

CHARLIE WARD

A HANDFUL OF SAND: THE GURINDJI

STRUGGLE, AFTER THE WALK-OFF

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On 23 August 1966, around 200 Gurindji, Mudburra, and Warlpiri stockmen, together with their families, walked off the Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory. This action was ostensibly in protest over their wages and conditions but at its heart was the desire for land rights and self-determination on their own country. Often imagined as a single journey, the Walk-off was in fact undertaken in a couple of steps: firstly the initial move to the 'Settlement' (today the town of Kalkarindji) fifteen kilometres from the station, and then, six months later, the final five kilometre walk to Wattie Creek, near the Daguragu waterhole. The movement(s) from one site to another was, as Minoru Hokari (2000) explored, the method by which the Gurindji and others acted to decolonise their country. Recognised as a key moment in Indigenous Australian activism, the Walk-off is commemorated every year with a re-creation of the event, and the route itself was added to the National Heritage List in 2007.

Charlie Ward's book, released for the fiftieth anniversary of the Walk-off, is an important and timely publication that explores the longer histories

of these events. Like many such moments, those of 23 August are just one point on a longer timeline of interactions between Indigenous Australians and settler colonialism. Ward has explored this longer story of entanglement, dispossession and Indigenous agency on Gurindji country, which began in the second half of the nineteenth century and continues to this day. His work is a vital contribution to both the history of this region and the events that took place there, and broader understandings of Australia's history post-European colonisation. It supplements and adds depth to previous writings on the Walk-off, the Land Rights movements, and Indigenous activism, including that of Frank Hardy (*The Unlucky Australians*, Melbourne: Nelson, 1968), Minoru Hokari ('From Wattie Creek to Wattie Creek', *Aboriginal History* 24 [2000]), and *Yijarni: True Stories from Gurindji Country* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2016), concurrently released with Ward's book, which tells, in their own words, 80 years of abuses perpetrated on the Gurindji prior to the Walk-off.

Ward's work takes the reader chronologically through this extended history, focussing largely on the period from 1930 to 1986, with a quick foray into the events of the fifty year period prior to 1930 and the two decades before the book's publication. The introduction, 'Put in their Place, 1879–1930', looks

briefly at the period from 1879, when European settler Nat Buchanan was granted a lease and established his station, to the leasing of the land by the global company owned by British peers, the Vestey brothers, in 1930. Part One, 'The Quest for Justice 1930–72' explores that four-decade stretch in which the original inhabitants of the land worked as stockmen on the station, gradually fought for better conditions, determined to agitate for land rights, walked off the Wave Hill Station, and occupied part of the property as they worked with various supporters to gain ownership. Part Two, 'Making a Fist of It 1973–1978', examines important moments such as Gough Whitlam's handover of a lease to the Darguragu land in August 1975, the development of the Muramulla cattle company on this land, and the 'Mixed Blessings' (Chapter 10) of subsequent events. Part Three 'The Harder Road 1979–1986', looks at the challenges presented to Muramulla—including low turnovers, the impact of alcohol and radical changes to 'the fabric of the elders' cultural and ceremonial life' (250)—together with the achievement of the ultimate goal of freehold ownership, finally gained in 1986. In the conclusion and afterword, Ward brings us briefly up to 2016, discussing the manifold 'reasons why the elders and their advisers were unable to make Muramulla financially self-supporting, or to transfer its management to the next generation of Gurindji' (311), and the agency

of the Gurindji in 'engineering the removal of the Intervention outpost at Dauragu' (320).

Through painstaking and in depth research, including oral histories, newspapers, institutional archival records, letters, personal papers, and previous published works, Ward weaves together a history that brings greater nuance to familiar stories. It is punctuated by significant and well-known moments—the Walk-off, the Freedom Rides, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, Gough Whitlam's handover of the lease—but emphasises the longer-term aspects of the road to freehold ownership and the reclaiming of the Gurindji land; the result of planning and activism by a wide variety of individuals and groups.

Ward incorporates other stories that are not often included in the narrative surrounding the Walk-off and handback: the anti-Communist (and anti-Union) sentiment that resulted in ASIO's surveillance of the Gurindji (67); attempts to make the new settlement fail, to increase reliance on welfare and promote assimilation (84); the difficulties of bridging Indigenous and white cultural understandings of place and meaning, and the mechanics of bureaucracy that needed to be negotiated (95); and the limits continually placed on Indigenous self determination (e.g. 147).

Overwhelmingly in Ward's work it is the stories of individuals—both *ngumpit* and *kartiya**—that shine through most vividly. Well-known participants appear, such as Gurindji elder Vincent Lingiari, Wave Hill's owners (the Vestey's), Indigenous unionist Dexter Daniels, journalist and author Frank Hardy, and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, but this is accompanied by a rich depiction of the stories and work of lesser-known actors. These are the people that are often unseen in other narratives: the many individual Gurindji, Mudburra, and Warlpiri men, women, and children of Wave Hill Station and Muramulla, Darguragu and Kalkarindji communities; the *kartiya* that lived and worked alongside them; and the the union workers, student activists, housewives and schoolchildren that protested, donated time, and gave funds towards their cause.

This is an intricate and detailed history written with a clear and expressive hand. Ward does not sugarcoat the difficulties of this long history and the ongoing challenges faced—leaving us sometimes confronted but also undeniably enriched. Ward leaves us on a note that emphasises the continuing strength of *ngumpit* agency and the possibilities for their future:

Kalkaringi and Daguragu's residents have initiated their own art centre, and formed a corporation designed to re-assert control of their organisations. The community is engaging with the Vic-Daly Regional Council for the first time. Fifty years after the Gurindji's Walk-off, it is a 'new day' again at Wave Hill. Against all odds, Lingiari's legacy lives. (320)

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* *ngumpit* 'Gurindji name for themselves and neighbouring Indigenous groups'; *kartiya* 'white people' (xvi).