

chapter one

mardamarda

Me and my two brothers all got maparn, but I had mine taken off me by the old fella [Tommy Coppin] when I was little. We all got our maparn from the Pundul tree, straight from that tree. My brother, Jack, he got his name from the nut of that tree, Ngarlkapangu. That's his bush name. Jack could fix people up and Sam too.

The doctor, a white man, was tellin' me we pretty smart. We can fix the people. I tell him you whitefellas are clever but he tell me that blackfella really smart too, with our maparn.

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Peter Coppin was one of the lucky ones. In a land of stolen children, he escaped being kidnapped by the white authorities.

His mother hid him, as a 'little fella', down the creek when the government people came looking for Aboriginal children of 'mixed blood' to place them in institutions or with white foster families. And later, when he was older, his white station boss would cover for him, knowing he was too valuable a worker to lose.*

I saw the government come and take the children from their mothers and fathers. They wanted to take them away — kids like me — so they couldn't mix with their own people, you know. But I was lucky because I was really a station boy — a big boy I was — and I do a lot of work for the station and they like me.

So all the station fellas were saying, 'Well you can't take that boy, he's too good to be taken away' and I've been a working man all the time since. They took children from everywhere, everywhere, thousands and thousands of people when you look at it. But they can't let me go. Old Jack McPhee and all them fellas, they all been taken away. Big mob of them, that's all our family. Jack is part of our family, that's all from Marble Bar way, all 'round the top end. We call it Wirtakari-Nyamal. He's still Nyamal, talks, speaks Nyamal. He can understand what I'm saying and I can understand what he say. But there are some different words — he talk different a little bit, that's all.

Peter Coppin was born on 1 February 1920, in Nyamal country, at Yarrie station on the banks of the De Grey River, under the protective canopy of majestic white river gums that still stand today. He was the third child born to Nurparn, a remarkably tall woman with short-cropped hair, who was given the name Sally by her white bosses. She gave her newborn son the name Karriwarna but he, too, would be given a white man's name. Before whites came to claim the land Nurparn knew as her country, her grandparents and the generations stretching thousands of years before them lived their lives hunting and gathering food within a sophisticated social, cultural and religious framework. But within just a few short decades of the arrival of white people north of the 26th

*Folklore has it that an Aborigines Department 'protector' by the name of Mitchell regularly visited stations in the region to take 'half-caste' children and place them in the Moore River Settlement. 'This man Mitchell was a relative of former Western Australian Premier Sir James Mitchell and he was one of the early protectors. He had a horse and he used to ride through the Pilbara and he was involved in taking half-caste children from their Aboriginal mothers. Peter's mother used to get word that Mitchell was on his way and she used to hide Peter down the creek which was why he wasn't brought south and put into Moore River. A lot of the mothers were astute enough to hide their half-caste kids. But the ironic thing is that Mitchell also fathered a number of children with Aboriginal mothers and Ernie Mitchell, who later became an important strike leader, was one of those related to the Mitchells.'¹

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Peter Coppin's birth place on the banks of the De Grey River, August 1996: 'I was born in Yarrie . . . just out in the bush . . . I was born in the river' (photograph Brendan Read).

parallel, all that changed. No longer could her parents, or she, live free of the restrictions and laws put in place by the white colonial authorities now in charge of Western Australia.

Nyamal land, Nurparn's land, became the land of white squatters who claimed it for pastoral stations for profit, introducing sheep from the eastern states and strict — and often brutally implemented — laws to protect their interests from any challenge by the Aboriginal owners. The so-called pastoralists' 'pioneering spirit' came to mean murder, sickness, dislocation, cultural extinction and slavery to the Aboriginal groups of the vast area of the Pilbara.

The Pilbara, or 'Pilypara', meaning dry country in the Nyamal and Banyjima languages, covers millions of kilometres of semi-arid land, bordered by the Indian Ocean to the west, the Great Sandy Desert to the east and sliced across the middle by the rust-red Hamersley Ranges, which contain immense iron ore deposits. White 'pioneers' were lured there by rumours of fortunes to be made in the 'wild northwest' after the first expedition by FT Gregory in 1861. Just two years later, Walter Padbury became the first to follow Gregory's footsteps north, sending an adventurous bachelor called Nairn to establish the first



Peter collecting firewood: 'My name is really Karriwarna, that's my real proper name from kid' (photograph Jolly Read).

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pastoral property on the De Grey River. However, the 'frontier' proved too much for Padbury and he was forced to abandon De Grey station several years later. Not long afterwards, it was taken up by McKenzie Grant and AW Anderson, who were later joined by Charles Harper.

De Grey station cut through Nyamal land. The Aboriginal population, including Nurparn's family, was large and, prior to white settlement, had lived there undisturbed for tens of thousands of years. Now they were threatened by the squatters, who took their land, often by force, and some resorted to retaliation. By the early 1870s, there were reports sent back to the south of the 'natives' causing considerable trouble for the new settlers in the De Grey and Roebourne regions, with frequent raids on stations and claims of the murder of whites. The authorities 'determined to put the law in force against these criminals, and for this purpose, selected a few of the most courageous bushmen possessing an expert knowledge of the country and the habits of the natives'.²

Christopher Coppin, one of the men enticed to the north by tales of the money to be made and later hailed as a Pilbara pioneer, accepted the position of trooper. He always wanted to be a landowner and, when the police force were recruiting in the southwest, he saw there might be chance if he volunteered for service in the north.³ He was based in Roebourne and was in charge of a large tract of country stretching from Roebuck Bay to Onslow. 'He was a strong tall man who stood up to the rigours of many long hours in the saddle and skirmishes with the aboriginals' and apparently some local Aboriginal people referred to him as 'big fella master'.⁴ On horseback he covered hundreds of kilometres over the spinifex-covered plains seeking out the so-called 'criminals' and enforcing the white man's law.

Coppin was from English stock. He was born in Croydon in the rural outskirts of south London in 1839. Three years later he was brought to Western Australia by his father, James, who came to join the Australind Land Company and was to become one of the early agriculturalists in the southwest of the state. Christopher Coppin followed in his father's footsteps and leased a farm on the Blackwood River in the south, then moved to Cable River. He married Eliza Bradley in the southwest coastal town of Busselton in 1861, and a year later a son, Christopher William, was born. During the next six years the couple had two daughters, Charlotte and Alice, and another son, Herbert. However, tragedy struck in 1870 when Eliza died giving birth to twins, both of whom died also. By this time the couple had moved north. Christopher couldn't resist the challenge of 'pioneering' the 'frontier', and took up his position as a mounted police constable at Roebourne.

In those days troopers rounded up Aboriginal people accused of causing trouble and chained them by the neck, shot them or incarcerated them in local

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goals or at Rottnest Island, just off Perth's coast. Christopher Coppin did a good job looking after the squatters' interests, so much so that when he decided to quit after five years in the service, he was given 'more than one offer of positions of trust from the surrounding squatters'. He finally agreed to manage De Grey station, a position he filled for seven years 'with excellent results', until he decided to take up his own lease.⁵

After careful thought, he chose to lease 200,000 acres (81,000 hectares) surrounding Yarrie homestead and he stocked it with sheep, though they were not particularly good quality, like much of the stock brought in by boat from the eastern states. However, Christopher and his sons, Herbert and Christopher junior, embarked on a project to improve breeding strains and began importing rams from noted runs in South Australia.⁶ By now many Aboriginal men and women were working as cooks, housemaids, stockmen, musterers and shearers for the pastoralists. In most cases they had no choice: their land had been taken from them and their supply of bush foods was threatened by growing numbers of sheep. In fact at De Grey, despite the 'numerous' Aboriginal people of 'fine physique and bold and threatening' manner, which 'often created uneasiness and alarm . . . gradually small parties of natives were prevailed upon to remain at the station and assist with the sheep'.⁷ Unlike their white masters though, they were not paid and only received modest supplies of tobacco, flour and sugar for their toil. By comparison, one of the relatives of the owners of De Grey was in 1877 paid £5 a month as a jackeroo, while in 1885 Aboriginal workers received no money for shearing 13,200 sheep in six weeks.⁸

Both Coppin's sons worked alongside their father and helped him expand the Yarrie property to include more land for grazing sheep. The young Christopher then decided to secure his own lease nearby, while Herbert stayed on to manage Yarrie. Christopher junior was a frequent visitor to Yarrie, turning up during mustering and shearing to help oversee the Aboriginal workers. It was during one of these visits that the young and striking Nurparn caught his eye.

Nurparn was born at Strelley sometime around the turn of the century. By the time she was in her teens she was working as a servant for Herbert Coppin and his wife in their wood and stone homestead built in 1906. (The first homestead used mainly Cadjeput trees for timber as it was less likely to be attacked by white ants, 'the great pest of the pastoralist'.⁹ Later a much more substantial and cyclone-proof stone house replaced the building.)

Nurparn spent her days polishing the family silver, washing, cleaning and keeping the red Pilbara dust from the dark Victorian furniture that decorated the modest but solid station home.

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Kangkushot's mother Nurparn (second left, back row), probably in the early 1930s: 'My mother, she was working in the house as a house-keeper for the Coppins . . .' (photograph Don McGregor).



My mother was born in Strelley station. The old fella, my grandfather, from my mother's side, he come from there. All these people, Ernie Mitchell and all them fellas, they're the one family, that lot. Ernie Mitchell, he was the family to my mother. They're cousins, full cousins. Ernie is my uncle. My mum met his husband, Nipper, at Strelley. She was given to him. They went from there to Yarrrie to live and then they came to Warralong. They followed me really, to Warralong, but it was a long time after when I was a bigger boy.

Christopher Coppin junior — referred to as Willy — was a tall, heavily moustached and imposing squatter of the north, who also was appointed a local Commissioner of the Peace. He, like many of the men who ventured north, used Aboriginal women for sex. White women were scarce and these men thought little of their liaisons with Aboriginal women in the station camps, even if they resulted in offspring. Rarely, if ever, did a white squatter make claim, or own up to, fathering a 'half-caste' born of the master's sexual demands on women they considered were theirs to use in a barren, white, male-dominated landscape. In 1920, Peter Coppin was born one of those 'half-castes'. Willy Coppin had chosen his mother Nurparn to 'mess around with'. (In 1894, at the age of 32, Willy had married his first cousin, Evelyn 'Eva' Rose, and they had a daughter Mabel. Twenty-six years later — according to Peter's date of birth on his driver's licence, which is not necessarily correct — he fathered Karriwarna, as Peter was known to his people.)

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I was born in Yarrie . . . and we had no hospital. I was born not in the station, just out in the bush. My name is really Karriwarna, that's my real proper name from kid. Karriwarna.

Willy Coppin was my father. My mother, she was working in the house as a housekeeper for the Coppins, like she was there all the time. Well, all these fellas from, well they probably come from England or somewhere. You know, they come, they left their wives behind and they come and start messin' around with the black women. And, what do you call it, half-castes, you call it? That's me. That colour — between black and white — mardamarda. Well, this is a real long time ago. I was born in the river. That's the place now. Just there, everybody was camping there, that's Walarinynya, on the bank of the river, straight down from the homestead. That's where everybody been sleepin' from the De Grey, top end.*

See in the early days there, in the early part of it, there were no Aboriginal people sleeping in a house, nothing. They don't want any blackfella to sleep among them white people. So we were kept separate. But they used to like our work, you know, when we were workin'.

Before this, it was all Nyamal people's land. Like a lot of wild people was there before. Well I call it wild people because there was no white people in the country. But they, the squatters, came along and made all the stations and all this sort of thing. And they [the Nyamal people] used to, maybe, start eating white man's tucker. I don't know how many years [ago] because blackfella been in this country, God knows how long . . . thousands and thousands of years. There was a real big mob of Nyamal lived 'round there. And in those days they didn't stop in one place. See a lot of stations there already and they used to go up and down, go to Bamboo Creek because used to be a bit of gold there. I think the old people were getting a bit of gold, yandying [panning with wooden dishes], and they find out they might get a stick of tobacco or something, a bit of flour and sugar, for the gold. That's how they [whites and Nyamal] got friendly I suppose. And still, you know, the white people doesn't like black people to be with them, sort of thing.

The Coppins called their lease Yarrie after the Nyamal word 'yari', for the white ochre found along the banks of the river. It was the same ochre used by the Nyamal men to paint themselves for their Law ceremonies.

As a young boy, Peter had seen his elders, including his 'classificatory' father, Kurilkarra, Tommy Coppin, decorate their bodies with yari and, later, as he grew older and went through the Law himself, learning its significance and

*Mardamarda means literally 'red-red', and is the Nyamal word for 'half-caste'.

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stories, he, too, marked his body with the white paint mixed from the ground rock and made into a paste with water. (Being Peter's classificatory father in the Nyamal kinship system, Tommy 'grew him up' and was his key 'social' father, responsible for teaching him and taking him through the Law. This was a very important relationship, as Peter took over from Tommy as top lawman after the older man's death.)

Yarrie's a place called after . . . it's really a paint, white paint. And the white people took the name from there because it might be they couldn't find another name. They used to paint their house with it. They used to get a lot out of the creek, the banks of the river, a couple of miles away, right in that Marntarinya Hill, just right on the side there. Well, there is a big story in that hill where the Law, the Aborigines' Law, what women are not allowed to know. That's why they call it Yarrie then. And there's a place in the river called Walarinynya. That's right in the river there. The pool's all year round there. All that river, up, all got a name from our own people. From there down, all got a name, native name, like the pool called Parluntanya — it's pretty hard. There are a lot of hard names.

It didn't matter to Willy Coppin that Peter's mother had a husband, Yatana, or 'Nipper' as the squatters called him, nor did it matter that other Aboriginal women living in the camp nearby to the homestead at Yarrie were also married. Willy Coppin, Peter believes, may have also fathered his two older sisters, Eileen and Lucy. But Willy Coppin's stepbrother George Coppin, who later committed suicide, is thought to have fathered Peter's older brother, 'Yarrie' Jack Coppin, and his younger brother, Sam, though there is confusion surrounding their paternity. George was at Nimingarra station and was one of two children Christopher Coppin senior had with his second wife.¹⁰ Peter's youngest sister, Judy, had an Aboriginal father. Only Jack, Peter and Judy are still alive.

Well, it could be Willy Coppin been messing 'round with all the girls down there. He was the only one . . . there was old Herbert, he was there but he was a married man, this fella, he had his wife. This bloke, Willy, bought another station in Pilga, Pilga station, near Marble Bar.

Probably we all come from that same bloody place, I don't know. They might have another father. Still, we're all mardamarda and they call us Coppin altogether. I think we three of us, the first one was the old lady, that was Eileen, and then Lucy, and myself, were from Willy. Judy, the last one, he's a fullblood, belong to another old fella but same mother. Jack's got a different mother

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again — Tommy Coppin's wife — he married after another old fella died, brother belong to old Nipper. Jack had a different mother to me but could be same father. It could be that way. And Tommy Coppin, the old fella, he reared them up, but it could be that maybe Jack's his son because like before he got married with this old lady — Jack's mother — he had a girlfriend, when the old fella was still alive, old Snowball they call him. He was a fullblood. My tribal father was named Nipper. Snowball and Nipper, they're two brothers, them two. Two brothers out of one mother, one father. Jack and Sam are two brothers again out of another mother — Tommy's wife. Tommy only grow them up, like we all one people, so Tommy was their father, sort of thing. But I been thinking that these two might be out of Tommy Coppin. He's a mardamarda. See his father, I don't know who his father is really, Tommy's father.

Herbert stayed in Yarrie but he didn't mess around. He had a son, he had two sons, one called Owen and another one called Bill. Owen had a car accident along the road somewhere near Perth. Bloody car ran over him or some bloody thing, or truck. He got killed. And young Lang, he was, I think, a little baby then. His mother might have got hurt a little bit, but lucky she was alive. Lang Coppin, himself, he is in Yarrie now, today. He there. White bloke. And they call me cousin-brother, every one of them. That's Lang, that's Owen Coppin's son.

(Owen Coppin was killed when his vehicle overturned on the way from Yarrie to Perth to see his two children, Helen and Lang, who were attending school in Forrestfield. 'Apparently the car rolled over three times' but their mother survived the accident.¹¹)

Willy Coppin never made contact with his son Peter, never claimed him as part of the Coppin family. He came and went between Yarrie and Pilga and the young boy would see him sometimes, and recognise the dark-haired white man on horseback as his father. However, at about the age of six, Peter left Yarrie to live with his older sister, Eileen, at Warralong station, 60 kilometres to the west, also in Nyamal country.

He spent his time before then wandering the river banks and living in the confines of the camp on the river allotted to the group of Nyamal people by the white Coppins of Yarrie. Peter's home was a structure built from long strips of bark cut carefully from the Cadjeput trees by the skilful craftsman, Tommy Coppin. Tommy could turn his hand to anything. He was a top lawman, a good horseman and stockman, and the Coppins relied heavily on him as a leading hand. He also knew how to build, and how to use the bush to provide the materials he needed to make some form of shelter for his family and relatives living in the camp. He took the thick, papery pieces and lashed them

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together between boughs chosen for their strength and straightness. The floors were the reddish brown soil where the buildings stood, but people covered them with fresh, clean, whiter sand fetched in old hessian bags from the dry river bed. The structures — of which he built two or three largish ones — at least kept out the damp and the rain in winter and gave some respite from the searing summer temperatures, which could rise to the high forties in the shade. However, they were no match for the cyclones that ripped through the region from time to time, and then Peter and the others were allowed to shelter in one of the homestead's storerooms until the winds and driving rain subsided.

Some of the people pick up the tin and make a bit of a house. But Tommy, the old fella, and I'm talking about Yarrie only, he used to get paperbark from the Cadjeput tree — tree growing in the spring — straight one, and he used to cut a piece there, take it off without killing the tree. Peel it out, clean it out and he used to get a lot of long ones, just like good corrugated iron. He used to carry them from the river, carry them on his shoulder.

He was a strong man. A leader of everything: for the Law and he was leader for the station work, fixing windmills and doing the mustering and all that sort of thing. Only skinny man, little fella, but work! Huh! We learn from him, you know: work, work, work. When he got back from the river he start fixing that house. He get a post from the river and make it same as this roof here. All the little ones like that, make it the same sort of shape as this house here. Oh, he used to be bloody good man, I tell you.

But he's a station hand. He must have been working there all his life, from when he was young. Might be when I wasn't born here. But he was a middle-aged man then, when I know him. He really learnt me a lot. White man's way too . . . he got no nail or anything, he just got a bit of wire and two timber, clamped together like that. He got sheets of paperbark like that, like this roof here, one over the top and he put wire through, twist from here tight. Same as this corrugated iron here. And he put the wire through to hold it down, the land as dry as anything underneath. Oh, he used to make a good house!

We were all camping there in rain time. Some of them sleep in the shed somewhere, might be working shed. They never give us good houses. It was never, 'You boys can have this one' or something like that. Nothing, because the boss used to have a meeting about the blackfella, every place, everywhere, and maybe another whitefella say, 'Oh, they're happy. They're used to it, so keep them like that.' Maybe they used to talk like that to keep us down.

It was cruel. My word, it was cruel all right.