

Gabarlgu Kaparlgoo Kapalga - South Alligator people, three ways

A talk by Bill Lennox

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Kia ora koutou katoa

My talk tonight draws together the three strands of research I have undertaken in the last eight years.

I came to the Northern Territory in 2008 to find out more about my grandfather, **Andrew Lennox**, one of the missionaries who established a mission at Kapalga in 1899. My book “After Andrew” relates my experiences on that trip. I have also published the memoir left by Andrew Lennox. Andrew’s story is the **third strand** of my talk.

Reading about my grandfather’s time in the north made me curious about other things that happened at Kapalga over the centuries. In 2009 I received a Northern Territory Government History Grant and I was able to spend time in Darwin researching the various uses of **Kapalga billabong** and adjacent country. That story is the **second strand** of tonight’s talk.

On my first visit to Kakadu in 2008, I was taken to Kapalga billabong by Victor Cooper Guruwala, senior man in the Minitja family that claims traditional ownership of the country around Kapalga.

As we drove away from Kapalga, Victor said three things: first, he told me I was welcome back there any time – that was very moving; the second thing he said was “I think we’ve got puncture” (we’d been driving off the track to avoid fallen trees); after we’d changed the tire, Victor said “You could write the story of our **Minitja family**. So I did. That story is the **first strand** of tonight’s talk.

My thanks to Victor and his family, and the many people and institutions who assisted me over the years, in particular Francoise Barr and other staff at the Northern Territory Archives Service.

Before I start, I need to **define some terms**.



The country at the centre of tonight’s talk is between the West and South Alligator Rivers, from Arnhem Highway to the coast. More specifically, I look at Kapalga – but I need to explain what I mean by “Kapalga”.

“Kapalga” signifies different places to different people.



Indigenous people crossed the river close to Kapalga billabong and camped in the area of the billabong, most often on its southern edges. So in pre-European times, “Kapalga” (or Gabalgu) was the country around the billabong across to the river and south almost as far as the highway.

The **missionaries** who arrived in 1899 appear to be the first Europeans to write the place-name – local people took them to a billabong they called Gabarlgu and the missionaries called their mission site Kaparlgoo.



In the first half of the 20th century **buffalo hunters** used the landing (built by the missionaries) on the South Alligator near Kapalga and the land immediately around the billabong. But some had leases on adjoining blocks of land between the West and South Alligator Rivers, from Arnhem Highway to the coast. Two of them referred to this wider holding as “**Kapalga Station**”. So to some, “Kapalga” referred to all the land between the West and South Alligator Rivers.



For 20 years from 1975 **CSIRO** had permission to conduct experiments on about two-thirds of the country between the West and South Alligator Rivers. CSIRO established their **Kapalga Research Station** at **Naramu**, a billabong about 13 km from Kapalga billabong. For many people (including some GPS systems) “Kapalga” refers to the outstation at Naramu and/or the wider CSIRO country.



When I think and write about Kapalga, I am usually referencing Kapalga billabong and the land immediately around it. Kapalga billabong is one kilometre west of the South Alligator River, about 10 km in a straight line from the Arnhem Highway bridge.

STRAND ONE

I want to start with a story – it's a long story but, tonight, a short one.



Four generations ago, at the dawn of what Europeans called the twentieth century, a young Gonbidj woman named **Margarula**, left her family's country on the western banks of the South Alligator River - near Kapalga billabong, not far from the current bridge on the Arnhem Highway.



Margarula had married **Biku**, a Limilngan man from Minitja country on the West Alligator River. Limilngan was his language and Minitja his people.



Margarula and Biku's ancestors had lived on the coastal plains for over 7,000 years.

There was plenty to sustain them year round. They hunted magpie geese and wallaby, caught fish, collected goose eggs and ate lily bulbs and palm nuts. They went to the coast for shellfish, mudcrabs and dugong. At Field Island, at the mouth of the South Alligator, they found honey, and sea turtles and their eggs.

Margarula was probably born in the late 1880s – by this time, foreigners were invading her family's country. Gold mining attracted thousands and water buffalo wallowed in rivers and billabongs. Commercial buffalo hunting started about this time - and the government divided the country into blocks for leasing.



About this time (in 1878) the government sliced the country into blocks for leasing. There were plans for a massive sugar plantation – but the land was soon overrun by buffalo.

Many indigenous people were moving off the coastal plains – some drifted to the outskirts of mining towns to the south. Many died from foreign diseases.



Others chose to stay on their country by working for buffalo hunters, skinning, salting and packing hides.



Margarula's brother **Woodeddi** went west, later living in Wulna country.

When Margarula was marrying Biku, she might have seen two white men arriving at Kapalga. They arrived uninvited and brought with them twenty goats, two pigs, two donkeys and horses - and they took over the land at Kapalga billabong.



They were the **Christian missionaries** - Alex Gathercole and Andrew Lennox. They set to work building houses and fences. They dug a large hole and found water, and they slept under a large net. They chopped down trees and planted their own trees - they called them bananas, mangos, custard apple and paw-paw. They put vegetable seeds into the earth. Most were washed away in the Wet.

Following custom, Margarula and Biku moved to Biku's Minitja country around the West Alligator River. In 1910, they were at Waldak Irrmbal (West Alligator Head).



West Alligator Head was within the Manassie Native Reserve, set up by the government to protect indigenous people from European civilization. There were only 20 people living there in Margarula and Biku's day. (The photographs of Biku at West Alligator Head were taken by Ted Ryko.)

Margarula and Biku soon moved inland up the West Alligator and into Wildman country. There they had one daughter - **Victoria Ulukbamil**.

Victoria Ulukbamil would become a central figure in this story.

Victoria married **Jimmy Linmun**, a Limilngan man from Mount Bunday, further west. The couple worked for buffalo hunters in the Mary River system but soon moved to the outskirts of Darwin.



Victoria had two children with Jimmy Linmun – the first (Mabel) was born in 1913 in Darwin Hospital; and the second was born on a cattle station at Humpty Doo in 1915. They named him **Felix lynuk**. He was later known as **Felix Holmes**.

After Jimmy Linmun died, Victoria made one child with Salum, a man from Malaysia. Victoria named her **Thelma Malun-ngan**. She was born in Darwin in 1918 – and she would be Victor Cooper's mother.

Victoria and her three children lived in the Darwin area in the 1920s. Felix was initiated "on the foreshore of Darwin Harbour" - and his sister Mabel went to work at Koolpinyah cattle station on the outskirts of Darwin.

By 1930 Victoria, with her children Thelma and Felix, had joined Mabel at Koolpinyah Station. At Koolpinyah Victoria met a Tiwi man, **Charlie Danbuwei**.



Victoria and Charlie made two children – a son, and a daughter they named **Lena Uraki**. Both were born in the early thirties in Darwin Hospital. Lena Uraki was later known as **Lena Henry**.

Victoria Ulukbamil's family of five children was complete – and **Koolpinyah Station** became the family's home for almost 40 years.



Victoria Ulukbamil's family felt safe and reasonably comfortable at Koolpinyah – they were employed, fed, housed and received some wages - and they were able to fish, hunt and travel across their ancestral Limilngan country.

At Koolpinyah, the family lived and worked with people from all over the north. When the census was carried out in 1956 there were 70 indigenous people at Koolpinyah and Humpty Doo (part of Koolpinyah Station). There were nine members of Victoria's family or their spouses, and another 7 gave their tribe as "Minaji". About 20 said they were born in the Alligator rivers region – almost all of them gave birth dates around 1900, about the time Victoria was born. They were part of the exodus.

The family developed a close bond with Koolpinyah's bachelor owners, **Oscar and Evan Herbert** – and their lives at Koolpinyah were carefully recorded in Oscar Herbert's diaries.



"Lena and Zelma will not work because they got no tobacco rations on Saturday." (5 February 1951)

Victoria Ulukbamil passed on in the early 1940s. She is buried in an unmarked grave at Koolpinyah Station.

Felix Lynuk was the first of the family to leave Koolpinyah – in 1963 he was at Annaburroo Station. The rest of the family left together (quite suddenly) in 1968.



"Wed 7 February 1968: "All decide to leave ... leave in Ford abt 10am"

The family's move from Koolpinyah was probably triggered by three social changes of the 1960s – Aboriginal people had access to **alcohol**, Aboriginal children were required to go to **school**, and cattle station owners were facing the prospect of paying **award wages** to indigenous workers.



The family moved to the Bagot community in Darwin, where the children could go to school.

The family was separated for a while after Cyclone Tracey in 1974, but they stayed in touch. Some of the men hunted buffalo in Mary River country and Felix lived for a time on Wildman country. Others in the family lived in Palmerston.



By the 1970s, Thelma, Lena and Felix were among the last fluent **Limilngan** speakers - they were consulted by researchers and passed on knowledge of Limilngan language, sacred sites and culture. Felix often reminded Victor Cooper of his responsibilities as the oldest of the next generation.



Thelma was often unwell – in 1968 she had been flown to Adelaide for heart surgery. Documents held in the NTAS archives indicate how well she was looked after during her eight months away from home. Thelma Malun-

ngan passed on a month after Cyclone Tracey.

The establishment of **Kakadu National Park** had a profound impact on the family.



In 1980, Thelma's son **Victor Cooper** was recruited as a trainee ranger. (Bill Neidje and Ian Morris played roles in getting Victor involved.) Victor would become a key figure in this story.

When the Park was extended in 1984 the plains west of the South Alligator and across to the Wildman became part of the National Park. So did Kapalga. As a senior ranger Victor Cooper was eventually appointed to liaise with CSIRO – he moved to CSIRO's Kapalga Research Station, on the country of his great grandmother Margarula.

Meanwhile, the family was involved in **land claims**. Felix Lynuk had links with Wildman and Mary River country through his Limilngan father and grandfather, but he lost the claim. He had no children so did not represent a "descent group".

The family then looked to their Gonbidj and Minitja ancestry and the country of Margarula and Biku - where Victor was already living. Felix, Lena and the rest of the family joined Victor at Kapalga in the 1990s.

So by the year 2000, the family's one-hundred year journey was complete - all of Margarula and Biku's descendants were back on ancestral country.

They were living together a few kilometres from Kapalga billabong - at Naramu, where CSIRO had its headquarters. Naramu was believed to be a primary camp site for the Gonbidj people.

The family was recognised as a local descent group - the Minitja descent group - and they claimed traditional ownership of country between the West and South Alligator rivers, from the highway to the coast.



Felix Lynuk and Lena Uraki – The Old People - connected the next generation with the family's culture. Felix and Bill Neidjie were close friends - they considered themselves cousin brothers and were senior lore men across Kakadu.

Felix Lynuk passed on in 2002, and Lena Uraki in 2006 - they are both buried on their grandmother's country at Naramu.

Today, four of Margarula and Biku's great grandchildren live at Naramu, just off the Arnhem Highway, south of the South Alligator bridge. Their children and grandchildren live nearby - in Kakadu and across Limilngan country to Darwin. Many of them work as rangers and in the tourism industry.

The family is grateful that their ancestors worked hard and stuck together through the invasion of their country - and they are happy to be able care for the country of their ancestors.

That's the essence of my story of the Minitja family of Kapalga – it also touches on the other two strands of this talk. This is their story – if you want to know more, or have a copy of the story, please contact Victor Cooper.

I want to make three observations on the Minitja family story:

1 The Minitja family's story is not a story of high drama.

It's not even a 'typical' story of indigenous dispossession and recovery. There were no stolen children, no massacres, no cruel or lecherous pastoralists

It is unusual in that the family **stayed in one place** for 40 years. They had positive interactions with many Europeans and a range of indigenous people. They had jobs and they experienced both rural and urban living.

Equally importantly, **they stayed together**. In a story that spans 120 years, we lost track of only two of the ancestors.

2 The family's relationship with the Herbert brothers was unusual.

The relationship between cattle station owners and Aboriginal workers was often described as '**feudal**' – indigenous people worked for wealthy landowners and got security in return, but little income. But at Koolpinyah a **co-dependency** developed – the Herberts and the indigenous people needed each other. There seemed to be mutual respect and even affection.

Oscar and Evan Herbert were bachelors, effectively trapped in an environment their father had thrust on them. They had intermittent contact with family and friends (challenges to their wills demonstrated their isolation from family) - so their indigenous community became more than cheap labour – it was a de facto family. The family had genuine affection for the brothers, especially Oscar perhaps. They remember their deaths and burials – they went to Koolpinyah and dug the graves.

3 A significant issue for me in researching this story was the status of matrilinear ancestry, especially in land claim processes.

In this family, mothers were critical to continuity and cohesion (probably not all that unusual) - but **patrilinear** connections are still often given precedence. I found some of the reports written for land claim tribunals to be inconsistent – on the one hand they gave priority to patrilinear connections, even where they rely on adoption and marriages - but in other contexts they'd recognize the validity of matrilinear connections. (That's the extent of my understanding of that topic!)

Now I want to take a step back and look at what happened over the centuries at Kapalga Billabong ... this strand is based on the research I undertook with the assistance of my Northern Territory Government History Grant.

STRAND TWO

Gabarlgu Kaparlgoo Kapalga – the story of a billabong

Indigenous people in the Kakadu region used Gabarlgu billabong for centuries before the arrival of Europeans – it was a regular camping place, an important meeting place for groups from all directions and a place where ceremony happened.



The billabong is less than a kilometre from the South Alligator River – at this point, the river is relatively simple to cross.

The billabong is 300 metres in diameter and is freshwater, presumed to be spring-fed. It's surrounded by tall open forest, swampy and liable to flooding to the south west and north west. Other land adjacent to the billabong doesn't flood in the Wet, although floodwaters can cut it off from other parts of the region.

As I explained in the first strand of this talk, there was (and still is) plenty within a day or two's walk to sustain people all year round.

One historian wrote:

Some of the coastal groups were large, semi-permanent and lived an almost sedentary existence, sustained by a plentiful diet from the sea ... as well as greater resources from the land than the desert people dared imagine.

Far Country, Alan Powell (2000)

There are **middens** and **sacred sites** along the west bank of the South Alligator north of Kapalga.

Wildlife is more varied and abundant than in many places within Kakadu National Park, especially recently as humans now hardly ever enter the area. The billabong itself sustains magpie geese, turtle, fish and often estuarine crocodile. In the 1990s CSIRO staff counted 39 in one night.

On my own visits I have seen wallaby, kangaroos, emu and dingo. In the 19990s researchers estimated that Kapalga dingo were among the purest in Australia, at 95%. There are 70 species of reptiles and goanna have been seen there recently.

The wildlife must have been puzzled by the spells of frenetic human activity interspersed with spells of silence. The dingo I saw there certainly looked surprised at our presence.

I have found one traditional story that mentions Kapalga. Baldwin Spencer (1914) documented an ancestral journey that gave the country the Gonbudj language.

A woman, named Ungula Robunbun ... walked to Koarnbo Creek, near the salt water at Murangaraiyu (West Alligator River), where she left a boy and girl and told them to speak Koarnbut. Travelling on to Kupalu, she left the Koarnbut language behind her and crossed over what is now called the East Alligator.

Traditional ownership of the billabong itself is still debated – Gonbudj and Minitja descendants and Murumburr (Ngomburr speakers) from the south both claim ancestral connections. The final outcome of a recent land claim is not yet settled but the two groups seem likely to share responsibility for Kapalga.



In pre- and early- European days, fifty to 100 people camped at various sites around the billabong in the Dry and they probably stayed throughout the Wet.

Robert Levitus has published one eye-witness account - Butcher Knight Namandarrk lived at the billabong between 1914 and 1920 (with buffalo hunter Fred Smith) but his account is probably a reliable indicator of pre-European life.

People from the 'bottom end' and 'top end', speaking one another's languages, met up at Kapalga ... Aborigines used to camp on the hills named Big Centipede and Little Centipede (Mount Hooper) ... They reached the area by canoe, and also camped on the islands Garralngarr (Field Island) and Djolburdu (Barron Island) ... They camped there during the wet or dry season, under stringybark shelters. *The Life of Butcher Knight Namandarrk*, Levitus (2011)

I became interested in the **earliest contact** indigenous people living near Kapalga might have had with people from other lands. Regular contact with Europeans didn't start until the 1880s but local people were probably aware of foreign visitors much earlier.



In 1644 **Abel Tasman** entered what is now known as Van Diemen Gulf. He didn't find the gulf's western entrance so assumed he was in a large bay - he named it van Diemen Bay. Tasman's records indicate that he criss-crossed the "bay" and would have been close to the mouths of the three Alligator Rivers. It is likely that people on the coast, especially at West Alligator Head and on Field Island would have seen Tasman's sails.

Other Europeans visiting Australia's northern coast either missed the entrance to Van Diemen Gulf, or assumed it was a bay so didn't venture further.

For example, in 1705 a Dutch party landed on Croker, Bathurst and Tiwi islands. They were on Tiwi for some time before violence developed. It's almost certain that people in West and South Alligator country knew about this event. In fact, there are suggestions that the Tiwi came to the mainland quite often, once possibly contributing to the demise of Gonbidj speakers.

Macassan trepangers came annually to the northern coast of the Territory from the mid-1700s to about 1900. Most reports come from the beaches of Arnhem Land, further east, but two suggest Macassans could have been close enough to Kakadu country to be noticed by South Alligator people.

In his account of his 1802 voyage, Matthew Flinders reported seeing large numbers of Macassan pruas off the north coast of Cobourg Peninsula - and the missionary Andrew Lennox reported seeing praus in 1901 as he was sailing via the Vernon Islands from Darwin to the South Alligator.

(Mathew Flinders' ship developed leaks in his circumnavigation in 1802 so he didn't enter Van Diemen Gulf. His charts reproduced Tasman's map of van Diemen Bay.)

The earliest close and almost certain sighting of Europeans is fascinating ...

In **1818 Phillip Parker King** was dispatched to survey the stretches of coastline Flinders had missed. King established that the body of water behind Cobourg Peninsula was a gulf. He named Cobourg Peninsula and Bathurst and Melville Islands. But most importantly for this research, King explored the South Alligator River.

King sailed his ship a few miles up the South Alligator River - as far as he dared – then continued by rowing boat until he was 36 miles (58km) from the coast. At the point where he stopped to turn back (he was aware of the power of the tide) he reported that he could see a large hill – almost certainly Ngarlangarlarrku, the hill on the Highway south of the bridge.



Helpfully for us, King noted his bearings - he was one bend away from the current Arnhem Highway. So he had rowed past Kapalga. King saw no people but he saw smoke. People at Kapalga must have seen him.

King's report wasn't promising so far as British interests were concerned.

... a low level plain, the monotony of which was occasionally relieved by a few wooded hills ... the palm-tree was conspicuous ... the view ... unvaried and heavy.

King was more impressed by Melville Island and Coburg Peninsula and British attempts at settlement started there. Of course, the failed attempt at settlement on Cobourg Peninsula eventually had a huge impact on South Alligator people – water buffalo introduced and released by the British soon found their way to the floodplains of the South Alligator, an ideal habitat.

Despite King's report, the government eventually encouraged settlers to utilise the coastal plains.



An 1878 land tenure map sliced the top end into lots in the hope of attracting graziers. It was clearly based on no evidence of the nature of the country – the South Alligator River ran through two of the lots. Perhaps officials had visions of English-style estates with picturesque rivers flowing through them – in fact, large portions of both lots would have been tidal mudflats (infested with crocodiles).

Legislation governing leases at least recognized the possible presence of indigenous people - they would have the right to **“enter and be on the leased land; take water; take or kill animals for food or ceremonial purposes; and take vegetable matter growing naturally”**. In New Zealand, we'd call that a Yeah right! proposition.

There was apparently little interest in the leases so the South Australian Government decided to look into the productive potential of the coastal floodplains.

In **1884-5 Captain Frederick Carrington** sailed about 90km up the South Alligator River – well past Kapalga. His report was not promising in pastoral terms - the country was swarming with buffalo!

But land leases were the way of the future. Kapalga became a place for grand dreams or semi-retirement ... leases were held by either speculators or experienced men Making a Go of It.



1883

Early leases had little impact on Kapalga billabong. The first three leaseholders held adjoining lots from the Wildman to the East Alligator – none actually used the land.

- In 1885 the Bank of NSW was part of a doomed plan for a massive sugar plantation.
- In 1894 James Tonkin, a Sydney politician and advocate for minerals industry, held leases. He seemed to be reserving them for the next leaseholder ...
- Tonkin transferred his leases to Anglo-French Goldfields of Australia. This company probably carried out some prospecting but soon lost interest in the coastal lots.

But the next lease changed Kapalga forever ...

Missionaries arrived at Kapalga in 1899 but they didn't pay any attention to leases - they just set up camp. But in 1901 Paddy Cahill turned up, explained he was the agent for Anglo-French Goldfields and ordered the missionaries to leave. My grandfather immediately contacted officials in Darwin – he was told that Anglo-French Goldfields had not paid lease fees for some years. So the missionaries applied for and were granted a lease.



The missionaries were already a little undecided about staying at Kapalga billabong so they leased a strip of land from just south of the billabong to the coast, as far west as Manassie Native Reserve.

Two points to note from this map (drawn up from Lennox's sketched map):

- By this time, applicants for leases usually ignored the government's published plans – they just defined the country they wanted and officials seemed to go along with the requests.
- The map shows the mission site in the wrong place – at least it admits the spot is "Approx". This error caused problems later. Two applicants initially applied for the wrong country – they wanted to lease country around the mission site so applied for country close to the coast. Some of those who wanted to live at Kapalga had never been there.

This error also contributed to a myth of sorts – well into the 20th century word got round that the mission had failed because the missionaries set up on the river's tidal mudflats ... the tide came in and they were swamped!

The Northern Territory Native Industrial Mission occupied the billabong site from November 1899 to mid-1903. Their lease was formalised in 1901 after the Anglo-French lease was cancelled.



The missionaries were Kapalga's first European inhabitants. (Buffalo hunter Barney Flynn had his camp further up river.) They left behind a large clearing, fences, roads and the landing on river – all a great encouragement for subsequent lessees.

The billabong site was vacant (in terms of European leases) for ten years – but no doubt buffalo hunters used the billabong and river landing through that time.



The next lease was dated 1910 but the tenant arrived in **1913**.

Fred Smith was aged 55 and winding down (he had asthma) - he gave up Mary River hunting leases further west to lease all the country between South and West Alligator Rivers, from the coast to the current boat ramp.

Like the missionaries, Smith drew the lot he wanted (regardless of land lease plans). He initially applied for land spanning the river nearer its mouth – he wanted the mission site, wherever it was.

Finally, his lease took in half of Manassie Native Reserve - officials seemed to just halve the size of the Reserve at the stroke of a pen!

Smith was licensed to run 500 cattle, plus goats and horses. (From 1912, to deter speculators, the government issued annual permits and charged one shilling for every head of “great cattle”. Permission was needed to erect huts, fences, etc.) But buffalo hunter (and author) **Carl Warburton**, who visited Smith in 1921, wrote that he saw 300 “magnificent horses”, hundreds of pigs and a large herd of bullocks.

Smith lived well – he had reputation as a heavy drinker but knew how to work. He lived in a two-bedroomed hut with a kitchen. (His wife and children were not there.) He hired as many as 100 indigenous workers and had a reputation for treating them fairly.

Smith developed the mission’s gardens, adding a watering system and meat-house. He grew bananas, coffee, cassava, kapok, cotton, peanuts and citrus trees – and he had a seven-ton coastal lugger. For 8 years Kapalga was a busy and productive place.

Smith died in Darwin 1921 – his leases were immediately transferred to the next tenant – Smith’s daughter Ada was his heir and she was married to **Hazel Gaden**, already a significant figure in the north.



Given its remoteness, Kapalga was very domesticated in Smith’s time, and Gaden and his wife further developed Smith’s gardens. But it was a struggle.

Hazel Gaden was a returned serviceman. He had been a buffalo hunter but wanted to settle down - he had grand ambitions, approaching the scale of a country estate. In 1923 a Darwin newspaper reported that “Mr and Mrs Hazel Gaden” and their first child had “settled into Kapalga Station”.

Yorkie Mick (or maybe his son Yorkie Billy) built the couple a new house – it had a “14 foot verandah back and front ... a kitchen of 20 x 20 feet ... a huge 10 ft square fireplace ... and arsenic in each post hole to discourage white ants”. The journalist Ernestine Hill wrote a flowery article about her visit to Kapalga.

But the Gadens soon found it was not easy to earn a living and bring up young family in such a remote place. A year later (by the end of 1924) the property was up for auction and the Gadens left Kapalga in 1927. (Gaden ran a hotel in Katherine then returned to hunting buffalo.)

Gaden’s lease was cancelled 1929 but he had lived there for only about 5 years. In 1945, discussing Gaden’s failure at Kapalga, the Administrator for NT wrote: **“The country is incapable, by reason of its swampy nature, of successful cattle raising as a business proposition.”**

The billabong was quiet again for a few years – and when a European did return, he had more modest hopes:



In 1929 **Charlie Burns** (aged 51 and also winding down) applied for a lease on just one square mile adjacent to the billabong – the site of the mission and Gaden's homestead, plus the river landing.

Burns held a new sort of lease - it was an **Agricultural Lease** and it became known as **AL300**. (I found only three other Agricultural Leases in the top end.) Holders of Agricultural Leases were expected to reside on the leased land.

Burns was charged minimal rent and made token gestures at agriculture – he had a government loan to grow peanuts (the Gaden's had left a peanut plot) but Burns was always in debt to the Primary Producers' Board.

Burns did grow and dry a crop - tobacco - and he shipped large numbers of pigs for sale in Darwin. As his friend Tom Cole pointed out, there was not a lot of work involved in raising pigs.

Burns was often away from Kapalga, working in mines for example – the billabong was often deserted apart from Smith's colleague Dave Cameron, an itinerant worker.



The buffalo hunter and author **Tom Cole** was a significant figure in the region throughout the 1930s – in fact, in 1936 Cole and Burns between them leased the entire wider Kapalga.



Contrary to popular belief, Tom Cole never lived at Kapalga billabong. His camp was at Ingarrabba, the site of the current South Alligator Ranger Station and the billabong behind the South Alligator resort. Cole never leased AL300 and he never lived on his leased blocks north of the billabong.

Cole used Kapalga as a “depot” – he corralled horses there and used the landing, whether Burns was there or not. Cole had big ambitions – in 1939 he wrote to his mother that he was going to set up “Kapalga Station” on leases covering 70 kilometres from the coast, to near Yellow Waters.

By mid-1943 Cole had contracted leprosy and received treatment in Sydney. He tried to lease AL300 after Burns died but cut ties with the north in 1944.

Charlie Burns' withdrawal from Kapalga was gradual – in 1939 he gave a Darwin address and in 1943 he was working in railway workshops in Katherine. But Burns showed interest in Cole's licences up to his death in 1943.

Even before Burns died others were eager to move in – but by the time Burns' lease was cancelled the Japanese had bombed Darwin ... the military was clearing people from coastal land. The country must have been unusually quiet.

After World War 2, Allan McGuire, a General Agent in Pine Creek and later South Australia, started to implement an ambitious plan to graze a herd right across the coastal strip. Like most previous Kapalga tenants, McGuire initially applied for the wrong block but he eventually held all the country between the West and East Alligators, from the coast to the tidal creeks near Yellow Waters. McGuire didn't live

there but he was successful in running cattle – he later sold the herd but kept the leases.

Meanwhile, in the **early 1950s**, and apparently with McGuire's permission, **Jerry Randall**, a buffalo and crocodile hunter, took parties on big game hunting expeditions around Kapalga. He wanted to set up the region's first tourism venture – a “dude ranch” with electricity and luxury accommodation. He considered but decided against Kapalga and went to the more accessible Mudginberry.

In **1961** McGuire transferred his licences to a consortium of property speculators – the **Stonhams and Lanhams**, all from Sydney - one was a racecourse bookie.

The consortium had a long term business plan – they acquired **grazing** leases but planned to convert them to **pastoral** leases, so they could develop the property, with fences, buildings, etc. Their project failed but it entailed an extraordinary (and protracted) story ...

The leases were eventually held by one member of the consortium, **Dr J.A.M. Stonham**. He held grazing licences on all the country between the Wildman and South Alligator Rivers, including AL300 at Kapalga billabong, but he needed capital to develop the land – despite government policy, Stonham assumed he would be granted pastoral licences. So Stonham persuaded his uncle **K.L. Johnston**, to lend him £14,000.

But in the early 1960s the Administrator refused to renew all leases and licences (grazing and pastoral) across the coastal strip. No reason was given for this moratorium – but it seemed the government had other plans.

This development ruined Stonham's grand plan – he was left with no grazing leases – but he still had the lease on AL300 (Kapalga billabong). And he still had a £14,000 debt to his uncle. To settle the debt, Stonham gifted Johnston the lease on AL300.

AL300 was economically worthless to a Sydney investor and Johnston's licence was soon cancelled because he was not in residence. Johnston was angry - it took 5 years of irate letters and inspections before Johnston conceded he had lost AL300 and his £14,000.

An internal memo from 1967-8 explains the hiatus in granting licences - “**other land use requirements ... were being considered**”, including slicing the land along the South Alligator into medium-sized farms.

There were no further leases on Kapalga country in the **1970s**, but there was plenty of interest:

- In **1971 L.G. Garton** of Darwin wrote that he was “investigating the tourist potential ... catering for the needs of the high priced and the camping tourist.” He considered the “South Alligator River is at that point a natural tourist attraction” and had plans for an airstrip. His application was turned down but he was advised that “roadside facilities” may be needed on the Arnhem Highway, then under development. (Hence the resort at the South Alligator.)
- In **1974**, the lawyer for **Fred Gaden**, grandson of Hazel Gaden and Fred Smith, enquired about the lease. Gaden “would reside on the land himself ... and carry out his own development programme”. His application was refused ...

Two projects of national importance were in the wind:

- The Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation – CSIRO - was looking at projects that would contribute to understanding the ecosystem, including conservation and development. Uranium mining companies were also interested and provided finance for feasibility studies.

CSIRO's work included two extended studies – they looked at the impact of annual burn-offs and the impact of buffalo. For the buffalo research CSIRO split the land into two plots, separated by a buffalo-proof fence. They removed 7,000 buffalo from the southern half, an indication of the huge numbers of buffalo on the country.

- In 1969 the federal government approved in principle the setting aside of land in the north for a **national park**. And there was serious talk of eradicating buffalo for conservation reasons.

The rest is recent history.

Finally, I want to tell you more about my grandfather, Andrew Lennox, and his attempts at setting up a mission station at Kapalga billabong.

STRAND THREE

Northern Territory Native Industrial Mission 1899-1903

... a fine lake about 1/4 mile long which we called Kaparlgoo



My grandfather Andrew Hunter Lennox was one of the missionaries who established the Northern Territory Native Industrial Mission at Kaparlgoo in 1899. That's him on the right, the cocky one.

Andrew was born in Rutherglen, northern Victoria in 1874. He was the son of Scottish migrants to the goldfields, though I think they weren't actual goldminers.



He died when I was sixteen (this photo was obviously taken a few years before that – I look like I'm trying to get away) – and I inherited the original copy of his memoir.



Andrew's memoir was written in the 1950s and based on diaries he kept throughout his life. I think he dictated the memoir to a typist, who ran off a few Gestetner copies.

Andrew sent this copy to A.H.Reed, a New Zealand publisher (who also published in Australia) – Reed made himself famous well into his 80s for completing long walks. Mr Reed returned the manuscript with the note "A wonderful story of heroic adventure. Thanks." Andrew was very annoyed – he expected Reed to publish it – he was, after all, another Christian.

But Mr Reed had a point – the memoir was a very demanding read, largely because of long and condensed sentences, odd structures and a lack of markers (like dates) in the narrative.

That's my excuse, anyway, for leaving it so late in life to take a careful look at the memoir. Almost fifty years after Andrew died I read it carefully and immediately decided to come to Australia to find out more. That was in 2008, and my life hasn't been the same since.



As I'll explain, Andrew made two trips across the continent, one on foot and the other by bicycle. I hired a Holden Commodore - and finally made it, with the help of Victor Cooper, to Kapalga, the site of Andrew's mission. I wrote about the experience in my book "After Andrew".



In 1897, at the age of 23, Andrew joined a pioneering Anglican mission on the **Forrest River**, on Wyndham River in the north of Western Australia.

That's the four missionaries about to leave Perth – Andrew at centre back (looking jaunty again) and in the front his friend Alex Gathercole, who was also at Kapalga.

The indigenous people at Forrest River were especially hostile to whites arriving on their country – Andrew felt the brunt of their anger. He wrote that one of the boys **“used our broken handled fireshovel on my head twice ... deprived of consciousness for eleven days”**. He was eventually shipped out to Perth to recover in what he called “a cooler climate”.

Forrest River was later (in 1926) the site of an infamous massacre – dozens of local people were shot by police and pastoralists. The missionary Ernest Gribble was a central figure in revealing the facts of the event.

When he had (almost) recovered Andrew and his friend **Alex Gathercole** decided to set up their own mission.

Andrew and Alex tried without success to persuade churches and missionary societies in Melbourne and Adelaide to support and fund them – finally, as Andrew wrote, **“friends ... of all denominations”** formed a “Council” to pass on donations, ship supplies, etc. The council was administered by **St Luke's Church of England** in Adelaide - so the venture became known as an “Anglican mission”.

That's why the Kapalga mission became known as an “Anglican mission – Andrew insisted it was non-denominational – **“free of institutional ties”** “. He hated church hierarchies and only acknowledged the Anglican connection when necessary, such as when he applied for a lease on land at the South Alligator.

Andrew and Alex apparently hadn't decided exactly where to set up their mission – they just knew it would be somewhere in north or central Australia.



For some reason, Andrew decided to go north overland (Alex went north by steam) – so in June 1899 he took the train to Oodnadatta, as he wrote, **“with my own funds ... to look for a Mission site”**. (I drove the Commodore up the Oodnadatta track.)

He followed the Overland Telegraph Line – there were well-stocked and manned repeater stations every two or three hundred miles – some were almost small villages. And there was a track under the line in most places for camel mail trains and repair gangs. But Andrew still faced as many as 20 days between stations.

I need to explain three things about my grandfather, the three aspects that enabled him to survive despite getting into terrible messes;

- Andrew believed totally in the power of “taking Jesus Christ as your saviour” and he often asked strangers if they had done so. (He asked me every Friday night.)
- He believed he was always right, despite making some very poor decisions – possibly because he had Jesus on his side, although many saw him as plain arrogant - “an arrogant so-and-so” were my other's words.
- And he had extraordinary resilience, both mental and physical.

Those beliefs plus his extraordinary energy got him into, and out of, a number of dangerous situations.

When I was immersed in researching Andrew's life – and inevitably made my own judgements on the rightness of his actions – then I read a piece by **Professor James Belich**, an eminent historian in New Zealand. Belich wrote about the impact of **settlers** – his thesis was that they were far more influential in establishing colonies than governments or armies. He looked at countries like Australia and Canada, as well as New Zealand.

Belich warned us not to look to our “ancestors as models of **virtue**” (certainly not in term of contemporary society) – but we should we should see them “as models of **dynamism**”. That certainly helped me to come to terms with Andrew.

So Andrew left Oodnadatta with a few horses, minimal supplies and equipment, and heaps of confidence. He made it to the first Telegraph Station (Dalhousie) - then he entered the Simpson Desert.

He made a typically unwise decision:

... instead of following the mail track around a large circle to avoid sand ranges, I went right into them ... The horses funked it. I was walking ankle deep with them with nothing but sand to be seen ...

He survived by collecting a tiny amount of rainwater in his sweaty singlet, and made it to Charlotte Waters.



The stationmaster at Charlotte Waters was Paddy Byrne. He'd been there for 50 years and he gave Andrew some important advice – he should go right up north where he'd find some large rivers. Byrne was also keen to get Andrew out of his territory.

I never worked out how and when Andrew and Alex decided on the South Alligator – there was some mention of Frews Pond (near Tennant Creek, where the Overland Telegraph Line was completed) and also Daly River. They were certainly looking for somewhere well away from European towns.



A little further on Andrew left the telegraph route and followed the Finke River to Hermansburg. He had a definite reason for going to **Hermansburg** – a well-known Lutheran mission (led at the time by Carl Strehlow) was run as an “industrial mission”.

Industrial missions were relatively common at the time and they were based on a set of principles – as articulated by **Ernest Gribble** (of Forrest Rover fame). Blacks would be taught

.... the habits of industry - by gathering them into communities, surrounding them with Christian influences, protecting them from evils too often associated with European service, getting them to take an interest in themselves as a race, and cultivating self respect.

This is what Andrew and Alex attempted at Kapalga.

When I was exploring Andrew's “adventures” (as he called them) I was greatly assisted by Rev Dr Philip Freier – Philip wrote his doctoral thesis on the Kaparlgoo

mission when he was Anglican Archbishop of Darwin. When I met him he was Archbishop of Melbourne.

Freier wrote about the paradox of the industrial mission model. Indigenous people would

... live as whites but ... have little contact with the outside world except that mediated by missionaries ... belief that the mode of production of a village society was inherently superior and more conducive to conversion to Christianity than was the traditional state in which Aborigines lived.

Andrew was at Hermannsburg for seven weeks (he built them a water tank) then moved on to Alice Springs and headed north along the Telegraph line, a route similar to the Stuart Highway.

A significant event happened at **Stirling Station**, 20 miles south of Barrow Creek. Andrew wrote:

... a black boy of 10 years joined me, completely nude, could not speak a word of English. "Undunda" or "Percy" I called him.

Andrew intended to take boy back after two years, converted and capable of spreading the word - Undunda was mentioned often in the memoir for twelve months, but then disappeared from view. As I drove into Stirling Station I was wondering if he made it back.



Andrew had arranged to meet Alex Gathercole at **Brocks Creek**, north of Pine Creek. Today there's just a mine at Brocks Creek but in those days it was a major town – it had railway station, many businesses and a significant population – and it became the missionaries' first contact when they left Kapalga. They walked or rode every few weeks for mail, supplies, meetings, telegraph – just 140km in straight line but a journey of about 200km.

Andrew arrived Brocks on 11 November 1899 after a 6 month trip. The young missionaries left for Kapalga a few weeks later, right in the buildup to the Wet. Andrew quite naively noted **“the rainy season had already commenced”**.

They took twenty goats, two pigs, two donkeys, horses and a dray – they lost two goats crossing Mary River so returned to Brocks to hire two ‘boys’ as guides - although Andrew took over the navigation because he thought they were “taking us over rough country”.

They finally made it to Kapalga with the help of buffalo hunter Barney Flynn whose camp was at Red Lily billabong, across the river from Cooida.



They reached Kapalga billabong on Christmas Eve 1899 and Andrew was elated.

Praise God! the long dreamed mission at last!

All requirements were found there - plenty of water, both fresh and salt, fish including the alligator, turkeys, geese, ducks, dingos, a good soil and plenty of native fruit.

They were immediately industrious – in fact they were intent on transforming the idyllic natural environment they were so delighted with.

They erected huts, fences and a pig sty, cut roads through the bush and planted **“bananas, mulberries, mangos, passion fruit, custard apple, potatoes, coconuts, sugar cane, mandioca, and sowed tomatoes, maize, beans, and paw-paws before the thunder storm.”**

They later cut a track to the South Alligator River and built a landing – it was used for decades by hunters and pastoralists.

The number of indigenous people at the mission varied over the years - from 80 to none. They came when they needed food, tobacco, shelter and medicines – and they found they had to work hard, which is probably why so many left.

The mission received some supplies from the government – blankets, tobacco and flour – but often almost angrily demanded more.

The missionaries were the first Europeans to settle at Kapalga but they soon found they were there illegally, even in European terms. In April 1901 Paddy Cahill turned up – he had given up buffalo hunting and one of his roles was as agent for the Anglo-French Gold Mining Company. He told the missionaries they were trespassing and gave them three months to leave.



Andrew immediately wrote to the Government in Adelaide and was told Anglo-French had not paid their lease. The missionaries were granted a lease on 100 square miles, from south of Kapalga to the sea.



Within a year Andrew was collecting and selling items made by indigenous people.

... we sailed up the Red Lilly Lake, got hides, saw Flynn's camp. There Marcelmoss tried to tomahawk me. I got 23 spears, plenty of water melon.

... sailed to Darwin ... with 4 bundles of native curios... received £5 for curios

We trimmed up the lugger ... Alex and I went to Port Darwin with a collection of weapons, spears, etc., delivered and sold Damper £7, a grey Timor pony.

The sale of artefacts was a significant source of income (four “bundles” earned £5, almost as much as they got for a pony) and resulted in perhaps the mission’s one positive legacy - many were purchased by collectors and found their way to museums, some in complete sets.

There are more than 400 items in the **South Australian Museum** (curated by **Dr Philip Jones**, who helped me greatly with this research) and others at the Australian Museum in Sydney.

Some researchers assume artefacts were made at Kaparlgoo, factory-style (as in Hermannsburg) - but I found no evidence in Andrew’s memoir of that sort of activity. In fact, there were usually too few indigenous people living at Kapalga for that sort of

enterprise. Instead, Andrew visited other camping places to collect the items. It's likely that people knew he would be coming back so made them for that purpose. Andrew doesn't mention whether he paid for the items – he probably traded them for flour and tobacco.



Six months after arriving at Kapalga, Andrew **“wired Adelaide to send a bicycle for the trip to the S. A. Capital as I promised before.”** He had undertaken to return to Adelaide to report on progress – it became another adventure, this time with fund-raising in mind.

A Red Bird Safety Bicycle arrived in September – it had wooden rims, inflatable tires, and was not a free wheel – and Andrew rode it away from Kapalga to Darwin three weeks later. He had never ridden a bicycle before – and he had never been to Darwin.

He rode the usual route to Brocks Creek, then went 250km north Darwin, dipped bike in sea and headed south again. He was totally unprepared – 50km south of Pine Creek he had his first puncture – his pump fell apart in his hands so he walked back to Pine Creek for a new one.

Andrew arrived in Adelaide to some acclaim two months later – he was the fourth person to cycle the length of the continent. Although he says in his memoir that he rode on a camel at one stage and told a reporter he'd taken the train from Coward Springs to Hawker.

He spoke at public meetings in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney – **“the daring self-appointed missionary ... graphically described his life among the aborigines”**. At one meeting he described the benefits of industrial missions:

There is no uplifting of the native into Christianity without the aid of Christian schools of the industrial type (Hear, hear) ... The natives ... are industrious when not polluted with the vices of civilisation.



Andrew raised enough money to buy a lugger, a small sailing ship, and returned to Darwin by steamer. Luggers were common enough on northern coasts and rivers to appear in indigenous rock paintings in Kakadu.

Andrew had never sailed a boat before but he frequently sailed from Kapalga, down the South Alligator to Darwin – he usually ferried hides and salt for local buffalo hunters as well as the mission's own supplies. But he took too many risks – which he blamed on others – and sank both the first lugger and its replacement.

Andrew's first voyage from Darwin is worth describing as it sums up his character.

He hired an experienced coastal sailor, Captain Lorentze, to sail the lugger to Kapalga and show him the ropes. They arrived at what Lorentze said was the mouth of the South Alligator but Andrew disagreed – he claimed it was the West Alligator. (He turned out to be right.)

While they were discussing this, Andrew decided to go ashore to make tea and scones. Then he couldn't find the lugger through the mud and mangroves so headed off on foot. He crossed the West Alligator (he was right about that) and reached the South Alligator, slept in a pool of water with a sugarbag over his head to keep off

mosquitos and, days later, reached to the mission site. Lorentze had not arrived with the lugger so Andrew decided he was lost – Andrew took a canoe to the mouth of the river, decided it is too dangerous so returned to Kapalga and walked to Brocks Creek to report the lugger missing.

Meanwhile, Lorentze had been searching for Andrew and returned to Darwin to report him missing - the police sent a ship to search for him. Andrew went immediately to Darwin to explain himself (and collect his lugger) and eight weeks later arrived back at Kapalga. He sent an unapologetic letter of thanks to the newspaper, which had published stern condemnations of the missionary's foolhardy actions.

Despite eventually sinking two luggers, the missionaries made good use of the boats. One eye-witness account of the mission was provided by Paddy Cahill in an article published in the Northern Territory Times and Gazette. Cahill arrived at Kapalga just as the mission lugger was returning from a day on Field Island.

... they all seemed to have had a good time at Field Island ... eight or nine live turtles on board ...

... an enormous amount of work had been done since I had been here last. A nice shady road had been cut through the jungle, and a large portion of the jungle had been cleared ...

... alas the beautiful sheet, of water that was to be seen the last time that I was here had all dried up.

Seeing the billabong going dry added to the missionaries' doubts about staying at Kapalga. It was too close to European influences and they had looked at possible sites further down the South Alligator and on the West Alligator.

Finally Andrew decided to investigate Greenhill Island.

Alex. and I and others sailed over to Greenhill Island, thinking to connect it with the Mission, also to retain the children for training.

Greenhill Island is close to the south coast of Cobourg Peninsula and 70 km across virtually open sea from the mouth of the South Alligator. In trying to set up there (with just the children) Andrew wrecked the second lugger and Lorentze lost his ship.

Andrew also fell out with the Anglican Bishop over the Greenhill Island venture so the Adelaide council withdrew its support – by May 1903 it was all over. The mission was abandoned.

Andrew returned to New Zealand to marry and took his young wife back to Darwin, where he leased land with the intention of starting another industrial mission, this time as a cotton plantation. It never happened.

Andrew and his family returned to New Zealand where he spent most of the rest of his life as a home missionary, often on construction sites. When he was 61 his wife died and Andrew applied for positions in missions in northern Queensland, **“hoping to spend the remainder of my days with the aborigines”** – he was unsuccessful.

Andrew died on a visit to his son – a minister in an independent church in Adelaide – and he was buried there.

Anthropologist Philip Jones described the Kaparlgoo venture as an **“unintimidated frontier enterprise”** – it was by far the most dramatic period of Andrew's long life.

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