

# BIRPAI YARNS



Listening, learning and  
writing the next chapter...





**Birpai Yarns.**  
**A Bago Community of Schools project.**  
First published 2011.

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Together, we acknowledge the Biripai Nation.  
We acknowledge the Elders and other members of  
our community who have shared their stories –  
a part of the Biripai history.

We acknowledge all the Aboriginal people of the  
past who have struggled so that we can have a  
better future.

We acknowledge the blessings of this beautiful  
country; and as the next generation, we will do our  
part to preserve this land.  
Its history, its people and its traditions.

**Yamada Gai Gimbay**

## INTRODUCTION ●●●

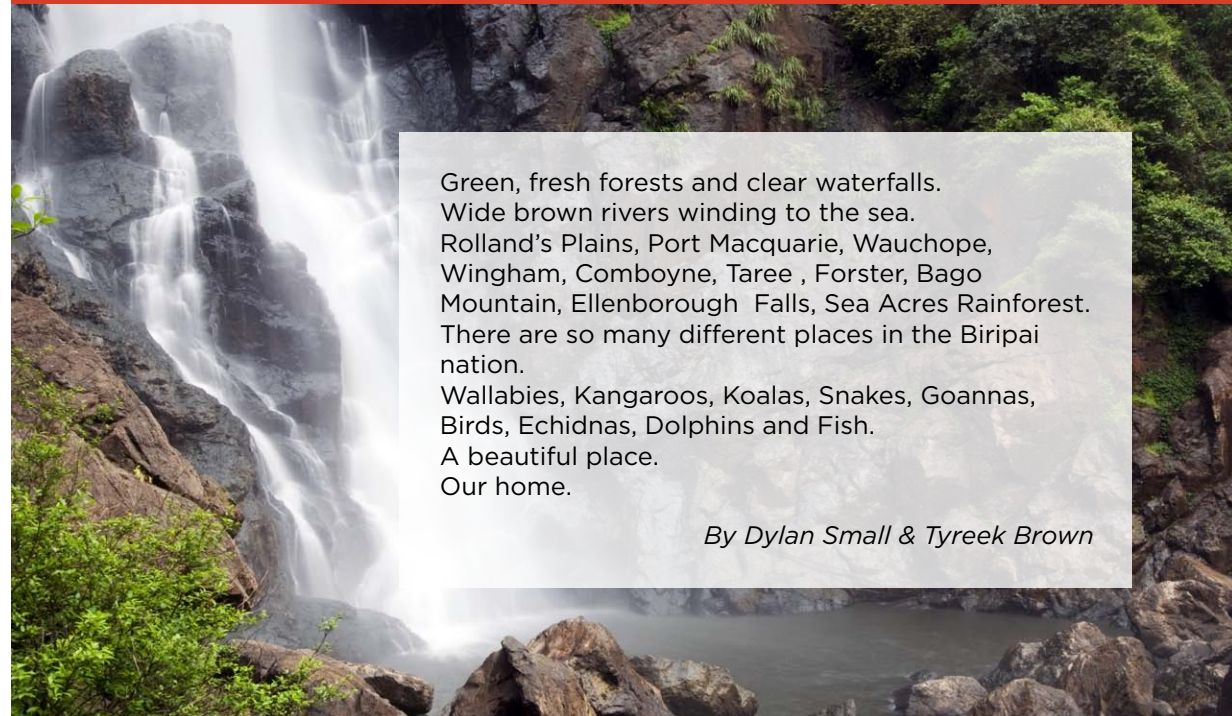
Before history was a subject at school, it was something else – something much more dynamic. It was a never-ending, mixed up collection of adventures, battles challenges, struggles, victories and defeats. It was the stories of how we have faced and overcome adversity, and if we listened very carefully we could hear the lessons to be learned. We could see the long-gone figures of the past come alive in our minds and we would become a part of their journey, a chapter in their legacy. The Birpai Yarns book project has seen a contemporary revival of the oral traditions of the past. Aboriginal school students from late primary and early high school have gathered together with parents and staff to hear the yarns of Elders and respected members of the Birpai Aboriginal community. Each experience has been unique. Some taught us skills, some shared dreamtime stories. Many offered wisdom and advice from their lives. All were an inspiration.

We painted and illustrated. We ate. We laughed. At times we shed a tear. We wrote narratives, recounts, interviews, summaries, opinion pieces, letters and poetry. We used a mixture of very traditional and very contemporary technologies, all the while building literacy skills in the students. As we listened and worked, we noticed a familiar thread woven into all the stories: Oppression – Brokenness – Struggle – Survival – and finally, Triumph. It is a tale that resonates within every human soul, as it is the journey of every hero. It is what we all hope to find the courage to become. Ordinary people living extra-ordinary lives. Of particular relevance to the children were the stories of the stolen generations and just how many of our elderly community were affected.

It is my hope that as people read the pieces of writing in this book, that we all share in the burdens of the past and that together, we strive to build a better future.

*Andrew Lord  
(Birpai Yarns, Project Coordinator)*

## THE BIRIPAI NATION ●●●



Green, fresh forests and clear waterfalls.  
Wide brown rivers winding to the sea.  
Rolland's Plains, Port Macquarie, Wauchope,  
Wingham, Comboyne, Taree , Forster, Bago  
Mountain, Ellenborough Falls, Sea Acres Rainforest.  
There are so many different places in the Birpai  
nation.  
Wallabies, Kangaroos, Koalas, Snakes, Goannas,  
Birds, Echidnas, Dolphins and Fish.  
A beautiful place.  
Our home.

*By Dylan Small & Tyreek Brown*



# BIRIPAI DREAMING

## CREATION STORY

The Dreaming is a non-Aboriginal word describing all the stories that the Aboriginal people told.

Before the Dreaming, the Biripai people believe that there was a man called Goonarbi who made the land and rivers with the help of the Biripai animals. When they finished making the land and rivers, this was a beautiful place with crystal clear waters and many different plants and animals. The boundaries of the Biripai people were marked by the rivers and mountains that ran into the valley.

Afterwards, Goonarbi created Goomarrunga who was his trusted keeper of the wonderful land. Then Goomarrunga started to get lonely and created Yeeindi, who was a man and he also created a woman whose name was Werin. Goomarrunga passed on all the knowledge that Goonarbi passed on to him, to the two people. Yeeindi (male) was told all the lore of men's business. Werin (female) was told all the women's business. The Biripai people believe that the land of the Aboriginal people is part of their culture. If our ancestors did not obey the lore, they would be sent to Ngaku (meaning no man's land) and if they went outside the land boundaries they would be put to death.

An excerpt from 'Visual Edge' by William (Uncle Bill) O'Brien - retold by Dylan Small



Before European people arrived, the Biripai people lived their traditional ways. They made weapons to kill their food. They gathered food, danced and made shelters to live in. They would fight if they had to, but mostly they lived happily together.

The Biripai Nation was one of the first to encounter European invasion. After Sydney and Newcastle, Port

Macquarie was the next choice by the British as a penal settlement for really bad criminals.

When the convicts and soldiers arrived, the Biripai must have been trying to figure out who these people were! But by 1829, the registry for Births, Deaths & Marriages was already recording children being born to white men (probably convicts) and 'a black woman' or 'a native'.

In the late **1800s**, after almost all the land had been taken, the Aboriginal Protection Board (APB) was formed to 'care' for Aboriginal people. Reserves were setup at Rollands Plains, Caincross, Ballengarra and near Rawdon Island.

Georgiana, son of George McDonald and Maria, a black woman. Abode was Port Macquarie. Occupation was Assistant Clerk at Government Stores.

Born 14.2.1831. Baptised 22.2.1831 Parish of St. Thomas, County of Ayr (15/509)

(Registered Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1788-1905, NSW, Volume 15)

In **1909** the APB was given the power to take children from their mums and dads. They were sent to missions.

By **1937** the traditional way of life was gone. The 'Assimilation Policy' was brought in to try and make Aboriginal people the same as white people. They took kids from their parents to try and train them in white ways.

By the **1940s** after about 100 years of being badly treated. Aboriginal people slowly began to stand up for their rights.

**1948** - "Australian Citizenship" is granted to Aboriginal people.

**1962:** All Aboriginal people are given the vote in Commonwealth elections.

**1965:** The Freedom Rides

In **1967**, 91% of Australians voted 'YES' to include Aboriginal people in the census and give the Commonwealth power to make laws for Aboriginal people.

**1972**, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy is set and adopts the Aboriginal flag, designed by Harold Thomas.



**1983** The land Rights Act recognises that Aboriginal people were taken off their land

**1999** The first Native Title deed is given to the Dunghutti people for land near Cresant Head (just north of Biripai).

**2008** The National Apology address given by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Students & teachers produced this summary from:  
'Black & White - Selections from the Thomas Dick Collection, 2009'.

Reconciliation Action Network - Timeline of Australia's Shared History  
The Biripai history display at Port Macquarie Glasshouse.  
The guided historical tour by Liz Gillroy (Regional Museums Curator.  
Aunty Helen's quick history quizzes.

Artwork by Zoe Blair

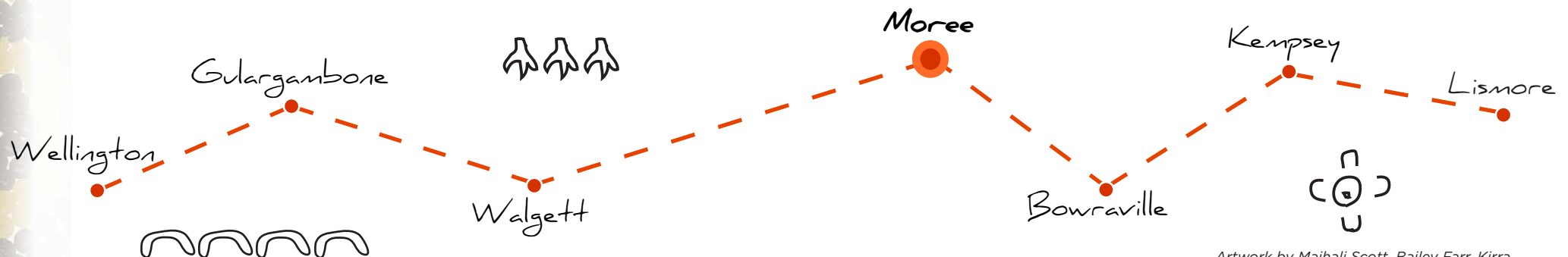
# THE FREEDOM RIDES ●●●

Mr Bourke grew up at Moree. He was in year 7 in 1965 and he had Aboriginal mates that he played football with at Moree. After football he went to the pool and they had to go somewhere else. At the time he didn't think anything of it.

Mr Bourke remembers Wednesday 17th February 1965, when Mr Charles Perkins and the Aboriginal children swam in Moree pool. This happened because they wanted Aboriginal people to be treated the same way and to have the same opportunities as white people. Charles Perkins, an Aboriginal student leader was part of the Freedom Ride and visited Moree, Kempsey, Walgett, Gulargambone and Bowraville. Charles Perkins did this to stop racism.

Because of the Freedom Ride I feel happy that Aboriginal people get chances to do things and that Charles Perkins is trying to stop racism. I think the Freedom Rides made a big difference and that is why we remember it today.

*Gabby Caruana*



Source: Tribune/SEARCH Foundation, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

*"...they wanted Aboriginal people to be treated the same way and have the same opportunities as white people."*



Artwork by Maihali Scott, Bailey Farr, Kirra Ostler, Teisha Farr and Bailey Cooper



# AUNTY HELEN ●●●

Aunty Helen was born in Kempsey. She grew up at Burnt Bridge Aboriginal mission. At the mission she had to learn from a young age, the special whistles. One whistle meant for all the kids to run and hide somewhere away from the welfare and the police. The welfare came to take the children and relocate them to non-Aboriginal households containing British or non-Aboriginal families who sometimes treated the Aboriginal children like dirt. Many never saw their families again.

Another whistle told the children to come home immediately as they were not allowed out after 5:00 pm otherwise the bad spirits could take them.

Aunty Helen's dad was a soldier who served in World War II. Aunty Helen's mum was stolen away as a child and grew up at Cootamundra Girls home. She survived by making up songs to sing to herself about her family, the stories she knew, and her own nickname. These things kept her strong.

One of the stories she kept alive and passed on to Aunty Helen and all the other children on the mission was about listening to elders and parents. She told the story of the spirit bird. It was a small, beautiful bird with lots of pretty colours. If you paid careful attention and recognised the bird, you could follow him and he would lead you home. But there was another bird. The bad spirit bird. He looked just like the good bird, with beautiful colours and a pretty song, but if didn't listen and didn't pay attention you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them, and you would follow him instead. The bad spirit bird would lead you away into the bush and you would be lost.

Aunty Helen learnt from this that all children must pay careful attention to their elders and their parents.

Aunty Helen attended Burnt Bridge Public School from Kindergarten to year 4.



After year 4 she went to Kempsey East Public School. She was scared of the big school and she experienced racism and bullying there. Her cousins would get into fights but she didn't. She tried hard and was good at sport but she was unhappy in those years.

Though her mother and father had never been educated, they stood by Helen and encouraged her to be strong. Aunty Helen's mum always told her to never give up and to never let anyone take your mind off the things you want to do because if you want to do something you can go for it. Aunty Helen went to Kempsey High School after that and left school at 15 ½ years old. She graduated from Sydney University and now she is our Aboriginal Education Officer at Wauchope Public School.

The message that Aunty Helen gives us is; "take strides to a better future". To listen to instructions and to be the best you can be.

Artwork by Tyreek Brown & Jake Teiffel



## Cootamundra Girls

Cootamundra Girls  
Got taken by white fullas  
To make them the same

Cootamundra Girls  
Cleaning dirty floors and clothes  
At the age of six

Cootamundra Girls  
Locked in a punishment room  
Still afraid today

Cootamundra Girls  
Washing clothes for the white men  
Discrimination

Cootamundra Girls  
Stay strong. Sing songs. Remember.  
Choose to win. Survive.

*By Zoe Blair, Josh Caruana, Bailey Cooper, Dylan Small*

Many of our sessions involved women who have been directly or indirectly affected by the removal of children from their families by the Aboriginal Protection Board.

The Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls began in 1911. It was maintained by the Aborigines Welfare Board until 1968. This was the place where Aboriginal girls were placed after forcible removal from their parents under the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909. The idea was to segregate 'part-Aboriginal' children from their families and assimilate them into the mainstream community. The girls were not allowed to remain in any contact with their families, speak their language or maintain their traditions. They were later sent to work as domestic servants in non-Aboriginal homes.

Source: (Horton, David (ed.). The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia, Vol. 1, Aboriginal Studies Press for AIATSIS, Canberra, 1994, p. 228)

*Dear Auntie Marion and Auntie Wilma,  
Thank you for coming to Wauchope High School  
to talk to us about your lives as kids. We felt  
sad for you because you were taken off your  
parents at such a young age, then used as slaves  
to scrub the floors and to work in such poor  
conditions.  
We are glad that the Cootamundra Girls Home is  
now shut down.  
We hope you enjoy the book when we finish it.*

*Ashley Martin  
Wauchope Public School*



**Auntie Wilma & Auntie Marion**



# UNCLE BILL

Uncle Bill O'Brien came to visit us at the school and tell us a bit about his life.

He was born in Redfern in 1951 and was one of 10 brothers and sisters. His father died at an early age and his mother was a part of the stolen generation.

When he was young, they didn't have much money and so Uncle Bill left school at 14 years and 10 months to go and work in the stables. Uncle Bill's family loved the Port Macquarie area and they came up on the train whenever they could.

He began training as a jockey and became very successful. He was paid \$5 for each ride. They only got one day off a week.

He won many races. In 1972 he won the Port Macquarie Cup.

Uncle Bill told us a bit about horse racing. There is more to it than what you think. You need to know when to ride the horse hard and when to pull him back. You need to be aware of the other riders. Riding can be rough and dangerous.

When he was a jockey he often got teased because he was Aboriginal. He stood up to them and never backed down. He said they must just be jealous because he was riding so well.

Uncle Bill didn't let racism stop him from being a good person. In many ways it made him stronger and more determined.

Uncle Bill was forced to retire through injury in 1986.

After he stopped racing Uncle Bill continued his involvement in sport by coaching Rugby League. First for the Port Sharks and then the Port Breakers. He played and coached tee-ball. He later became the president of the Port Macquarie Body Boarding Association and was a member of the NSW Body Boarding Association too.

Uncle Bill is very well respected for his contributions to the Hastings community. He is a member of the Birpai Land Council. Although he was not born here, Uncle Bill is respected as an elder within the Biripai community. He often gets asked to give

**"...Uncle Bill didn't let racism stop him from being a good person. In many ways it made him stronger and more determined."**

the Welcome to Country at special events. He also works at Sea Acres rainforest centre telling people about Aboriginal heritage, bush tucker and culture.

Uncle Bill married his wife Marilyn and now has two children and four grandchildren.







## Project Participants:

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