

WHISPERING IN OUR HEARTS

... the Mowla Bluff Massacre

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AUSTRALIAN
FILM FINANCE
CORPORATION

STUDYGUIDE



ISSUE 29 AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION

DIRECTED BY Mitch Torres. PRODUCED BY Graeme Isaac. In collaboration with the Nyikina, Mangala and Karrajarrri people of Western Australia. A re-enactment of station life at the time of the massacre, filmed at Mt. Anderson Station inland from Derby



PETER CLANCY



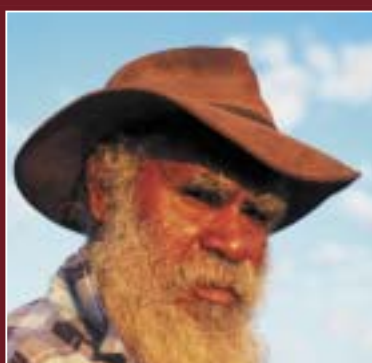
EDNA HOPIGA



WIDADONG MULARDI



STEPHEN POSSUM



JOHN WATSON

INTRODUCTION

WHISPERING IN OUR HEARTS is a documentary film about a Western Australian Aboriginal community's memory of a massacre of their people in 1916 at Mowla Bluff, near Broome.

Frontier conflict is a very important but sometimes controversial area of Australian History. It is essential that we know our history, both the good and the bad elements, and acknowledge those elements about which we feel regret, as well as celebrate those about which we feel pride.

In recent years historians (both indigenous and non-indigenous) have started to tell us about massacres – usually of Aboriginal people by Europeans, but sometimes of Europeans by Aboriginal people. In doing so they have given a voice to the previously largely unknown or silenced victims of many killings.

However, some historians have questioned the extent of this 'massacre history', challenging the evidence that has been used to describe some massacres, and even denying that some of the claimed events ever really happened.

The Mowla Bluff massacre is such a case. It is denied in official documents, but stories of it have been handed down among the Nyikina, Mangala and Karrijarri people of the area over several generations. This film tells the story of the killings from the Aboriginal viewpoint, and includes acted reconstructions of the events.

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Whispering In Our Hearts provides a case study that can help students to achieve these learning outcomes for Time, Continuity and Change in Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) and History:

- Describe some significant ideas, people or events that have contributed to Australian identity
- Interpret people's motives and actions from various perspectives
- Critically compare representations of people, events and issues
- Explain how causes, motives and consequences may be related
- Use knowledge about the past to explain contemporary events
- Explain why different individuals, groups and societies have interpreted and reinterpreted history in different ways.

Whispering In Our Hearts is relevant to a key area of Australian history – the nature of the occupation of the land by Europeans since 1788, and the dispossession of the original owners. To some, this was 'settlement'; to others, it was 'invasion'.

The film needs to be looked at in this context. This means that we need to concentrate on three major aspects:

- What happened in 1916 at Mowla Bluff?
- How do we know about those events?
- Is this depiction of the events a fair and reasonable representation of the past?

top-bottom: Peter Clancy: Peter Clancy, Mangala elder from Looma Community who was brought up in the desert south of Mowla Bluff. Clancy travelled through the Mowla Bluff area with his parents as a child before coming in to station life. Whilst he is able to identify some of the sites he can't find them all - there have been big cyclones through the area and the country has changed.; Edna Hopiga and Widadong Mulardi: Senior Karrijarri women from Bidydangah and Miljilmilmiya Communities south of Broome. Edna's first husband (a much older man who was alive at the time of the killings) had a younger brother amongst those killed at Mowla Bluff. Both Edna and Widadong also talk about the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by white pastoralists, and about women and children that they believe were also killed at Mowla Bluff; Stephen Possum: Karrijarri Elder from Bidydangah Community who talks about the shooting of the dog which led to the conflict, and about the killings themselves. Possum also sings the song in language that opens the film, about the rib bones left in the fire; John Watson: Nyikina elder from Jarlmandangah who was the driving force behind the building of the Mowla Bluff Memorial. Doris Edgar: (photo top of page 4) Karrijarri/Yawaru woman who now lives in Broome. She talks about how Aboriginal women were taken by white station owners for their sexual use as a matter of course.



RESPONDING TO THE FILM

Whispering In Our Hearts was filmed at Mowla Bluff, on the edge of the Kimberley region of north-west Western Australia.

This area is mostly semi-arid, but with some important rivers and water holes. (see maps)

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Europeans came to the Kimberley coast in the 1860s, looking for land suitable for cattle or sheep, and by the 1880's had begun to move inland in to the Kimberly hinterland. They did not buy the land, or lease it from its traditional owners. They simply claimed it as though it were 'terra nullius' – 'nobody's land'.

During this 'exploration' period there were some violent clashes between European and indigenous people, with deaths on both sides. There were also massacres of indigenous people in reprisal for the killing of explorers and early settlers – such as in 1864 when perhaps twenty Aboriginal people were killed for having killed three invading/ exploring Europeans late the previous year near La Grange, (also known as Bidyadanganh).

The ultimately successful process of European settlement and stocking of the area with sheep and later cattle meant that the newcomers dominated the precious water sources, to the exclusion of the native animals that were the basis of Aboriginal life. The process of settlement also often meant the accidental or deliberate violation of important Aboriginal sacred sites. By 1916 much of the land in the central Kimberley region that could support pastoralism had been claimed, and many of the surviving Aboriginal people were being used as pastoral labour. They were paid mainly in rations and



Above: Director Michelle Torres



previous page: Young men from the Jarlmandangar community at Mt. Anderson Station, inland from Derby, re-enact the events of the Mowla Bluff Massacre





DORIS EDGAR

clothing for their work, but their families were allowed to stay on the station, and thus maintain their traditional ties to the land. They often left the station for periods of time, especially in the wet season, to live in the bush and pursue a traditional lifestyle. (When equal pay was eventually granted to Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry in 1968 many workers were sacked, and families were made to move away from their traditional lands.)

Many of the station managers treated the indigenous people badly. Many white men on stations also lived with Aboriginal women, which often created conflict and jealousy that ended in violence. There were also regular conflicts over the monopolisation by settlers of water resources, over the spearing of sheep and cattle by Aboriginals for food or revenge, and over the settlers practice of killing native dogs which the Aboriginals relied on for hunting. Aboriginals were not classified as Australian citizens and did not have equal rights in the legal system, which was European based and designed to protect the interests of the pastoral industry. Police stations were in the few settled areas, remote from the pastoral stations where the station manager was given legal authority over his station workers. This encouraged some station owners to ignore the laws and act as they saw fit, particularly in relation to Aboriginals who still lived in the bush and outside the station system.

Kimberley Aboriginal communities were also affected by the government assimilation policy involving removal of half-caste kids who had been fathered by white settlers and pastoral workers, as depicted in the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

Look at the film, and then discuss these questions.

- 1 Locate Mowla Bluff on the map.
- 2 Describe what the area looks like.
- 3 Describe the general conditions on pastoral stations for the indigenous people of the area at the time of the events in 1916.
- 4 How could such conditions have been allowed to exist?
- 5 Why were Aboriginal people not able to stop exploitation and abuse?
- 6 How would the European pastoralists and workers have justified this situation?
- 7 The key events presented in the film started with the attack on George Wye. Describe what the film reveals about what happened to him, and why this happened.
- 8 How did the police deal with this incident?
- 9 Why do you think they behaved in this way?
- 10 There was a police investigation in 1918 of the accusation of a massacre two years before. What was the result of this investigation?
- 11 Why did they reach this conclusion?
- 12 The title of the film echoes that used by a recent book by historian Henry Reynolds about frontier violence, and refers to a speech in 1842 by Richard Windeyer, a lawyer defending Aboriginals dispossessed of their land. Despite the case he was presenting, Windeyer still felt uneasy about the situation. He concluded: 'How is it that our minds are not satisfied? What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?' What do you think the title of the film is meant to convey to the viewers?
- 13 The film ends with a commemorative ceremony, and the unveiling of a plaque:

THIS SITE ACKNOWLEDGES THE MASSACRE OF NYIKINA, MANGALA & KAR-

RAJARRI PEOPLE IN 1916.

THE MASSACRE TOOK PLACE NEAR GEEGULLY CREEK CLOSE TO MOWLA BLUFF STATION AFTER A BEATING OF A PASTORALIST TOOK PLACE.

IN 1918 A POLICE INQUIRY IN BROOME CONCEALED THE TRUTH ABOUT THE KILLINGS.

THE MOWLA BLUFF INCIDENT WAS CLOSED AND FORGOTTEN BY THE AUTHORITIES BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN BY US, AND IS SUPPORTED BY THE EVIDENCE PRESENTED IN THE 1918 INQUIRY.

THIS PLAQUE IS IN MEMORY OF ALL OUR FAMILY MEMBERS WHO HAD THEIR LIVES TAKEN AWAY IN THE MASSACRE.

*Nyikina, Mangala & Karrajari People
October 2000*

Do you think the plaque is a good explanation of the event to people who read it?

- 14 During the ceremony Carol Martin, the State Parliament Member for Kimberley, said: 'We can't move on until we've put our past behind us.' What do you think she means by this?
- 15 Why is the creation of the commemorative plaque important for the community?
- 16 The film sets up a journey of discovery by Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy to places where the events occurred. What did you discover during this journey?

3 TESTING THE ACCURACY OF THE FILM

It's not written in papers, it's not written in books, but it's been told by many of our families, around fires, how our people have been massacred out here.

Aboriginal elder John Watson at the dedication of the plaque commemorating the massacre at Mowla Bluff in 1916

Old legends and oral history, unless they are corroborated by original documents, are worthless as historical evidence, whether told by blacks or whites.

Historian Keith Windschuttle in 'Documented evidence and invented incidents

in Aboriginal historiography', paper presented to a conference on frontier conflict, National Museum of Australia, 13-14 December 2001)

Whispering In Our Hearts presents the record of an historical event, and of a conflict that took place right across the frontier of pastoral settlement where the interests of white and black collided. What this film is doing is to give voice to the voiceless. For the first time we are hearing publicly the Aboriginal oral tradition of what happened at Mowla Bluff in 1916.

However, the film also acknowledges that there is a contrasting written record of what happened at Mowla Bluff in 1916, and that the police disputed (and still dispute) that any killing took place at all.

We therefore have a contested version of history.

Once stories are presented as the truth of what happened in the past they are subject to testing and critical evaluation. This means that the competing versions of history—in this case the Aboriginal oral tradition and the European documentary version relying on written records, must both be subject to critical analysis.

ORAL HISTORY VERSUS WRITTEN HISTORY

History is a search for truth – or at least to establish with as much certainty as possible what happened, and why it happened in that way. But how do we evaluate oral history compared to written historical records?

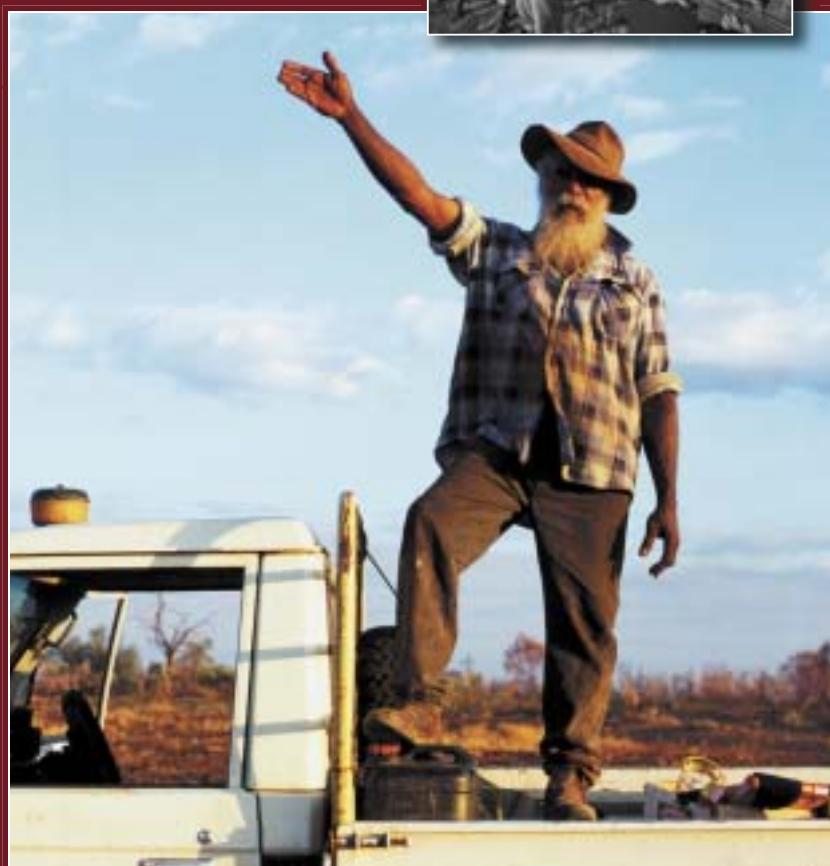
By its very nature oral history may often contain contradictions, and stories may be embroidered or modified as they pass from one generation to the next. Sometimes different events and characters can become confused or amalgamated as stories are passed from hand to hand over time. Some historians feel that this disqualifies oral history from being considered as historical evidence at all, while others say it has great value but that it must be treated and evaluated in a different way.



On the other hand can we assume that written historical sources are necessarily any more correct or any less biased? The police who wrote the journals, diaries and letters of correspondence which comprise the written record of this history may have had their own interests to consider and protect. And the Aboriginal eyewitness statements recorded by the police would have first had to have been translated from local languages into English, which could have led to inaccuracies and contributed to the statements being dismissed by the enquiry.

It is time to look at the film again, and

Photos this spread by Michael Hutchinson. L-R Annie Milgun (from Jarlmandangah) Widgee Henry and Daisy Broome (from Looma) talk with director Michelle Torres about the experience of Aboriginal women in the pastoral industry; Re-enactment of the massacre at Mowla Bluff, filmed on Mt. Anderson Station with members of the Jarlmandangah community. John Watson tells the story of the massacre at Mowla Bluff;



STORY AS TOLD BY	
WHEN THE EVENTS HAPPENED	
WHERE	
THE CAUSE	
THOSE KILLED	
HOW KILLED	
KILLED BY	
OTHER RELEVANT ASPECTS	

this time to consider not what the film tells us, but rather how it supports its claims that it is telling us what really happened.

TELLING THE STORY

There are three substantially different versions of the story included in the film:

- the account of eye-witnesses as recorded in police reports, and also supported by the oral tradition (as told by Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy and Steven Possum)
- the denial of a massacre (as told by the police investigation records)
- the claim that many more people – men, women and children – were also killed (as told by Daisy Broome, Doris Edgar, Edna Hopiga, Steven Possum, Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy).

- Share the task of summarising the three versions among your class, with an individual or group being responsible for completing a summary of each person's evidence or account. Then compare all your summaries, and discuss your findings.

Use this grid (see *Chart 1*) to summarise the different accounts of the massacre presented in the film.

Some key scenes in which the story is discussed (with approximate time codes) and which need to be summarised in the above form, are (see *chart 02*):

- In looking at the evidence and discussing it, you need to consider the following critical questions of all the evidence presented in the film:

- EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNTS**
(Who? Were they in a position to know? Are there inconsistencies? Who would have translated these eyewitness statements into English, and under what circumstances?)
 - POLICE INVESTIGATION**
(Who? Which police? Are they biased or unreliable in some way?)
 - PHYSICAL EVIDENCE**
(What physical evidence could remain? Was it ever seen? Was it found? What might have happened to it?)
 - ORAL TRADITION**
(Who was it heard from? Would they know? What does each say? Are they consistent? Is there any evidence of stories changing or being uncertain? Do the oral history accounts have to be fully consistent in order to contain truth?)
- Having summarised and critically examined the main evidence presented in the film, comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each of the three versions of the events at Mowla Bluff in 1916.
 - What do you believe happened at Mowla Bluff in 1916?

LOOKING AT OTHER EVIDENCE

In testing a film's accuracy we can sometimes also find other accounts of the same events. Here is some additional information and ideas.

- Read each, and decide how it supports or challenges each of the three versions of the story.

A. HISTORICAL CONSULTANT'S STATEMENT

The oral story of ruthless reprisals by a party of police, station workers and Aboriginal trackers against Aboriginal

people near Mowla Bluff in 1916 can be well supported by documentary evidence from State Government archives.

Reprisals such as these were a regular feature of frontier life, and violent incidents of the kind described [in the film] ... occurred across the Kimberley from first contact in the 1880s right through to the late 1920s. They were part of the 'early days' struggle between indigenous and non-indigenous people to occupy the land and control the people.

The Mowla Bluff story which is told in this film provides a clear and graphic illustration of this history and the burden it creates for those who choose to remember and those who cannot forget.

Dr Mary Anne Jebb, Historian, in notes accompanying the film

B. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON ORAL HISTORY

Indigenous Oral History involves storytellers who often do not speak English as their first language. There are cultural differences that inform the way the story is told: who is allowed to tell it and what is told. The older Indigenous men and women who hold the stories of Australia's frontiers have told and retold their stories to family and friends usually without using dates and numbers. As the stories emerge for a European audience they are asked for numbers and dates because these are important elements of the way history is recorded in official history books. Gradually stories emerge and find some middle ground between different ways of recording and telling history. This process of bringing history out of the camps and across the cultural

and social divide between Indigenous and European people can take time and discussion.

Dr Mary Anne Jebb

C. FILM-MAKER'S NOTES

For the Aboriginal people in the film there were many factors involved that affected them in the way they told their story. For traditional reasons there was generally an avoidance of mentioning the names of the dead. There was also a reluctance or nervousness by some about telling parts of the story that could be deemed to 'belong' to someone else. In a traditional community stories are owned and you can only tell a story that you have the right to tell, generally one that is about people closely related to you. Also, Elders sometimes delegate others to speak on their behalf, and in this film John Watson regularly defers to Peter Clancy who is a senior lawman and who was brought up in the desert just south of Mowla Bluff.

Other factors that at times affected some of the participants during filming included a reticence about bringing up bad memories, a sensitivity towards decedents of the perpetrators (some of whom live within their own communities), and an ongoing insecurity about provoking a response from authorities and particularly from the police. These reasons help to explain why many stories such as this have remained within the Aboriginal community concerned as a secret history, known to Aboriginal people but largely hidden from white Australia.

A further complication for us as film makers was to try and identify the oral history stories that dealt with one particular police patrol to Mowla Bluff, when community elders could recount many events of violence that had happened in and around the area over many years. There was also a limit to how much material could fit into a fifty-two minute film, and some stories were not included or were simplified and abbreviated.

Since the making of the film and its viewing by the community some of the participants have been prepared to talk in more detail about their knowledge of

these and similar events, and a number of other communities in the Kimberley have come out publicly to assert their own massacre histories and build their own memorials.

D. NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Watson's record of the massacre comes largely from Darby, the oldest man at Jarlmadangah.

One of the old men took Watson to the site in 1959: 'There were no real skeletons,' he says, 'just bits and pieces of bone laying here and there. And there was a patch of soil that had been made black from the fat of all the people who had been burned there'.

Telling his story in *Raparapa*, a book about the Fitzroy River drovers, Watson said: "Only three people survived that massacre. Two were young women that the police saved for the manager at Mowla Bluff station. According to the old fella who told me the story, there must have been three or four hundred people killed that day."

Kim Akerman, an anthropologist who

has worked in the Kimberley, told how Butcher Joe Nangan and Paddy Roe were witnesses to a massacre near Mowla Bluff in the early 1920s.

The two relatives of Clancy and Watson allegedly killed at Jarinyadum were never found. Watson believes there are many other similar cases, that the Mowla Bluff area was something of a killing field."

Extracts from an article by Tony Stephens, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 2000

E. INTERVIEW WITH JOHNNY WATSON

John Watson (b.1940, Nyikina man)

I was taken there [Mowla Bluff] in 1959 by an old fella who showed me the remains of a lot of dead people. There were no real skeletons, just bits and pieces of bone laying here and there, and there was a patch of soil that had been made black from the fat of all the people who had been burnt there. The old fella who took me there told me the story of the big massacre which happened there. Hundreds of Mangala peo-

ACCOUNT	TIME CODE	VERSION OF THE EVENTS
TWO ABORIGINAL EYEWITNESSES (as recorded in the police files)	1.00	Ten or eleven Aboriginal men taken prisoner were killed in three separate events
	2.30	
	10.15	
	14.00	
	16.45	
	19.00	
	25.30	
	29.00	
ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION: Steven Possum	30.15	Ten or eleven Aboriginal men taken prisoner were killed in three separate events
ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION: Johnny Watson	10.50	Ten or eleven Aboriginal men taken prisoner were killed in three separate events
	20.00	
	12.00	
	15.00	
ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION: Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy	21.50	
	27.30	
ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION: Daisy Broome	21.00	Many more Aboriginal people – men, women and children – were also killed at the time
	30.45	
ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION: Johnny Watson, Pat Clancy, Doris Edgar, Edna Hopiga, Steven Possum		
POLICE INVESTIGATION	30.30	There was no massacre
	33.30	

ple, my father's people, were murdered by the police at the place.

I'll tell you how it happened. The story goes back to an old Aboriginal fella by the name of Gunna Wyatpan who went off with his relative's wife. A few years later the people caught up with him and put a spear through his leg. That was the proper punishment according to their law. . . He came out of it alive, but apparently he decided that he'd get his revenge on those people. So, a few years later, he went along to the police station in Derby and offered himself as a police tracker.

Now those same Mangala people were still camped down near Ngi Ngi or Mowla Bluff station. One day a bloke from the station by the name of Georgie Why came across them while he was out boundary riding, and he started demanding that they give him some scalps from their dingoes. An argument broke out and it ended with Georgie Why being knocked from his saddle with a boomerang and being speared through the leg. His horse took off back to the station and the manager there wondered what had happened. So he backtracked the horse and found Georgie laying there with a spear through his leg. The manager took him back to the station and then sent a bloke up to Yeeda to ring the police.

Now those fellas who had speared Georgie Why thought the issue had been settled, and they just climbed up the hill and set up their camp. What they didn't know was that a party of police had been despatched from Derby with old Gunna Wyatpan and another Aboriginal bloke as their trackers. They . . . crept up on those people during the night. When they had the camp surrounded they fired their guns and the people woke up to find the police standing over them.

The police got out their chains and locked all the people together: men, women, boys and girls. They had only come to arrest one person, the bloke who had speared Georgie Why, but Gunna told them that they should "clean the lot up". Well, that's what they decided to do.

First of all Gunna told them that the police were going to kill a bullock for dinner. He let them off the chain and

told them to collect up a lot of firewood. When they had piled up enough, he told them that they would have to go back on the chain for a while and then they would all be released. The police boys did the chaining up because the police themselves were too wary to walk amongst a group of bush blackfellas. As soon as they were all on the chain again, the police got out their guns and started shooting them one by one.

They didn't ask any questions, they didn't have trials or anything of that sort, they didn't worry whether they were girls or boys, they just went ahead and killed them all. Some of them were shot; others, mainly thee children, were whacked across the head. then they piled all the bodies up in a heap and burnt them. All because that one particular mongrel wanted revenge!

Only three people survived that massacre. One was an old man who had evaded capture at the camp. The other two were young women that the police saved for the manager at Mowla Bluff station. According to the old fella who told me the story there must have been three or four hundred people killed that day. It could have been more, it would be hard to tell. I'll have to go back there someday and have another look.

Pages 224 – 228, John Watson)
In Paul Marshall (ed), *Raparapa Kularr Martuwarra, All right, now we go 'side the river, along that sundown way. Stories from the Fitzroy River Drovers*, Magabala Books, Broome, 1988. (Interviews were carried out between November 1986 and April 1987, transcripts put into standard English, with each of the nine men having the final say on the content.)

- 6 Compare the account of events given in the film by Johnny Watson with this interview twelve years earlier. What are the main similarities, and the main differences? How can you account for these differences?
- 7 Does any of this extra information change your answer to question 4? Explain your reasons.

THE FILM AS A REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY

Frontier contact - the nature and impacts of the interaction between

Aboriginal people and Europeans on the various 'frontiers' of Australia - is an important and sensitive aspect of Australian history today.

The nature of the contact and conflict varied from place to place and over time, and generalisations about the experience can be misleading. In some cases there was co-operation and accommodation, with Aboriginal people and Europeans involved in a 'give and take' that involved benefits to both. In other cases contacts were marked by violence, with both sides involved in killings.

Every time an account in history is presented to us it is in fact a representation of history – somebody's version of the events. The person responsible for that representation made choices about what to include and what to leave out, how to sequence the information, and how to explain it. The maker also has values, beliefs, convictions that shape what is presented. Representations of history can be created as words, writing, film, illustrations, memorials, museum displays and other forms. (See *Representations of History* section)

A key question then is: is *Whispering In Our Hearts* a fair and reasonable representation of what really happened in Australian history? To answer this we need to analyse not only what information the film presents, but also the way in which it presents information and messages, and the impression it creates.

A DOCUMENTARY APPROACH

The film is a documentary – but there are very different approaches possible in a documentary, such as:

- A film that takes a neutral stand, and presents a variety of evidence about a particular event – a neutral approach
- A film that clearly supports one view of events and presents evidence in a way that supports that view – an advocacy approach
- A film that presents an account of events from one point of view only – a subjective approach

- 1 Which of these do you think is closest to the style and approach of *Whispering In Our Hearts*?



Films do not just present information. Firstly the film-maker makes conscious choices as to who and what will be filmed and what will not. Secondly the filming will often be done using cinematic techniques of camera placement, camera movement, lighting etc... to impart a particular feeling or impression to the shots. Thirdly in editing the film-maker makes deliberate choices in choosing, ordering and manipulating image and sound to create the desired impression.

- 2 Comment briefly on how each of the following is used in the film, and what overall effect and impact they help to create:

- Interviews
- Eye-witness accounts from 1916-1918
- Historical reconstructions
- Historical stills and film images
- Sound effects and music
- Editing
- Special effects

- 3 Do you think the film presents a fair, accurate and full account of the events at Mowla Bluff in such a way that we can make our own evaluation of what happened there? Explain your ideas.

- 4 The film is not only about Mowla Bluff but also about an Aboriginal community going through the process of trying to uncover and assert its own history. What is their relationship to this history? Why might this process be important to them? Is it also important for other Australians?

REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY

A MUSEUM DISPLAY

There is a reference in the film to the Forrest River Massacre. This was an event that supposedly occurred in Western Australia in 1926, and a book was written about it by a historian named Neville Green. The Museum of Western Australia has a display about it, with documents, artefacts, photographs and text outlining the story of the killing of eleven (and oral tradition says a hundred) Aboriginal people by police. This is a representation of this event in history.

One journalist, however, disputed the historian's evidence and claimed that the event never happened – that it basically was a lie told by a missionary to gain sympathy and support for his efforts to help the Aboriginal people of the area. This journalist and his supporters criticise the WA Museum exhibit because they say it does not adequately acknowledge that the events it presents as facts are really interpretations of a disputed event based on accounts and evidence that can be challenged. Rather, they claim it gives the impression that the events depicted are factual, certain and authoritatively established – and that the event really happened in the way presented.

Here is another example of a contested view of history.

A MEMORIAL

In 1864 three explorers were killed by Aboriginal people at La Grange, also known as Bidyadangah, not far from Mowla Bluff. In 1913 a memorial was built in a park in Fremantle, Western Australia, which included these words:

THIS MONUMENT WAS ERECTED BY CJ BROCKMAN AS A FELLOW BUSH WANDERER'S TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORIES OF PANTER, HARDING AND GOLDWYER EARLIEST EXPLORERS AFTER GREY AND GREGORY OF THIS TERRA INCOGNITA. ATTACKED AT NIGHT BY TREACHEROUS NATIVES THEY WERE MURDERED AT BOOLA BOOLA NEAR LA GRANGE BAY ON THE 13 NOVEMBER 1864.

ALSO AS AN APPRECIATIVE TOKEN OF REMEMBRANCE OF MAITLAND BROWN ONE OF THE PIONEER PASTORALISTS AND PREMIER POLITICIANS OF THIS STATE. INTREPID LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT SEARCH AND PUNITIVE PARTY. HIS REMAINS TOGETHER WITH THE SAD RELICS OF THE ILL FATED THREE RECOVERED WITH GREAT RISK AND DANGER FROM LONE WILDS REPOSE UNDER A PUBLIC MONUMENT IN THE EAST PERTH CEMETERY
LEST WE FORGET

This plaque is a representation of the events in 1864.

It has been challenged, however, after research into the incident by academics and students at Murdoch University and

the Karrajari people based at La Grange / Bidyadangah. In 1994 they had this plaque attached below the original one:

THIS PLAQUE WAS ERECTED BY PEOPLE WHO FOUND THE MONUMENT BEFORE YOU OFFENSIVE. THE MONUMENT DESCRIBES THE EVENTS AT LA GRANGE FROM ONE PERSPECTIVE ONLY; THE VIEWPOINT OF THE WHITE 'SETTLERS'. NO MENTION IS MADE OF THE RIGHT OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO DEFEND THEIR LAND OR OF THE HISTORY OF PROVOCATION WHICH LED TO THE EXPLORERS' DEATHS. THE 'PUNITIVE PARTY' MENTIONED HERE ENDED IN THE DEATHS OF SOMEWHERE AROUND TWENTY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. THE WHITES WERE WELL-ARMED AND EQUIPPED AND NONE OF THEIR PARTY WAS KILLED OR WOUNDED.

THIS PLAQUE IS IN MEMORY OF THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE KILLED AT LA GRANGE. IT ALSO COMMEMORATES ALL OTHER ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WHO DIED DURING THE INVASION OF THEIR COUNTRY. LEST WE FORGET
MAPAJARRIYA-NYALAKU

This is an alternative representation of that same event.

Which is more accurate? How do we know? Is it important to know that there are different versions of the same event? What does this tell us about the nature of "History".

5 REFLECTIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

- 1 The plaque that we see set up at Mowla Bluff records that a major injustice occurred to the people of the area. Recently, attempts have been made legally to redress the seizure of land by acknowledging 'Native Title' – the legal ownership of land by the traditional inhabitants where they can demonstrate an historical and continuing association with that area. Do you think recording and commemorating such massacres publicly be more likely to help or slow down a process of reconciliation? Discuss your ideas.

- 2 Rae Minniecon, an Aboriginal student who worked with the Bidyadanga community on the memorial project referred to in the previous section, said these words at the unveiling ceremony in 1994:

This particular monument is a window into our past. It is a window into the way in which our country was invaded and the atrocities which have taken place with that invasion. But it is not only a window into our past, it is also a window into our present and if we want to understand the particular situation which we as Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people face in this country, then we would do well to look into and explore the windows of the past. Monuments like this are dotted all across the Australian landscape.

Many old memorials have stories or versions of events that would now be considered inaccurate, even offensive. Should they be allowed to remain? Or be replaced? Or have the competing story added to them? What if our version or understanding of the past changes again in 50 years' time – what do we do? Discuss this, and decide what your suggestion would be.

- 3 *Whispering In Our Hearts* is a modern film dealing with an historical period. Discuss the difficulties that face a documentary film-maker in presenting stories in a visual medium where there are no people alive who were involved in the events, and images relating to the people, place and time may be limited or even non-existent.
- 4 You have seen in the previous section that there have been controversies about how the Western Australian Museum has represented a particular frontier conflict event. Plan your own museum display about the events at Mowla Bluff.
 - What will you include as exhibitions?
 - What captions will you give them?
 - How will you deal with various controversial or contradictory elements?
 - What messages will your representation of history convey? Create your display for an audience that has no knowledge of this event.
- 5 Why might frontier conflict be such a difficult, controversial and important issue in studying Australian history today? Discuss this idea.
- 6 Research the early frontier contact history of your area, and create a

classroom display. As part of that research you could invite a local Aboriginal speaker to talk to your class. For detailed information about the groups of people in a particular region contact your local ATSIC Land Council, at www.atsic.gov.au, go to About ATSIC and click on the appropriate region on the map.

FURTHER READING

The good overview of frontier conflict is by Richard Broome, 'Massacres', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Revised Edition 2001, Oxford University Press, Melbourne

The most prolific writer in the area is Henry Reynolds. The best collection of his work in the area is in the CD ROM *Frontier, Stories From White Australia's Forgotten War*, ABC and Dataworks, Sydney, 1997

The main critic of the state of current research into and representations of frontier conflict is Keith Windschuttle, and his writings can be accessed at <http://www.sydneyle.com/>

FURTHER REFERENCES INCLUDE

Heather Goodall, 1992, *'The whole truth and nothing but... : some intersections of western law, Aboriginal history and community memory'*, Journal of Australian Studies, no. 35, p. 104-119.

Mary Anne Jebb, *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers*, UWA Press 2002. Chapter 2 and 3 provide a context for understanding relationships between Indigenous people, police and pastoralists in the period 1900-1930 in the Kimberley region. It also provides a context for later years to the 1970s when the cultural and social gap between Indigenous people and Europeans increased. It tells how stories like Mowla Bluff became part of a number of hidden histories that were not told to outsiders.

Morndi Munro (with Mary Anne Jebb ed.), *Emerarra: A Man of Merarra*, Magabala Books, 1996. Oral stories from indigenous people in the West

Kimberley tell of violent clashes and deaths in a region just north of Derby at a similar time to the Mowla Bluff massacre. Some names of people involved, the tracker Gunner Nyutbun and George Lovell the pastoralist are also part of the Mowla Bluff massacre stories. This book also has some discussion of how oral history is recorded and the difficulties that arise in translating.

Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra, *Jandamarra and the Bunaba Resistance*, Magabala Books, 1995. This book tells the story of a prolonged 'war' in the Kimberley between pastoralists and a group of Bunaba people in the 1890s. It is drawn both from written records and oral tradition.

Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991. This book has some discussion of the way that people from an Indigenous oral tradition keep stories alive in their camps and amongst themselves but do not tell them to outsiders.

Bruce Scates, 1989, 'A Monument to murder: celebrating the conquest of Aboriginal Australia', *Studies in Western Australian History*, pp.21-31. This article provides a detailed analysis of written records of the punitive expedition that resulted in a massacre in 1864 at La Grange also known as Bidyadangah. This is the research of the written archival documents that lay behind the rewording of the plaque of remembrance in Fremantle referred to earlier in this study guide.

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