he? They looked north, and they saw that Fog had tied his net to a rock just north of the river mouth. He had released all those fish into the sea. That's how some of the freshwater fish species from Curlew's lagoon got out into the sea in the first place.

Old Wurrbal had disappeared, heading inland. He was off, on his way.

"Oh, well, there's nothing we can do." The two Magpie brothers couldn't catch up to him before he got to the sea.

They didn't give up, though. They just headed inland, following his tracks, and you may as well know that they met Wurrey again by and by.

That was Fog's first adventure. That was when he started telling lies.

### Fog Visits Guraaban

After he released the fish, Wurrey headed west, back inland. He traveled a little bit west and a little bit north. After a while he came close to a mountain called **Guraaban**, Brown's Peak. There was a big mob of people living in a camp there.

Old Fog marched up from the south and right into camp.

"Here I am! I've come," he said. Then he added, "I have a terribly hungry belly after walking all this way."

The people in the camp were glad to see him. They thought he might have brought some news.

"Ma, you sit down." They showed him where to rest. "Go over there in the shade."

Once Fog was seated comfortably, straight away they started asking



Figure 3. Wurrey eats honey at Brown's Peak

him for news. "What's happening in the east," they asked. "How is everyone out that way? Are all the people well? How's my uncle? How's my grampa?"

Well, Fog had to give them an answer. He started to invent some news.

"Ah, everyone over there is well. They're all right," he began. "Only this one's Granny died," he went on, pointing at one of them. "Your grandmother died over there to the east."

He started telling lies now.

"Yes, she died, only yesterday it was."

People started wailing and crying now.

Wurrey was just getting started. "Yes," he said, "and this fellow's father died, too."

He spoke to him: "Your father died yesterday, I am sorry to tell you. He was speared to death."

So all that lot started crying, too. They smeared themselves all over with white clay to mourn for their dead relatives.

"You should head east, mourn them there," said old Fog. "But don't start crying yet. I'm really very hungry now."

He sat down in the shade again.

"Get me something to eat."

The people in the camp had to forget about their dead relatives for a while. They went to find some food to give Fog. They had robbed some wild honey, *u:lgal*, from a native bees' nest. They mixed that in water.

"Here, drink this!" They handed the *u:lgal* to old Fog.

Well, Fog was a sly trickster. While they were mixing the honey for him, he was digging a hole in the ground. He dug and dug, but secretly, you know, so nobody would notice him. When the hole was deep enough, he moved over until he was sitting right on top of it.

They brought the honey to where he was sitting, and he started to drink. But this was his trick, you see: the honey went in his mouth and ran right through him into the hole.

The people kept on mixing more and more of their honey. "Here, drink this! Is your belly feeling better now? Are you full yet?"

"Not yet, *guya*. Bring me a bit more, eh?"

They kept mixing honey and taking it over to him where he sat on the east side of the camp. He still wasn't satisfied, so they had to make more and more.

"What kind of stomach does this fellow have, anyway?" they asked each other. "Uncle Fog has been eating and eating. He should be satisfied by now, but he keeps clamoring for more honey."

The people from the camp began to feel suspicious. They went up to old Fog, sitting in the shade, and they pushed him over.

"Hey, *dagu*,<sup>1</sup> this old man has been sitting with his rump over a deep hole. The honey is running right through him into the hole!"

They sent some kids off to fetch some *bayjin* grass. They plugged old Fog's bottom with a wad of the spongy stuff so the honey wouldn't run out anymore.

"But I'm still hungry," said Fog.

They mixed up the last of their honey and gave it to him. He drank it down, and this time his belly swelled up full.

"Ah, now I feel satisfied. I've eaten enough. I guess I'll be going," said old Fog, standing up.

When the people in the camp saw he had finished eating, they remembered their dead relatives. Again they started to wail and to smear themselves with white clay. They started to plan a trip to bury their kinsmen.

"We'll go east tomorrow to take care of the dead ones," said some.

"Let's start now," said others.

Old Fog didn't pay them any more attention. He just got up, with a belly full of honey, and set out again toward the west.

## The Giant Dingo Dog

Fog left Guraaban and kept going west. When he got halfway to where he was heading, he pulled up to camp for the night.

Now, you remember the two Magpie brothers. They had started to follow old Fog when he was still in the east, before he let all those fish go. From the mouth of the Jeannie River they had followed his tracks west. But they always stayed a little to the south of him, never getting too close.

The Magpie brothers were now camped at a place just north of Jones's Gap, a break in a high range of mountains. They were staying at the camp of old lady Carpet Snake. Since they were just young fellows, they camped with her, but not too close. That old lady had a big dog, you see, a very big dingo dog.

The two brothers had been planning to ambush old Fog, but in the meantime they had gotten very hungry. They set out hunting. By and by they began to smell something good to eat. They began to look around to see what it was. The smell was coming from the north. They searched and searched, and pretty soon they found a Leichhardt tree.

"Ahh," they said, "it's the fruit that the old lady eats."

They began to eat what they found lying on the ground. They ate and ate and ate. When they had finished all the fallen fruit, they still weren't satisfied. So they climbed the tree and began to eat the ripe fruit, just quietly. They ate and ate and ate, until late in the afternoon.

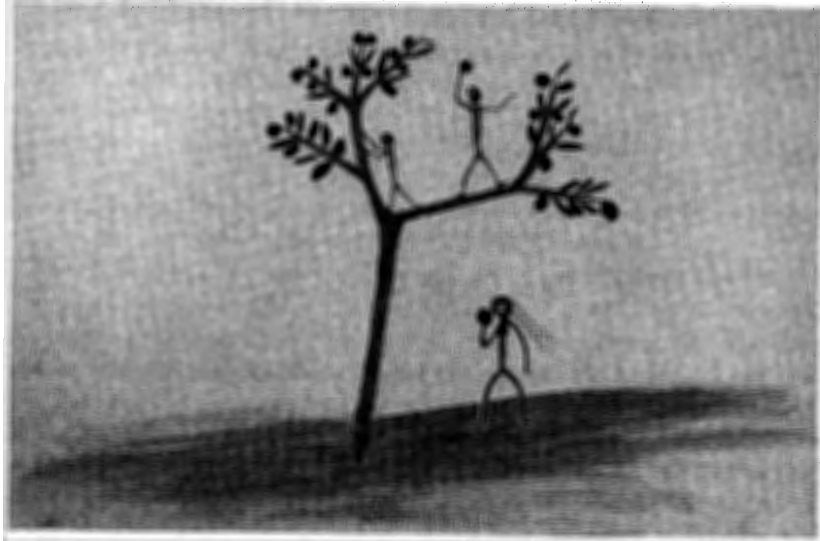
Old lady Carpet Snake came back then, from the west. The two Magpie brothers could hear her as she moved along, talking to herself.

"I'll just go and get that *mayi*.<sup>1</sup> I'll go and eat my fruit," she was saying as she came closer and closer.

The two Magpies didn't say anything. They just sat silent in the tree.

The old lady came up to her Leichhardt tree. She started hunting all around, looking for her fruit. She searched everywhere.

"Where's that *mayi*?" she said. "Maybe it hasn't fallen down yet."



**Figure 4. The Magpie brothers throw Leichhardt fruit down onto the Carpet Snake**

She kept looking and looking. Nothing.

The younger Magpie brother picked a piece of raw fruit from the tree, and he chucked it down at her. It hit her on the back, as she was bent over searching for fruit on the ground.

"Ngaanhigay!" She cried out in pain. "Something hit me on the back! The fruit is just now falling off the tree!"

So she picked up that fruit and gulped it down.

The younger Magpie brother broke off more fruit and threw it down. It was the younger one's idea, see? He kept throwing unripe fruit down. The old lady would pick it up and eat it.

Then she said, "Where is that **mayi** falling from?" She looked up. At that very moment, he threw another piece of fruit, and it hit her right on the nose.

"Ngaanhigay! Now it hit me on the nose!"

In fact, the fruit hit her so hard that it flattened her nose right out. If you see a carpet snake nowadays you'll see that she has a flat head. Well, it's for that reason.

Anyway, she recognized the two Magpie brothers up in the tree. She sang out to them, "So, it's you two larrikins!<sup>2</sup> Come on down from there! Oh, my poor nose!"

The two Magpie brothers climbed down from the tree.

Then the old woman made them a promise. She said, "Tomorrow I'm going to send you my puppy. It's a really nice little dog." But she was tricking them. "I'll bring you my little dog, and you can train it for hunting."

"All right, bring it to us," they said.

She let them go, and they headed south again.

They started to talk it over. The younger brother asked his older brother, "Is that old woman telling the truth? She says she's going to give us a nice puppy dog."

The older brother answered: "Puppy dog? Why, that's a huge dog. We'd better run away from here. Otherwise, the dog will eat the both of us right up! Let's go!"

So the two of them ran off. They ran and ran, **di di di di**,<sup>3</sup> toward the south.

Meanwhile, old lady Carpet Snake went back west to her camp. She fetched her giant dog and sent it after them. The dog headed down from the north, barking and whining, on their trail.

The Magpies could hear the dog coming, so they kept running farther south, farther south. Well, nowadays Jones's Gap is fairly wide, but in those days it was just a narrow passage through the mountains. That was many thousands of years ago. The two brothers split up. One climbed up the south side, and the other climbed up the north side. They had decided to try to save themselves by spearing that giant dingo.

Meanwhile the huge dog came along below. His tongue was just coming into view.

The younger brother spoke up. "I'm going to spear him now." The younger brother was left-handed, you see.

His older brother told him, "No. You might miss. Better leave him to me."

Meanwhile the big dingo came closer still. His head sprang into view, as he moved along to the west. The older brother picked up his spear and threw it from the north down toward the south. At the same time the younger brother threw his spear from the south. The two of them kept throwing their spears from opposite directions.

There used to be a big flat plain down below, to the east. It was on that big flat area that the two brothers finally killed that giant dingo dog. It thrashed around and knocked down all the trees.

Once they had killed the dingo, the brothers began to cut the animal up. They cut and cut and cut. All right. When they had finished, they lifted up the meat and carried it west. They carried it a long way, until they came down to the Wakooka Creek.

Somewhere above the river people reckon that even today there is a big hollow place. That's where they dug out a hole for an earth oven. They built a big fire in the hole and covered it with rocks. The two brothers singed off the giant dingo's fur. They stuck the pieces of meat into the oven.

Then they waited. First they had a bath. They found some good shade and lay down to sleep, while the meat cooked. The sun started to go down. They slept and slept and slept.

Finally they got up.

"Okay, let's take the meat out."

They opened the earth oven. They took out all the meat, letting the hot steam escape. Then they set the pieces down one by one in the open air to cool.

At the very moment they were picking the minha out of the earth oven, old Fog appeared from the south. The two of them saw him coming. "Oh, so he's here. He has come up here," they said.

They greeted him. "Our grandfather, you've appeared," they said. "Adhi-dhu imbwirrin. Our grandfather has come."

"Yes, I have come. It is me." He was very hungry again.

The Magpie brothers said, "Well, come over here. Come see this meat."

Fog came over and sat down.

"Grandfather, what sort of meat do you want? Do you want the leg?"

"Uh-uh."

"What sort of meat, then? Do you want the arm?"

"Uh-uh."

"Well, then, what meat will you take? The back?"

"Uh-uh."

Then the older brother said to the other, "I think he's asking for the head part."<sup>4</sup> The other brother asked Fog, "What sort of meat do you want, then? Do you want the head?"

"Yeah, give me that."

So they had to give him the head. Then they picked up all the rest of the meat and started back down to their camp.

Old man Fog took the head of that giant dingo, and he set out straight east, up and up, until he got right to the top of Jones's Gap. There he set the meat down and began to work a spell. He decided to give eyes to that animal. (See Pl. 1.)

You see, in those early days, all the animals were blind. Emu, wallaby, kangaroo, and all the rest couldn't see. When people went out hunting,

they had only to walk up and hit their prey with a stick. The poor things were blind, and they wouldn't run away.

Fog took the dingo's head and cleaned it off. He spoke to it: "These are your eyes. Ssuuuuu! Use these eyes to watch out for people. And this is your nose. Ssuuuuu! If bama<sup>s</sup> are coming up on the windward side of you, use your nose to smell their sweat, and run away."

You see, he changed everything. He didn't bother to eat the meat. He gave eyes and a nose to the dingo's head. He dug and dug and dug, until he had a deep hole. He took the head, and he put it in the hole and covered it up. He put big stones all over the top of it. People who go to that place now can still see the stones. He transformed all the animals by burying the head there.

After Fog had covered up the giant dingo's head, he set out again. He disappeared.

## The Stories: Owners and Morals

Roger Hart and Tulo Gordon were laughing about the Wurrey story. The three of us sat on the verandah of the old hospital at Hopevale, preparing to record several episodes of the stories on film. Down in town, we could hear the whistle that signaled afternoon tea.

As was our custom, we spoke that day in a mixture of Guugu Yimithirr and English, peppered with occasional expressions from Roger's Barrow Point tongue. Tulo Gordon had been one of my Guugu Yimithirr teachers, and he still took pains to help me improve my skills in the language. Roger Hart had taken me on as nearly his only interlocutor in Barrow Point, and it seemed to tickle his fancy to be able to share its virtually secret words with someone else.

One thing I learned from Roger Hart is that one can construct history or reminisce without ever mentioning the past, but simply by talking with certain words. Barrow Point language was, for us, inherently linked with former times, endowed with a strong evocative power in the discourse of remembering. The mere sound of a Barrow Point word could redefine an interaction and redirect a conversation.

Roger Hart had arrived at Hope Valley as a native speaker of the Barrow Point language, with a working knowledge of other "northern" di-



Figure 5. Fog enters his cave at Bathhurst Head

alects, especially the Flinders Island language spoken around Cape Melville. He knew neither English nor Guugu Yimithirr, the language of Cooktown. The one Cape Melville boy already living at Cape Bedford had largely lost his own language, so Roger had to learn to communicate all over again. In school at Hope Valley he learned a slightly old-fashioned schoolbook English and became fluent in Guugu Yimithirr, still today his most comfortable modes of expression.

It was clear that, as he put it, Roger had in many ways "forgotten about" his own language. Once he had entered the mission school, when his Barrow Point relatives visited Cape Bedford, he was afraid to approach them. For the little mission boy, educated into a select group of part-European Lutherans at Hope Valley, these heathen Aborigines had now become visions of danger and the un-Christian life.

When Roger was a young adult, one of his uncles, a man he remembered from Barrow Point, came to Cape Bedford as a boatman and taught fragments of the Barrow Point language to the young men of the boat crews. Roger made a conscious effort to reacquire his native tongue

and with it bits of Barrow Point history and tradition. He also began to reconstruct life histories for his Barrow Point kinsmen, now mostly dead or scattered across the Aboriginal landscape. After the war, the exile in the south, and his return to the reconstructed mission community, in the late 1960s and early 1970s Roger Hart lived away from Hopevale mission, sharing a house with his childhood playmate Toby Gordon, by then elderly and in poor health but still fluent in the Barrow Point language. This friend had lived all his life "on the outside," on stations, in Aboriginal camps and settlements. Never having experienced the institutionalization that was Roger's lot as a result of the color of his skin, Toby Gordon was able to spark Roger's dormant memories of a Barrow Point childhood.

The more we probed Roger's knowledge of the Barrow Point language, the more his linguistic intuitions proved to be intertwined with a vast collection of memories and stories. Dredging words out of the past became an obsession. Often we would be stumped by a Barrow Point equivalent for some familiar Guugu Yimithirr noun or verb. At the crack of dawn the next morning, Roger would be knocking on my door.

"*Anggatha*," he would exclaim in triumph, "it came to me in a dream!"

The lexical problems were compounded by the environment itself. Around Hopevale, even the plants and animals seemed to speak their names naturally in Guugu Yimithirr, the language of the place. But what was the name of that particular fruit or tree that Roger could picture from his childhood at Barrow Point but was nowhere to be found here in the south? After we began to work on his language in the late 1970s, Roger's linguistic reconstruction gradually gave way to a full-scale autobiographical excursion. Looking for the name of a tree or fish brought back memories of the places where one had seen such trees or caught such fish. "Remembering the past" and "telling about the past" collapsed into a single activity. Recalling a fragment of a story or the name of a kinsman set off chains of recollections: a man who had acted like old Fog, a woman bitten by a snake at a particular spot, or a forgotten relative whose name flashed to mind at the mention of a long ago event. The past began to pervade the present.

As our conversations stretched over several years, Roger, Tulo, and I began to share a repertoire of Roger's stories. His vanished kinsmen became our companions, and their doings became our gossip. Tales were told, retold, refashioned, and reinterpreted, often altering but never completely abandoning the original voices—usually a polyphonic, multi-lingual chorus—of our first hearings.

"Everything in that story," Tulo observed that afternoon at Hopevale, "really fits together properly, when you come to look back at it. Old Fog was truly a troublemaker."

"**Wuurbal**, old Wurrey, now," mused Roger. "He's my totem, *anggatha athu*." Roger claimed kinship not only with the trickster himself but also with the places Fog traveled and with the people who owned his stories. "That story about the giant dingo dog belongs to us," he went on.

The Barrow Point people were once divided into two large groups, one living on the coast at Barrow Point itself, the other clustered inland around mountain ranges to the south. It was in those mountains, at Jones' Gap, that Fog buried the head of the giant dingo dog. The Fog story not only belonged to both of the Barrow Point "mobs," but, indeed, it united the whole region that Fog's adventures traversed, from the Jeannie River to Bathurst Head. Roger commented, "We all belong together. We all one for that Devil Dingo story."<sup>1</sup>

The socially embracing affiliation between story, place, and tribe has as well its darker, modern side: the loss of knowledge. Roger continued, "I got no relations left from Barrow Point. The younger ones wouldn't know the story anymore. Even my own sons—I used to tell them every night, but I think they've got it all mixed up."

Roger remembers that he once quarreled with his elder son, who had wanted to add an element to the Jeannie River episode. "You see, he wanted to find fault with the story. He wanted me to put into it that the **murrabal** 'baramundi' comes in two species: one belongs to salt water and the other belongs to fresh water.

"I told him it wasn't *my* story. I said, 'Look, the old people didn't tell me the story that way. I don't want to make up my *own* stories; they belong to the old people. What I heard, I'll put it down that way, too.'"

The Barrow Point word *yimpal* 'story' (or *uwu yimpal*, literally, 'word story') like its Guugu Yimithirr gloss **milbi**, denotes a range of story-telling activities, encompassing everything from "tales" or "myths" to simply "news," "gossip," or just "talk." People at Hopevale accustomed to a whole collection of different kinds of stories in English—"anecdotes," "histories," "Bible stories," "fairy tales," and "yarns," among others—do not apply such terminological distinctions to **milbi** or *yimpal*. Roger Hart instead keeps separate "stories" about times past when things happened to distant but traceable kinsmen, from "stories" from a much earlier era when animals walked, hunted, talked, and ate like human beings, and when the present conditions of life were established. One knows what is **manu buthun** 'true' about the first kind of story from the

testimony of people who saw and later recounted the events in question; the events have passed from one witness's mouth to another. By contrast, one knows about stories of the second kind not because of someone's direct testimony, but because someone with the right and knowledge to tell the story—a grandfather, an uncle, or perhaps an elder at one's initiation—has confided the details. You know the story because you have been authoritatively and appropriately informed.

There is also an important similarity between the two kinds of story. The moral rules that concern life for Aboriginal people underlie all *yimpal*, just as they underlie one's understanding of events in the present or in the recent past, before "bama way" began to fade from view, as many people of Roger Hart's generation lament. Even more, all of these "stories"—like language, land, or knowledge in general—are owned. They belong to people and places. A story can be mine not (merely) because I was there to see it happen, or because I heard it first, but rather because it happened to someone (or in some place) that belongs to me—my kinsman, my country—or because it is a story my kinsmen told me. That gives me, too, a special right to laugh over the funny parts, to shake my head at the denouement, and, indeed, to tell the story myself. It concerns me. Little wonder that Roger Hart should claim old Fog as his kinsman, his "friend" or mentor.

Fog himself is not, of course, a particularly admirable character. In the first few episodes of his story, he moves from his home at Red Point to the Jeannie River—once a fairly important boundary between the Guugu Yimithirr speakers to the south and the speakers of a group of distinct but interrelated languages to the north—and then starts back through the territories of these northern tribes, marking out notable spots along the way through adventures in which he tricks people. We have already seen him lie, steal, cheat, and work mischievous magic. Things will only get worse.

Fog is a classic trickster hero: he stands for certain precepts of Aboriginal life, sometimes by virtue of his own contradictions. True, he steals old lady Curlew's fish, but then she was hoarding them in the first place. True, he throws her down onto the fish spines, but then again it was indecorous and unwise of her to curse him. He does lie to the people of Guraaban about their dead relatives, but oughtn't they to go visit them anyway? There is also the complicated and ambivalent issue of food: on the one hand, it takes serious effort to find what one needs to eat, and the common resources of the bush must be conserved; on the other, what one has one must share. Fog insists on his right to share other

folk's food, but he also takes steps to protect easy prey from human-kind's voracious hunting appetite.

"Those stories were supposed to remind us of something. They were for teaching people, for 'admonishing' them." Roger uses the Guugu Yimithirr expression that means, literally, "poke the ears." "The stories set an example for people to follow. You see how old Fog behaved. The stories taught bama not to do the things he was doing. Our people used to have a very strict law—not like now, when people no longer follow the good way of living."

Roger recounts an almost dreamlike memory of the last time he saw his Aboriginal father. The little boy had been left at Cape Bedford to be brought up by white missionaries. Although Roger had at first tried to run away, he was by now used to mission life. Some months, or perhaps even a year after they had left him at Cape Bedford—Roger's memory is uncertain—a few Barrow Point men visited the mission to pick up supplies, blankets, and tobacco before returning to their own country in the north. Among them was Roger's father. He took the little boy aside, Roger remembers, and used the bad example of old man Fog to exhort Roger to behave properly.

"Don't be like Fog," he said, 'don't chase around after women, or play with girls. Keep well away.'"

"Don't be cheeky," he went on. 'And don't cause bad feelings or anger among other people.' He told me to follow the law, not to do silly things. He told me everything about how to behave. He said, 'I'll come back.' Then he left, and I never saw his face again."

Roger likens other morals from Fog's story to biblical commandments. "It reminds us not to steal **mayi** that belongs to someone else." Roger laughed. "What you'll get, if you do, is a spear for your troubles."

"All those stories have the meaning on them, down there deep. They help us keep in mind the old ways, even in the face of what is going to happen in later years, in our own times."

As we recorded the stories and talked about writing them down, we faced a new problem. For whom were these stories intended? Roger Hart expressed reservations. Although Tulo Gordon's Guugu Yimithirr tales, published some years before, had been presented as stories for children, the adventures of Wurrey have a very different character. The lessons implicit in Roger's stories were the serious stuff of Aboriginal law, instilled in young men at initiation. More problematic still was the fragmentary nature of the stories as Roger was able to recollect them: surely there were parts missing, or misremembered, perhaps told "back to front." Roger could be no more certain about some episodes than he

could be about some of the Barrow Point words scattered anarchically through his memory.

Despite his father's final visit, Roger thinks the stories were inappropriate for children. They were not openly and publicly told, but instead could only properly be passed on between people of certain relationships. Roger himself remembers hearing a full version of Fog's story only as an adult. Old Yagay was an elderly Barrow Point man who had survived World War II and was still living around Cooktown when the Cape Bedford people returned to the north after their exile at Woorabinda. The older man came to stay with Roger for a few weeks, and Roger asked him about the story.

"Later I asked old lady Mary Ann<sup>2</sup> about it, and she told me, poor old thing. She was my **gami**, my same side grandmother.<sup>3</sup> It is quite all right for my **gami** to tell me that story. Only what we call **bama binthu**<sup>4</sup>—someone who is not sacred for you— can tell it. That old lady could tell me anything, you know, use bad words, curse, make jokes."

Instead of speaking openly about Wurrey's adventures, the old people would make infrequent allusions to the story. When the weather was fine, near the mouth of the Mack River, the old men might point at a prominent rock on the top of Bathurst Head. "'**Wurrey ayila uwer**, look at Fog there to the west, **thurrgu agelu**, standing up straight facing east,' they would cry. 'Fog has appeared over there, looking for fish. There he stands fishing.'"


"That's the only time they would mention the story. That part of it they used to tell. Might as well say they worshipped old Fog."

Another important story tells of a terrible punishment meted out to evildoers in the great camp at Pinnacle.

"That story, you know, was very sacred. They wouldn't tell it to *anybody*.

"I never heard it when I was living up in Barrow Point myself. They would never tell it to youngsters. When Yagay came to stay with me, that's another story he told me.

"Come here. You listen," he said. 'They didn't tell you children about this. But now you're all right.' You know, I was a full-grown man then. 'Well, I'm going to tell you a story,' he said. And that's when he told me how the earth opened up and swallowed all the people."



## Swallowed by the Earth

This is not a fairy tale.<sup>1</sup> This is a fair dinkum story. Who knows how long ago it happened. Perhaps it was back in the 1800s. It is not an ancient story but more recent. One old lady was the only person to survive the events, and she was Toby Gordon's **babi**, his grandmother. She was only a small girl at the time. (See Pl. 2.)

Toby's grandmother saw everything. If the earth had swallowed her up, too, then there would have been nobody left to tell this story. Through her it was handed down to us.

There used to be a big lot of **Gambiilmugu-warra**<sup>2</sup> people living there to the south. On my side toward the coast were the "older brothers." Those from the inland half of the tribe near the area they call Pinnacle were the "younger brothers." They might have had a boundary to divide the two groups. It would have been somewhere west of Wakooka Station. Although our side was to the north and theirs to the south, it was really all the same **Gambiilmugu**. All of us from Barrow Point, and all the **Wuuri**<sup>3</sup> people, too, share the same Devil Dingo story. We all spoke one language, too.<sup>4</sup>

They were a terribly hard-headed, stubborn lot of people. They wouldn't listen to anybody or take advice or orders, that Pinnacle mob. They were fierce as well as terrific hunters. No game could ever get away from them.

It wasn't only *minha* they hunted, either. They used to go out at night and sneak around other people's camps. The houses they used to have in the old days were just humpies, really. The Pinnacle people were on the lookout for girls—not little girls, but young women whose breasts were starting to grow. That's the kind they wanted to steal. They would take them back to their camp in the south.

Sometimes they would come as far as the Jeannie River. They would steal the women and take them back to their own area. Or else they might go farther west and north, stealing girls from Bathhurst Head, or from the other side of Princess Charlotte Bay. They got a big lot of women from up that way and brought them home again.

After a while it got to be a huge camp of people. Many young men were living there, and it was just as well. Those girls would begin to get hungry, so the men would have to go out hunting to feed them all.

They got enough girls there to keep them going. Then they said, "Eh? Let's go north. Let's go and visit our 'older brothers' and bring a

few young men back from there." So they set out north, toward the coast.

Now you know those men from the north side of Barrow Point, the coastal side, were a bit older, more mature. They were mighty tough talkers, too. When the younger men came up from the south, their "older brothers" on the coast were taking care of a group of youths who had been sent there for initiation. The "younger brothers" wanted to see how the initiated boys were coming along.

When the Pinnacle men got to the coast on the north, they said to the elders, "Give us the youths. We're going to take them back to the south. They have become men, now."

You see, they had an oversupply of girls down in the south by this time.

The people there in the north, the "older brothers," hardened their hearts. At first, they remained silent and wouldn't answer their "younger brothers."

"No," they said at last. "We aren't going to send the boys south. We have made our youths **thabul**, 'sacred'. They have been through **nganyja** 'Initiation'. If you people want to disobey the law, go ahead. You may get speared, but go on and be disobedient if you want."

"Give us the youths."

"No. We don't agree with you people. We've heard about your plans, but we can't go along with them."

"Come on, let the boys come south with us. They'll get wives."

But they weren't going to get wives, you know. They were just going to copulate with those girls one after the other.

The "younger brothers" began to look closely at the boys' heads. When they saw one or two grey hairs, they would say, "All right, you'll do." They looked through the whole lot, picking only the biggest boys. Finally they had about a dozen or so.

They insisted on taking those youths back south.

They went around to the place where all the girls were staying. Each boy picked out the girl he wanted and took her.

All those boys from the coast brought their new wives back north. But the rest of the people stayed down around Pinnacle. They used to go out hunting every day, looking around for game.

One day something happened. Early in the morning the young men left the camp to hunt. The other people stayed behind, a good few. The sun rose higher. It might have been about 10 o'clock in the morning. Suddenly the earth simply opened up. It swallowed the whole lot of them. They fell right into the earth.



There was just that one old lady who survived. She wasn't swallowed up. Only her leg was caught in the earth. Her foot was covered by the great hole, and her leg was broken. She was trapped there.

By and by someone returned to the camp from hunting. He found the old lady with her leg stuck in the earth.

"Why, where are all the people?" he asked.

"All the people went down into the earth. They're inside. A great **yiirmbal**<sup>5</sup> swallowed them up."

They managed to lift the old lady out of the hole she was trapped in. They took her north then to Barrow Point.

After a while her broken leg healed. That's when Toby's grandfather married her. She had a good few grandchildren, too. I saw that old woman when I was a boy. I used to call her **gami**, too, 'grandmother'. She was lame from her broken leg. Oh, she was a terribly old lady, too. I think she was from the tribal area of Wuuri. Down there in Pinnacle, they had women from all over, from the Jeannie River right west as far as Princess Charlotte Bay.

Me, I've never seen that country. I've only seen the mountain from afar. I think you go through a place they call Cockatoo Yard, and from there west, to the corner of the mountain, and from there south. Some people still know the place, though, because Banjo used to take them around there.<sup>6</sup> He told them, "Don't go over there! You might go down!"

The **yiirmbal** swallowed all the people for being lawless and disobedient. It punished them before they did any greater damage, before they destroyed Aboriginal people. You see, that Pinnacle mob had great power, and all the tribes along the coast were afraid of them. "Don't get mixed up with those **Yiithuu**<sup>7</sup> people!" they would say.



## Part Two

### BARROW POINT