

# Unfinished Business at Gundabooka

## Chapter 3 of *A Book that Opens*

Paul Collis  
and  
Wayne Knight,  
with  
Jen Crawford  
and Paul Magee

Paul Collis is a Barkindji man. His early life was informed by Barkindji, Kunya, Murawarri, Wongamara and Nyempa storytellers and artists, who taught him Aboriginal Culture and Law. He is author of *Dancing Home*, University of Queensland Press 2017, and *Nightmares Run Like Mercury*, Recent Works Press 2021. Paul is Director of Indigenous Engagement at the University of Canberra.

Wayne Knight is a Barkindji/Kunya person who was born and raised in Bourke. Much of his early life was spent with his mother, grandmother and grandfather. This is where Wayne learned much of the Barkindji and Kunya cultural practices and languages, and how to recognise and care for Country. He is an excellent On-Country Ranger.

### Intro

by Paul Collis

It all comes in 'conversation'. There is a 'sync' that happens differently for each person, place and circumstance. Allowing for that synchronicity to happen is often the difference between white fellas and Aboriginal researchers. Often, we Aboriginal fellas say, 'You can't push it...' All that stuff around people 'not knowing much', feeling ashamed, having the right to speak depends on the circumstance, place or person, at any one point in time. It's as much about trusting the space, the circumstances and the people in it.

It is a problem when research grants are 'set to a time frame', allowing some allocated time to get the question answered. It's different when working with Aboriginal people—especially when you are 'on Country' doing that research. With the research that I have been doing with people in Bourke and in Brewarrina, not everything comes at once. The people/person that I am 'working with' at any time 'might not be ready' ... that's the way it is. Family, Sorry Stuff, Unfinished Business, History and Country all play a role in when 'to speak, to listen, to be'.

I have been out West four times now. I find the 'right time', but sometimes the right time is not right for the person I've come to speak with ... I find another person where it is the right time to speak, and work with that person. So, the research takes time. Rolls into other voices and into a richer and, sometimes, a different research to the thing originally sought.

Here I'm speaking with my cousin, Wayne.

We're with poets Paul Magee and Jen Crawford, working on *A Book that Opens*. That's the research. We're making a speaking book. Or a book that speaks.

## Unfinished Business at Gundabooka

**Location:** Turning wheel just outside entrance to Gundabooka National Park.  
Standing around.

**Time:** Morning, Sunday 11 September.

**Speakers:** Paul C, Jen, Wayne, Paul M.

**Recording Quality:** Wind blows over microphone in places.

PAUL C: Pitjantjatjara comes right up to Lake Mungo, down near there. We've always had contact with them.

They played frisbee with a number 7.<sup>1</sup> Off the ground [*claps*]. And you'd outmanoeuvre your opponents. What made it an Indigenous game, as opposed to other games: no score.

There was a blackfella from there—he was doing his PhD—and the librarians at AIATSIS<sup>2</sup> told him, 'Go over to that bloke, he's Barkindji.'

He said, 'Do you know this word?'

I said, 'Yeah, it's that stick game, eh?'

That bloke said last time we played the game was 1890 or something. There was a white priest there at the time staying with the Pitjantjatjara mob. He said, 'That priest was there. You fellas won.'

To walk from Barkindji Country to where they were was about 200 miles. It would only have been initiated men, walking with an old elder. They'd do the hunting for him. They played this game. It could go for two days or something, however long they wanted it to.

PAUL M: But how can you win it if there's no score?

PAUL C: The fuckin' priest kept score. They stopped the game after that.

It wasn't only Barkindji people in Pitjantjatjara, there were other language groups. Just like those seven language groups that come here to corroboree, it would have been like that.

I don't know how far Grandfather went past Wilcannia. But he was known.

Now, how did they know that he died?

WAYNE: Yeah, exactly.

PAUL C: [*Pointing at sign*] So this word here, Paul, this word here is *yappa* or *yapa*. I've heard some people say *yappa*, others say *yapa*. I think it's

1. Boomerang.

2. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is located on the Acton Peninsula, in Canberra.

pronounced *yapa*. It's a Pitjantjatjara word, as well as a Barkindji word. I don't know if it appears in Nyemba language, because I don't know enough about the language, but it means sister.

PAUL M: Sister rock art.

PAUL C: Woman's rock art. This is a woman's site. That's a woman sacred site up there, at the top of Gundabooka. Men don't go there. In Ngunnawal Country, the top of the mountain is the men's site. The bottom of the mountain is the women's site. Because there's rivers there, see? That's where they give birth, where there's food.

The birthing site here is over at Toorale, which is by the river.

So Gundabooka is in here [*points at gate*]. To go from there by land for the birthing—how far do you reckon, Wayne? Twenty-five mile?

WAYNE: More than that. Used to take us over an hour—it's a long way.

PAUL C: By car?

WAYNE: Yeah. But they would come across the river.

PAUL C: That's a long way for a woman about to give birth to walk. But I don't think anything seemed too much of an effort for them, in the sense that there's so much invested in those kids being born on Country, in that special woman's site.

There would have been other sites—maybe over this way.

Maybe at the Darling River, over that way.

I don't know how long it would take Grandfather to walk, when he'd go out to fish with the men—when he was seven, or eight, maybe younger. They probably had other kids there, too. They probably would have done it in a day and a bit: start in the morning, the cool of the morning, and get there by early evening. Fishing wouldn't have been throwing a line in for the day and heading back. They'd have been there for a couple of days, maybe three days, maybe five days, before they return. That's when they're talking of Country. Those stories would have been told to him then.

I don't know if he was initiated, I don't think he was. But he never told me. I never saw those scars. But he never took his singlet off.

Wayne's grandfather was Grandfather's nephew, Uncle Hope.

When Uncle Hope started to fight for Gundabooka to be given back to Barkindji people under Native Title, the response was, 'No, that's our

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national park. We'll let you co-manage it. But it's a national park and will always remain in the hands of the State.'

PAUL M: That's why we're on the outskirts of the park and can't go in.

PAUL C: That's right.

PAUL M: That's why the gate's locked.

PAUL C: Because we've had rain. They'd be conservative. This gate would have been shut since Thursday, maybe a bit longer. As you can see from coming through that puddle up there, this country is very fine. It's dust and it's easy to disturb it.

WAYNE: The creek's getting ready to run through here.

PAUL M: But it's National Parks who make the call, rather than Barkindji people.

PAUL C: What do you say about that, Wayne?

WAYNE: We're there to give input. But anyway, the National Parks have the last say.

PAUL M: Were there any times when you had input and saw genuine changes come about?

WAYNE: Nothing significant.

PAUL C: When you started finding artefacts and remains out there, was there more interest, or less interest?

WAYNE: At the start there was less interest. It took about two-and-a-half years before anyone decided to come out and have a look.

PAUL C: So that person that came out and had a look, were they Parks and Wildlife or was that the University?

WAYNE: University of Sydney.

They wanted to make a documentary, because of the significance of the remains.

PAUL C: When you walked the Darling River Road looking for artefacts, say from where Black Rocks are down to the end of Toorale, how far is that by foot?

WAYNE: About 25 kilometres, I'd say.

PAUL C: That take you a week or more to do, in little bits at a time?

WAYNE: Yeah, a week.

## EXPERIMENTS

PAUL C: I noticed when we were out here, and when you were with us out at Toorale, how your eyes were constantly cast out, looking for signs of Aboriginal history.

WAYNE: Yeah.

PAUL C: So as the earth starts to give up its dead, and the remains pop up everywhere, the problem for white people is that farmers own most of the land. Parks and Wildlife own the rest. Parks and Wildlife haven't been good custodians of Aboriginal artefacts.

PAUL M: Are there any Barkindji land claims 'round here?

PAUL C: This was one.

But they didn't get it. Parks and Wildlife got it. Once it's Parks and Wildlife, it's held by the state forever. The best you can ever hope for is that you'll have management teams helping Parks and Wildlife manage the country.

But there's no traditional burning here. None on Toorale either, is there, Wayne?

WAYNE: No. Backburning's what they do.

PAUL C: Did you do any of that training? Did you see any of those traditional fires?

WAYNE: Yeah, in Toorale I did.

PAUL C: Toorale, is that a Barkindji word? Sounds like a western word to me.

PAUL M: It sounds very Irish.

WAYNE: Well, it is Irish.

Gumbalie, that's a Barkindji word.

PAUL C: It's surprising how suburbs with Aboriginal names are popping up everywhere in cities. Do you find that weird?

JEN: It's very weird. It's that concept that you name your shopping mall after the place you destroyed to build it.

PAUL C: Wayne, can I ask you if there was any poor behaviour on behalf of Parks and Wildlife when you worked there?

WAYNE: They bulldozed a midden site, when I was on Toorale.

PAUL C: How'd you feel about that?

WAYNE: It caused a big row. Our elder and me were there.

- PAUL C: What'd you do? Did you walk off?
- WAYNE: They sent us away before they did it. When I came back, they'd gone straight through the midden site.
- JEN: You were moved to another site while they did it?
- WAYNE: Yeah. I came back and I said, 'What are you doing there?'  
They said, 'Oh, they told us to bury it.'  
I said, 'I'm meant to be here when you do that. It's already been site-surveyed.'  
They got into shit over it.
- PAUL C: Not enough to replace it.  
Toorale runs up to the fence of that cotton property. I was asking you about traditional burning. Last time we were there four years ago that bush was up high like that [*raises hand to shoulder-height*]. Never had fire or anything. If that catches fire, all that oil in that cotton's going to go up too.
- WAYNE: Those plants and trees have oil in them, too.
- PAUL C: Parks and Wildlife will do backburning, but not the traditional stuff.  
You were allowed to go and see some traditional burning at another property, eh?
- WAYNE: Yeah.
- PAUL C: But you weren't trained in that.
- WAYNE: Yeah.
- PAUL C: It's just a lost opportunity.
- PAUL M: I want to ask you guys something. So we're on the outskirts of Gundabooka, and obviously we can't go in and see the rock art. But can you guys describe what we would see if we were there?
- WAYNE: When you go through, you see how the terrain changes as you get closer.
- PAUL C: Goes from scrub to the rocks, doesn't it? There's a different feeling too, when you start walking towards it.
- PAUL M: And what's the artwork of?
- WAYNE: There's handprints, there's paintings of people doing corroborees.

3. Frederick 'Captain Thunderbolt' Ward, 1835–70. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/bushrangers-new-south-wales/captain-thunderbolt>

PAUL C: Did you get to go 'round the other side when you were with Parks and Wildlife?

WAYNE: No.

The only time I went to the other side was when I was looking for the bushranger, Thunderbolt.<sup>3</sup> His hideout was actually there.

PAUL C: I find that so strange. All of these traces of Aboriginal occupation, all these artefacts, are visible in this area. And they're most interested in a bushranger, someone who was caught and killed by a policeman.

Thunderbolt had an Aboriginal wife. Name of Mary. Mary was a direct ancestor of John Heath, the historian. Black Mary she was called.

Thunderbolt was arrested one time. Had a broken leg from a fall off his horse. They tied him to a tree when they were resting one night. The river was in flood. Might have been the Manning River, which is a fuckin' big river. Black Mary swam the river, at night, while it was in flood, unchained him quietly, took him on her shoulder and swam back across. He wasn't in custody for long.

She was quite amazing. The last time, they chased him past Gunnedah, right into the Pilliga, which she knew fairly well. He had hideouts everywhere. From here to Pilliga's a fuckin' bit of a ride, isn't it?

He wouldn't have been living off much, I guess.

From the sounds of it, he was friends with Aboriginal people wherever he went. It would make sense. We don't know much about that part of his history. It wasn't recorded or known by those that have written him up.

I don't know if Thunderbolt was Irish or not, but he probably was.

WAYNE: I'd say he would have been.

PAUL C: It wasn't uncommon for those early guys to have a wife at home, and other wives in other places. And when you're married into Aboriginal culture, even an unsanctioned marriage, if they don't kill you first up, they're probably accepting that part of it. But if you break any of their laws, such as breaking restrictions on knowledge, they'd drop you pretty quick.

Anyway, this property here—my grandfather's Country, as far as I'm concerned, Barkindji people's more generally—this property always was, and always will be, Barkindji Country.

That word, *Yapa*, sister—this is a sacred women's site.

I don't know where else there would have been sacred women's sites 'round here. I haven't been right through like this fella's been.

Toorale Station runs up to here. This was part of another station. They were both owned by the same people at one stage. 100,000 blocks. That's a big area, isn't it?

There are lots of sites here that are yet to be identified.

Our problem is that we're going back in time very slowly. You've got to do it by foot, you can't do it in any other way. So you're going back, discovering the past. It's a very contemporary thing. When Wayne was working, things just kept coming to him, all the time.

PAUL M: So that's what you were doing, Wayne? You were surveying by foot?

WAYNE: Yeah.

PAUL C: When he was with us, he'd get out the car and his eyes would straight away be driven towards something.

Felt like that, when you were out working, eh?

WAYNE: Yeah.

PAUL C: When you found those three men, what happened that day?

WAYNE: I was having a smoko. I'd been going to check the pest control—checking the bait stations for wild dogs. I was having a smoko and something kept drawing me to these sandhills. I got a bear in me, so I jumped up and started to walk around. First I found one tooth—

PAUL C: A kid's tooth, eh?

WAYNE: [*Wind blows over microphone in places, recording unclear for 91 seconds*]  
... so then I just walking around the edge of it ...  
... clevermen ...  
... infrared footage ...

PAUL M: So it was a burial site?

PAUL C: Where those men were? And those kids?

It was a massacre. They were running towards those clever fellas for protection.

WAYNE: They also found three crystals hidden away there.

PAUL M: What were the crystals for?



## EXPERIMENTS

- WAYNE: The clevermen.
- PAUL M: Are you allowed to explain what a cleverman is?
- PAUL C: Kidachi.
- WAYNE: People'll say 'witch power'.
- PAUL C: In West Australia they call them 'Kidachi'. That was the word we used. My Nan used to say 'Kidachi'. But that's West Australian language as well. So I don't know if it's across the country. In Sydney, they call them 'Karadays'. Pemulwuy was probably a Karaday—clever fella. Their job—they have lots of jobs—but they're doctors, really.
- PAUL M: It was an initiation site?
- PAUL C: I don't know where they did initiations around here. Might have been further towards the river. Do you know?
- WAYNE: Back of the trail there, towards Mt Toorale, there's four big Bora rings. They did ceremony there.
- PAUL C: Towards the river?
- WAYNE: Yeah.
- PAUL C: That indicates how many people would have been there.
- WAYNE: They're massive.
- [points to the turning circle]
- Right around this circle here, that's how big those rings are.
- PAUL M: A couple of hundred metres' circumference.
- WAYNE: Yeah, there's about four of them.
- PAUL C: There were a lot of Barkindji people then. That was just this northern end.
- WAYNE: That was the rocky part.
- 'Round the sandy side I'd find ceremonial sticks and that sort of stuff and I'd tell National Parks so they could take them and bury them.
- PAUL C: But that again is this problem Australia's got with Aboriginal history. If you find something and get someone to identify where it's from, the whole area's likely to be identified as an Aboriginal heritage site. Which means no farming. You only get compensation once, and then you can't farm that area.

When Grandfather was working on Toorale, he kept the farmers away from those sacred places. When Blacks were finally paid wages in 1967 and they said, 'You have to go, we can't afford you,' I wonder what he felt, how much agony that would have caused him.

He was very quiet when he came to town.

Then his nephew started fighting for Gundabooka. He and Hope were very close.

There's a lot of heartache here.

He showed me a Bora ring out past the dairy, on that Brewarrina floodplain—it's only a little one. The stones are still there, on the Sydney Road. He took me out in his old blue ute.

'This songline, boy, goes on to Victoria.'

Beside the river, basically, then across to the Victorian coast, then up the New South Wales coast with a spur to Tumut. It then continues up to Ngannawal Country. We're connected to that.

He said, 'This one here goes right down to Victoria, see? And it cuts that way, out past Mt Oxley to Kunya Country, and then straight to Uluru.'

It's all women's stuff.

Then he started talking to me about what the songline means and how, if you know that song, and the law that runs with it, no matter if you speak their language or not, if you're in Queensland or somewhere, they'll know the dance. Then because you're on the same songline as them, you're afforded accommodation: they'll hunt for you, even fight for you.

And when you get over to Brewarrina—just before Bre—it goes through mountains, zigzag—like that [*gestures*]. Goes for as far as you can see over that Country. You can see the curvature of the Earth there—it's basically floodplain.

And it's really temperamental country. Soft. All of this would have been inland sea once.

WAYNE: I'll give you an example. We were working near Yanda. They were building salt ponds, trying to get the salt away from the river. They were using these big excavator scrapers, building these huge big dams, and when they brought the dirt up, we found all this coral. It was part of the inland sea.

## EXPERIMENTS

PAUL C: And where do you reckon those crystals come from?

WAYNE: Nowhere. Nothing like that 'round here.

PAUL C: South Australia, probably.

WAYNE: They actually did DNA on the Toorale man. Also DNA on five of our relatives, and it's a match. That's in the documentary.

PAUL C: So he's related to Grandfather then?

WAYNE: Yeah.

PAUL M: But he's got crystals that have come from—

PAUL C: No, he's not the Kidachi.

This is another man: the guy that was split from the crown of his head with a number 7 boomerang.

WAYNE: His DNA's a match.

PAUL C: They carbon-dated him as 900 years old. So he was too old for the West to be here with swords. But that's what it looked like, eh?

When they reburied him—you were there that day?

WAYNE: Yeah.

PAUL C: How'd that feel when they put him back in the ground?

WAYNE: I was the one who picked the site for him. But I didn't see that thing in the tree until after I picked the site. They said, 'Have a look up here.'

JEN: What was in the tree?

WAYNE: The face of the man in the tree. You can see it on the documentary.

JEN: It was carved in?

PAUL C: A man's carved it, or—?

WAYNE: I don't know if a man's carved it, or it's just natural, but it's in the tree. You can see it plain as day.

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