MY ISLAND HOME

A TORRES STRAIT MEMOIR john singe
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His other books include *Torres Strait: People and History* (1979 and 1988), *Culture in Change: Torres Strait History in Photographs* (1988) and *Among Islands* (1993).

John Singe now teaches in Cooktown where he lives with his wife Barbara. He has four Torres Strait Islander children and six Islander grandchildren.
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Preface

This is the story of a quarter century spent among the beautiful islands of the Torres Strait and the remarkable, charismatic people who live there. I must emphasise, however, that it is my own, very personal story.

Over the years my mother collected and safeguarded the scores of letters I sent home. These provided names, places, dates and other details of events which occurred long ago, and they reflect the social environment in which they were written. Also, sensing that I was living through exciting times, from 1970 till 1976 I kept notes which form a narrative of those years. In the published text some names have been changed or omitted out of respect for the individual’s privacy.

Although this is very much my story I am delighted to have the opportunity to describe some of the wonderful people of the Torres Strait I have known. Each of them is very special. Many have passed on and become faded memories of a glorious time when things were changing and anything seemed possible. Islanders in their fashion retain a history of those times in their oral culture. In my markay (white ghost) fashion I have written of them.

The last thirty years have been a journey of discovery for me, discovering other cultures, environments and people. I count myself fortunate to have experienced Australia’s Melanesian frontier at such a special time and to have been able to recount the stories of some of the great characters who peopled that frontier.

When preparing this manuscript I received excellent assistance from staff at the State Library of Queensland, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, the Thursday Island State High School, the Torres News, the Courier-Mail and the Cairns Post. Many individuals provided valuable help including Bishop Anthony
and Valerie Hall-Matthews, Steve Mullins, Dana Ober, Paul and Corrine Billy, Steve Pollain, Margaret Reid and Jackie Goddard. I need to include a very special ‘thank you’ to Larry James.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my wife, Barbara, and my parents, Dot and Jack, whose support and love have never wavered.

John Singe
CHAPTER 1

Kayn Lag (New Place)

In November 1969 I was among scores of young teachers waiting anxiously to receive our first posting to a Queensland school. The auditorium at Kelvin Grove Teachers’ College in Brisbane was packed. Bonded for the next two years to the Queensland Department of Education, we could be sent literally anywhere in the state to serve out our bondage. Queensland is a big place and two years seems an eternity when you are nineteen years old.

A middle-aged member of the college staff mounted the podium and commenced reading from a list. Perhaps it was my imagination, but he seemed to have a fine sense of timing. He read the name first, then left the audience suspended in breathless anticipation before reading out the location. Most appointments were to obscure places spread haphazardly across the length and breadth of Queensland, and they were received with outbursts of spontaneous laughter, ironic cheers and startled grimaces as recipients wondered where in hell their place was. Some young women, upon hearing that they were being relocated, by train, to a tiny school in a western town a thousand kilometres from Brisbane, dissolved in tears.

But the biggest cheers and loudest laughter came as the appointments to Thursday Island were read out, including my own. Thursday Island was a mythical name way beyond the borders of my known world. It was the appointment I wanted more than anything else. With the wilderness of Cape York Peninsula to its south, and the vast, untamed island of New Guinea to its north, it was the ideal place for a nineteen-year-old seeking adventure. Or so I reasoned. All I knew of the Torres Strait Islands was that they dived for pearls there, and that sounded just fine. Naturally my mother and father would have preferred me to
be closer to the family in Brisbane. They realised that we would not see much of each other in the coming years. However, even they could not imagine how long this separation would be, for I never really returned from that island adventure.

I was about as Australian as a European can be. My mother’s ancestors had arrived as convicts and marines with the First Fleet and others had arrived during the Gold Rushes. Family tradition has it that we are related, by marriage, to Ned Kelly the bushranger, and my family helped open up the rich sheep and wheat country from Bathurst to Dubbo, west of the Blue Mountains. I came from a long line of teachers. An ancestor had established a grammar school at Bendigo and my great-grandfather and my grandmother had both been country teachers.

My father’s family fled Germany to escape religious persecution, arriving in South Australia in the 1860s to plant the first vineyards in the Barossa Valley. Some later moved north to pioneer new wheat country along the Murray River. My grandfather, Johann Carl Singe, anglicised his name to John Charles Singe to join the AIF during World War I and was wounded four times fighting in France. He returned to be knocked from his motorbike and killed near his fruit shop in western Sydney, leaving my dad fatherless in the Depression.

During World War II Dad served in New Guinea, while Mum left her parents’ farm in Orange to work with searchlight and ambulance units. They met at war’s end in Sydney and I was the first of four children. My father’s background was films, theatre and the newly arrived television and it was my father’s promotion in ABC television which brought my family from Sydney to Brisbane, but I never really settled there. I went to Brisbane Boys’ College, played soccer, learned the bagpipes, joined the Army Cadets, but it never felt like home. Whenever I could I visited relatives’ farms in western New South Wales or dreamed of my escape from suburbia. I wanted to be a patrol officer in the Australian Territory of Papua and New Guinea, but the best I could do on completing Year 12 was a scholarship with the Queensland Department of Education. Hence my transfer to Thursday Island — it was as close as I could get to New Guinea.

By way of preparation my parents drove me to see Uncle Alf, my mother’s uncle who was a sprightly retiree on the Gold Coast. Hal had gone to German New Guinea as part of the Australian occupation forces after World War I. His advice was as follows:

Always wear a white suit. Go home at lunch, have a shower and put on a
clean white suit before returning to work in the afternoon. Also never carry a bag. That is the natives' job. Just grab a passing native off the street and threaten him with violence if he hesitates. You have to let them know who is master right from the start.

I thanked Uncle Alf, but his methods sounded dangerously obsolete. My father, like many of his generation, said little about his experiences in New Guinea during the Pacific War. Thus informed I packed my suitcase, adding some extra tubes of toothpaste and bars of soap just in case.

Before I set off a cyclone roared in over the Barrier Reef and struck Townsville that January in 1970. The dislocation to road and rail transport meant that I travelled from Brisbane to Cairns by plane instead of train. This was a luxury not encouraged by the public service. As the plane wheeled over the lush, green squares of sugar cane paddocks, rainforest-clad ranges on the left and the Coral Sea on the right, I had my first view of Cairns.

The airport terminal was a corrugated iron shed left over from the war. There was then no international terminal and would not be for another decade. Foreign tourists were marvelled at for their stamina in actually reaching Cairns, which was the state's northern outpost of civilisation. The houses were high-set with wide verandahs.

The taxi driver taking me into town recommended a well-known brothel, but I asked him to drop me at a motel or hotel where I could overnight before my flight to Thursday Island. The town seemed full of rough, boisterous drinkers. Each wet season itinerant workers from the bush moved to Cairns. They partied there till the roads and mines and stations started drying out around April. The town pubs were packed with ringers from the cattle stations on Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and tin scratchers and gold prospectors, crocodile shooters, fishermen — and young teachers on transfer.

There were no vacant rooms to be had. Finally a hotel offered me a stretcher on the verandah. It was a typical two-storey Queensland hotel with big verandahs. For a couple of dollars I got a blanket, pillow and hessian stretcher, another war relic, on the upper floor. The verandah was littered with stretchers, bags, suitcases and the occasional drunk sleeping it off. The air was pungent with the smell of rum.

I had a counter dinner in the bar surrounded by garrulous characters of every outback type. The ringer at my left elbow inquired conversationally if I would go out the back of the pub for a 'knuckle dance'
with him. I declined this offer and was subsequently accosted by the neighbour on my right who sported a pencil moustache. He informed me that he was the King of Kuwait travelling incognito. He described how he had flown his blue plane over from the Middle East for a short visit. Apparently the affairs of state hung heavily on him, and he needed a break. He was very plausible until he asked for five dollars as a loan, which I gave him.

I spent a miserable night on the stretcher. The heat and humidity were appalling, but if you pulled off the blanket scores of mosquitoes settled on your exposed skin. Finally, early in the morning, a violent storm swept the verandah with rain and wind gusts, and I dozed off.

My adventures had only just begun. The flight to Thursday Island next day was spectacular. Reefs shone aqua and gold in the blue, transparent sea. Hundreds of kilometres of beaches showed no sign of human habitation and the tip of Cape York was a finger of rock pointing northwards.

My first view of Thursday Island, or ‘TI’ as everyone calls it, was disappointing. From the aircraft I saw large mountainous islands sprawling in all directions across the surface of the sea. TI, though, was a tiny islet just two kilometres in length nestled between them. It had two hills. The taller dominated the island’s eastern end. A ridgeline, running like a backbone, east–west, divided the island. I could see a scattering of shining roofs along Thursday Island’s southern coastline, with three wharfs and some boats. On the northern side of TI, isolated by the ridgeline, were more houses — just a village.

We landed at Horn Island, Thursday Island being too small for a landing strip. Horn’s barren landscape was a shock. We flew in over tidal swamps and claypans belted by mangroves. The vegetation lining the airstrip consisted of low grasses, stumpy eucalypts and spiky pandanus trees. There seemed to be a termite mound for every tree. I had expected the tropical forests of Cairns and Papua New Guinea. There are monsoonal forests in the Torres Strait Islands, but it was some time before I saw them.

What startled me more than anything though were the people. Thirty years ago, with the White Australia Policy in place and Aborigines confined to reserves, Australia was, quite literally, a white nation. In my entire upbringing I can recall meeting only three non-Europeans, two Pacific Islander boarders at my school, Brisbane Boys’ College, and a Chinese artist I met at an exhibition. As I alighted from the plane, suddenly there were dozens of robust, smiling Islanders and sleek,
confident-looking Asians about me. I found it at once daunting and fascinating.

From the airport a bus drove passengers to the wharf for the ferry ride over to Thursday Island. I was unprepared for the squalor of Horn Island. Rusting oil drums and wrecked cars were scattered through the scrub and along the roads, with tumbledown corrugated iron sheds nestled amid the wreckage. Sullen, naked children stared expressionlessly as the bus clattered by. The wharf was a similar scene of devastation, littered with oil drums and derelict machinery.

Approaching Thursday Island harbour we passed the red, steel-hulled Carpentaria Lightship and saw the pearling luggers — slim, elegant, two-masted vessels bobbing at anchor. Their crews whistled and called out as we passed.

I was surprised to recognise two of my friends from Kelvin Grove waiting on the wharf. Chris Hall and Kevin Kearney had flown in two days earlier. Gaping holes in the deck made the wharf treacherous, especially at night, and a number of people had recently tumbled into the sea and perished. Clusters of Islander women with tightly curled black hair and huge smiles sat cross-legged around the edge of the jetty fishing. They chortled and called out ribald comments to the disembarking passengers.

We walked uphill to the main street past drab, unpainted shop fronts, partly hidden by waist-high grass, to the Rainbow Motel, our home while the new teacher accommodation was being finished.

The motel had recently been built by the Fuji family, a Torres Strait family of Japanese descent whose patriarch, Tomitaro Fuji, had come to Australia in 1925. He had been a well-known diver and lugger captain in his day.

Our first visitor was ‘Mister TI’, Bernie Clark. Bernie was a middle-aged dynamo of Filipino descent. Habitually clad in a white singlet, khaki shorts and thongs, Bernie was P & C president for the local state primary school, the high school and the local Roman Catholic school. However, he did not want to discuss education. His main topic was the TI women. He explained that it was customary in the islands for young women to make advances to men they liked. However, this was usually done through a third party. Frequently these liaisons were kept secret, although sometimes one or the other might announce ‘I was there’ in public, to discomfort the other party. This sounded complicated and he had all of us thinking when he left.

That night, during dinner, Kevin, Chris and I were distracted by a
rhythmic booming. We were told there was an Islander celebration at the old Buffalo’s Hall in John Street. Following the booming drums and harmonious singing, we found rows of sweating dancers in bright lava-lavas stamping and gyrating by the light of pressure lanterns. The audience, sitting on mats round the dancing area, roared out the songs, whistling and clapping. At the front, sitting facing the dancers, two drummers in lava-lavas thumped away on hour-glass-shaped native drums. Next to them women pounded on empty twenty-litre fuel drums with sticks. The beat, ONE two three four ONE two three four, was punctuated by a single deep boom of the drum on the emphasised beat. The dancers twisted and leaped, teeth flashing in the lamplight, bawling out the songs at the top of their voices. The raw energy of the scene was electrifying.

The next evening we were invited to dinner by Barry Osborne. Barry had been teaching at the Thursday Island High School for a number of years and lived with Bob and Betty Stewart in a two-storey wooden house on Green Hill. There were few vehicles on Thursday Island, so most people walked everywhere and the island was criss-crossed by rough walking tracks. We followed one of these up to the Stewarts’. The humid air hung thick and heavy, and as we laboured up the rocky track we streamed perspiration and our wet shirts clung to our backs. During the wet season there are frequent rain squalls so we had taken our umbrellas. A tiny Islander boy we encountered on the track glanced at the umbrellas and remarked, ‘Wat por yupla gat umbrela. Yu in mach luk laik woman!’ [‘What do you carry umbrellas for? You too much look like women!’] From the top of the track we gazed south across a reef-studded sea towards Cape York Peninsula, a purple line on the horizon thirty kilometres away.

At dinner we were cautioned again to be wary of the TI girls. We also met some Islander students who boarded with Barry. They came from islands far to the north and east to attend secondary school on Thursday Island, and finding a place for them to stay was always a problem, so Barry was helping a few families out. Also Barry and Betty helped run the Basketball Association. Basketball was the only organised sport on the island, but of course none of us had ever played the game as it was generally unknown in Queensland at that time.

It was becoming obvious that there was a great deal about the Torres Strait that we did not know or understand. It was a very thoughtful group of young teachers that stumbled back down the hill in the dark.

The high school was a motley collection of buildings on a rocky
knoll overlooking the town. Some rooms dated from the turn of the century. They were built for the climate. With high ceilings and wide verandahs they perched on the hill’s crest where they enjoyed the full benefit of the trade winds. In the days before airconditioners and electric fans that was important. Other sections of the school were almost new. However, as enrolments at the school had grown dramatically, ‘temporary’ classrooms had been added haphazardly round the rocky slopes. Staff and students scrambled from one class to the next avoiding the herd of resident goats.

The goats belonged to Arthur Ahmat, whose father, a Muslim, had come out to Thursday Island from India. Arthur, his Murray Island wife, Emily, and their children lived down behind the school. The goats, however, seemed to prefer to be at school. We soon became used to them grazing nonchalantly along the hill slopes or stampeding across the parade ground. Managing the goat ‘problem’ was one of the school janitor’s responsibilities. The janitor, Seriako Stephen, was the first Torres Strait Islander that I had met. He was a genial giant of a man from tiny Stephen Island in the far Eastern Islands, two hundred kilometres from TI. Like virtually every other male we met, he had worked on the pearling luggers and been a diver himself. He had huge, rounded muscles, the sort that body builders could only dream about, and carried them with a natural ease and dignity.

The view from the parade ground was superb. You could see all the way across to Horn Island and the airport and down to Cape York. Before our first parade could begin, Seriako was called upon to remove a recalcitrant billy goat which had taken its stand in the centre of the ground. Seriako looped a rope round the goat’s horns and began a seesawing tug of war, gradually dragging the billy out of the way.

I remember that first parade as if it were yesterday. There were two hundred students, all in uniform and mostly barefooted. A handful of students were white. The others ranged from rich chocolate through every shade and tone of skin colour imaginable. They included Fujis and Clarks and Ahmats and Stephens. Many of the boys sported earrings and thick bundles of coloured beads round their necks. The girls’ dark hair shone with coconut oil and many had red hibiscus flowers behind an ear.

My first class consisted of thirty Torres Strait boys about fourteen years old. Most spoke traditional languages, or Torres Strait Broken, rather than Australian English. As student-teachers we had not received any training to prepare us for this, there was no separate curriculum
designed for these Islander students, and facilities were minimal. We had really been thrown in at the deep end. That we coped at all was due to the particular timing of our arrival.

This was a very special period in the Torres Strait, when old barriers were being broken down and goodwill was evident on all sides. Torres Strait Islanders were emerging from a century of colonial repression during which (among other things) they had been denied the right to vote, the right to government social security payments, the right to equal pay, the right to travel (even from island to island) and the right to an equal education. Until the 1960s Islanders had not been permitted to enrol at the White School on top of the hill. Rather they had attended the Coloured School down in Frog Valley.

The location of the White School at the top and the Coloured School at the bottom was not coincidental, for it is interesting how the colonial obsession with hierarchy was so frequently translated into altitude. I had seen this during a wander round the TI cemetery. John Douglas, an extraordinary man who had been Queensland Premier, Special Commissioner to British New Guinea and Government Resident at Thursday Island, had an imposing monument right on the crest of cemetery hill. He is surrounded, in death, by the colonial aristocracy — doctors, professors and the like. Further down are the headstones of bank officers, pearlers and other Europeans of the Protestant faith. As the track winds downhill there are scattered headstones lost in the long, dry grass. These are the graves of Japanese and South Sea Islander Protestants. At the base of cemetery hill is the Islamic section, mostly people from Indonesia and Malaysia. On the flat near the road are the Japanese non-Christians. Roman Catholic graves occupy the hill on the other side of the cemetery track, quite separate and distinct. Here are drowned Irish nuns and a murdered Irish policeman, buried among the people of all races with whom they worked. The arrangement of the cemetery perfectly reflects the caste system of colonial society in the Torres Strait. Torres Strait Islanders were allocated a section near the road, adjacent to the Japanese.

In education, radical change had occurred shortly before my arrival at TI. In 1964 the two state schools were amalgamated on the site of the old Coloured School, becoming the Thursday Island State School. Its average attendance in 1964 was 395 students, with 96 students in the Secondary Department. In 1966 the old White School on the hill officially became the Thursday Island State High School. It was a high school for all races and a gathering point for young people from all
over the Torres Strait. It is not surprising that I sensed such optimism and excitement among my Islander students and their families.

Islander parents placed enormous faith in education. The Department of Native Affairs had converted an old Quarantine Station on the northern side of Thursday Island into the Torres Strait College, a boarding facility for boys travelling in from the Outer Islands. However, not all boys could be accommodated at the college, and girls from the Outer Islands were provided with no accommodation. Parents instead relied on their extended families, searching out relatives on TI to board these students. Families on TI would accept as many as two or three Outer Island students. It was an obligation, but they rarely minded for they saw education as the future for their family, and family for them meant extended family. However, it was a time of grinding poverty. The pearling industry had collapsed and social security payments had not generally been extended to Torres Strait Islanders, so the additional mouths to feed meant real hardship.

Though busy at school, we new teachers explored the island in our spare time. The main street, Douglas Street, was named after John Douglas. The two-storey shop fronts were dilapidated, their paint peeling. Some were boarded up and vacant, though others — Laifoo’s, See Kee’s, See Hop’s and Mendis’s — appeared busy enough. Clearly TI had seen better times. The See Kee shops were delightful Asian emporiums. Piles of mats, bundles of knives, baskets full of hats, racks of clothing, salty plums, mango kunji, dried squid, fishing gear, beautifully carved mother-of-pearl ornaments, sandals, thongs, saucepans suspended from the roof, packets of rifle bullets, hammers and saws, boxes of sea shells, rolls of gaudy fabric, and old Mr See Kee, the family patriarch, rattling away on his abacus at the front counter, calculating your change in the traditional way.

There were several pool halls. The largest was Laifoo’s. An open front window encouraged pedestrians to loiter, lounge on the sill, smoke and pass the time while observing the tables where shadowy figures stepped in and out of the light, stooping over, in a haze of cigarette smoke, to casually pocket another ball.

Outside Laifoo’s was a handful of taxis. People called a taxi using special taxi phones located strategically round the community. The traffic was so infrequent that dogs would sleep happily in the dust on the road. Down the hill on the left was the open-air picture theatre consisting of four corrugated iron walls, a small covered area at the rear and an enormous fig tree overhanging the screen. Across the road on
the corner was the newsagency run by Nisi Mendis and his lovely, sari-clad wife. Nisi was a portly, smiling character from Sri Lanka who enjoyed his cricket.

A kilometre north of Douglas Street, on the other side of the island, was Tamwoy suburb. When Islander ex-servicemen settled on TI after the war they were directed to the flats adjoining the old Quarantine Station. Here they built little fibro cottages and planted bananas, sugar cane, sweet potatoes and cassava as they had done at home on the Outer Islands. Some went back on the fishing boats, but many found cash employment on the boat slips and wharfs, in stores or building houses for more immigrants moving in from the Outer Islands.

Although earning more than their relatives on the Outer Islands, the Tamwoy workers were paid at a lower rate than non-Islanders. They walked whenever they could to save the taxi fares and the grassy slopes and pockets of rainforest on Green Hill were a maze of well-used walking tracks. The road from Tamwoy to town was a nightmare stretch of rocks, mud and potholes flanked by waist-high grass. There were always some people who for one reason or another needed taxis, but on payday — Friday night — workers all caught a taxi home from the pub. Every Friday the rusting hulks that passed for taxis rattled back and forth from Tamwoy to town and back again till well into the early hours of Saturday morning.

Though the community was outwardly friendly, deep undercurrents of resentment were never far below the surface. Until 1945 Torres Strait Islanders had not been permitted to live on Thursday Island. They were ‘under the Act’, living highly regulated lives on the Outer Islands. When they migrated to TI after the war there was friction with the established Port Kennedy community which consisted of Asian and Pacific Islander families whose ancestors had come to Thursday Island to work in the pearling industry. These Asians and Pacific Islanders were not ‘under the Act’ and they had preferred to distance themselves from Torres Strait Islanders. Over generations the Asian/Pacific Islander community at Port Kennedy had coalesced into a distinctly separate community. Torres Strait Islanders referred to them as ‘TI half-castes’, though many in the Port Kennedy community disliked the term. One friend said to me, ‘They call me a half-caste but I am full blood Malay from my mother and father’. However, another young man of Samoan descent told me, ‘I’m not a Torres Strait Islander, I’m a half-caste.’ There were frequent gang fights between Outer Islanders and Port Kennedy boys.

I need to explain the use of the term ‘boy’ in the Torres Strait. It did
not refer to males of a particular race; rather it denoted a time of life. I was called 'boy' by Islander elders for years and I knew unmarried Islander men in their forties who were still referred to as 'boys'. Most were happy to be called 'TI boys', 'Darnley boys' or 'Badu boys', for the term suggested young tearaways, without responsibilities, who knew how to have a good time. The term 'girl' had similar connotations.

Naturally there was resentment towards the European elite. These Europeans always seemed to have the best jobs, the best houses, the best school, the final say in just about everything. Although many of the old barriers were being broken down, one did not have to look far to see that things had not really changed much at all. My situation was a case in point. Nineteen years old, straight out of college in Brisbane, I was earning $113.20 a fortnight. Islanders employed as 'native clerks' received $32.20 a fortnight. An Islander teacher received $34 a fortnight and Islander domestics at the Thursday Island Hospital received $17.20 for an eighty-hour fortnight. And our accommodation consisted of brand new, single-bed units with spacious verandahs all round, when an Islander worker might share a sand floor in a corrugated iron humpy on the beach.

Violence was rarely directed at us, though we seemed to be surrounded by it all the time. Shortly after my arrival we had invited Bernie Clarke, and others who had made us welcome, around for a small 'thank you' party. There was vacant land next to our flat. Shouts and the sound of a scuffle made it clear that someone was in trouble and I looked over just in time to see two bodies go down. They were white men in shorts, and they were being hammered by the half-dozen figures standing over them. We could hear the kicks thudding into their sides. Bernie sauntered out, beer in hand, so Kevin and I followed. The attackers saw us, left off beating their victims and stood silently, waiting.

Bernie halted near the two victims and took a long swig of beer. The two whites were seamen off a boat at the wharf.

'Well,' said Bernie, 'what's going on, boys?'

'These bastards gave us cheek, so we gave them a hiding.' These were Port Kennedy boys, including several from school.

Bernie coolly observed the groaning bodies at his feet. 'Yeah, well I think you've done enough.'

There followed one of those interesting pauses when everyone wonders what to do next.

Then, incredibly, one seaman rose shakily to an elbow and snarled at us, 'Why don't you piss off and leave us alone?'
Immediately the boys took up the cry, ‘Yeah, piss off’, and moved in on us.

I took a step back but Bernie, serenely unperturbed, stood his ground. At that moment one seaman, scratching round in the dark, complained loudly that he could not find his thongs. Whereupon, unbelievably, his attackers dropped down on their hands and knees in the grass to help him find them. The other seaman announced that his back hurt so badly that he could not walk. So the boys, who only minutes ago had attacked him, hoisted him onto their shoulders and proceeded to carry him down to the wharf, stopping occasionally to yell abuse back at us. We retreated to the party on our verandah, puzzled by the bizarre turn of events.

When the prawn boats from the east coast arrived at TI they staged a last farewell party before heading off down the Gulf to Weipa and Karumba for the start of the prawn season. The relationship between the visiting prawners and the male residents of Thursday Island resembled a war between rival tribes. One Friday night Kevin and I left the open-air movies and walked right into a brawl in front of See Kee’s. A knot of young Port Kennedy fellows surrounded a white man, a crewman off a prawn trawler. They harried him from the back and the sides, darting in to land a kick or a punch wherever they saw an opening. As he turned to face one attacker, others would pounce from behind. But this fellow had been around. He was big, sun-tanned, well-muscled and tattooed, wearing just a faded pair of denim shorts and a wide leather belt. His curly blond hair was cut short and I guessed he was about forty. He had a carton of beer bottles clutched under one elbow, so he only ever had one arm free, but he swung at them, grinning hugely. When particularly hard-pressed he backed into a shop front and traded blows with two or three attackers at a time for a while. Then he would push through them, fighting all the way, laughing and swinging away with his free arm. Soon the boys tired of the sport and dropped back, looking for easier prey, leaving the prawn to wander off into the night, with the carton still safely jammed under his arm. Kevin and I were not tempted to step in and act as peacekeepers this time.

My mate Kevin was a red-headed, freckled, Irish Australian Catholic. As often happens, his flamboyant character matched his appearance. He was quick to anger and quick to laugh, and a good friend. Chris Hall, on the other hand, was a tall, lanky, smiling fellow with a neat moustache. Always impeccably dressed, he conducted himself, and spoke, like a gentleman. He seemed very English, though he too was Australian.
Slowly, supporting each other, we found our feet. By Easter time we were feeling comfortable with Thursday Island. During the evenings we might go to the movies, stroll down to the Mendis newsagent to grab a paper or walk up to watch the basketball at Wongai Court. One night a week we would travel round to Quarantine on the Catholic mission truck to help the boys at the Torres Strait College with their homework.

The Roman Catholic priest, Father McSweeney, coordinated the homework classes. He also organised our Saturday morning excursions on the mission vessel *Lady Pat* over to Hammond Island where teachers laboured at community projects — building a road near the school and clearing land. Hammond is a rugged island, and much of our time was spent shifting stones and even boulders that we dug and levered out with three men on a crowbar. Crowning a summit above the village, the mission church was constructed entirely of large, fitted stones hauled to the site by the residents after the war. They were immensely proud of their church which has become a famous local landmark.

At that time the Torres Strait received no television or radio transmissions. This was before videos, and even before effective tape recorders to play music. Little wonder that singsongs, parties, the movies and the pubs were so popular. Going to the movies, however, involved the moral dilemma of choosing whether to sit upstairs or downstairs. Upstairs was slightly dearer, but that was not the point. Islanders believed that only whites could sit in the upstairs balcony and that blacks had to sit downstairs, and this had been the case in the past. Barry Osborne and Betty Stewart always sat downstairs with the mass of the Islander people. This was a conscience-driven decision on their part, identifying with people who were still struggling for social equality. We younger teachers chose to sit upstairs and encouraged our Islander friends to do the same. When our friends did come upstairs no one seemed to bat an eyelid. In any case, upstairs was less crowded and had a better view of the screen.

Chris found some of the attitudes towards women difficult to cope with. One day he and Kevin and I were seated at the bar in the Royal Hotel having beers. Suddenly from the next bar there was an uproar of screams and smashing glass. Through the door and past us dodged an attractive young Aboriginal woman clutching her shredded dress to her breasts. Hurtling after her was a tall, bare-chested white man. Though strong and active, he was hampered by a plaster cast on one leg as he plunged after her with drinkers and stools going in all directions. After
a minute or two of entertaining chaos the publican, Bernie Bulger, stepped in and persuaded the man to return to the other bar. Bernie gave the woman a pot of beer and I can still see her perched on a stool, practically naked, sipping away happily. Chris insisted that he should have done something to protect the woman, and nothing we said would console him. Kevin and I had learned to keep out of things which did not concern us.

As we came to know more Torres Strait people, it became obvious that we were witnessing a great outpouring of Islanders leaving their homes to travel south and west. Until the end of World War II Torres Strait Islanders had been subject to laws that severely restricted their ability to travel. They had sailed down the Queensland coast on luggers fishing for pearl shell, trochus and bêche-de-mer, visiting mainland towns as far south as Mackay, but were not permitted to stay in the south. As the season drew to a close all the Islanders withdrew, once again, to their islands in the Torres Strait.

The end of the war was followed by a surge in northern development, accompanied by a labour shortage. In 1947 forty Murray Islanders went south to cut sugar cane. Their experiences encouraged others to move to the mainland seeking employment. Many found jobs with the railways, quickly establishing a reputation for hard and efficient work that led to them being recruited for railway construction right through the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Councils on islands such as Badu initially refused to permit young men to leave. Tanu Nona, head of the Nona dynasty, had built up the Badu fishing fleet to thirteen luggers in 1959 and all able-bodied men were required to work the boats.

Between 1960 and 1970 all this changed. The pearling industry collapsed. By 1970 Badu was operating only two vessels. Overall employment in the pearling industry crashed from 951 in 1960–61 to 373 in 1970–71. This rapid decline has been attributed to the popularity of plastics in place of mother-of-pearl. However, the pearling industry had already moved from the harvest of wild pearl shell to the farming of cultured pearls and, by 1964, twelve pearl culture operations were based at Thursday Island. Then in March 1970 an oil tanker, the Oceanic Grandeur, struck a reef near Wednesday Island. We walked to the top of Millman Hill and watched with binoculars as the ship heeled over gushing oil from her hull. As oil spills go this was relatively small, a million litres, but Gamlen, a detergent now banned, was used to disperse the oil. Afterwards pearl culture farms suffered a devastating epidemic
which killed their live pearl shell. The pearl companies blamed Gamlen for the disaster and employment plummeted. Only two farms survived.

The collapse of pearling led Islander councils to reconsider their objections to emigration. No Islanders living on the Outer Islands of the Torres Strait at the time received unemployment benefits. If a seaman lost his job on a pearling lugger or a pearl farm, he would have to support his family the best way he could. Destitute Islanders called at our teachers’ flats selling beautifully patterned bailer shells, scarlet spider shells and turtle-shells. Women hawked brightly coloured necklaces made from plastic beads and red gigi-gidi seeds. They were in desperate straits but never asked for food or money. Frequently emigration to find work was the only option left for them.

This is not the whole story though. Ironically, operating luggers began to experience difficulties recruiting crews in the islands. They could not offer attractive wages to young Islanders who now knew what their labour was worth. By 1970 luggers were busy recruiting cheap labour along the coast of New Guinea at Sigabadur, Mabadawan and up the Pahoturi River. Tanu Nona visited our school and spoke of his hopes that crayfishing would fill the void left by pearling. However, he said that many Badu men were working on the railways in the Northern Territory. It was good for them to find work, he said, but they should try to return to Badu for holidays. With such endorsement the trickle of emigrants became a flood.

Other opportunities were opening up as well. In the late 1960s and early 1970s many of the brightest and most ambitious young people from the Torres Strait turned to the armed services. Many joined the Royal Australian Navy, some the Army, and one or two enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force. A number, such as McBonny Wasiu of Saibai, served in Vietnam, though, to my knowledge, none were casualties.

And yet pearling persisted. I recall three pearling luggers in line astern, under sail, with a red lava-lava at the masthead of the leading vessel. This was the traditional signal that there had been a death at sea. A young seaman had become tangled in a rope while harpooning dugong and been killed. Luggers coming in to TI had their rigging festooned with rows of orange shell meat cut from the pearl shells when they were cleaned. You could lounge at the bar of the Grand Hotel, looking down over pearling luggers pulling against their anchor chains, and chew on the sun-dried shell meat while yarning with the skippers and crews. There were Victor Nona and his father, Tala, and the whole Nona clan. There were retired divers and tenders of Malay
descent, like Woggy Sedan, who explained over a beer what it was like to have the bends. He had been bundled back into his diver’s dress, dumped overboard and left to hang for hours. This staging assimilated the nitrogen bubbles in the blood and was the only treatment for bends in those times. The Farquhars, a white pearling family, still ran their store on the waterfront near the Federal Hotel, though I think 1970 was the year they too finally closed up and moved south.

For a century, pearling had been the raison d’etre for the community on Thursday Island and the chief activity in the collective life of the Torres Strait. Sixteen-year-old boys would still come to their teachers at school and proudly announce that they were leaving to be crew on a Nona boat. It was a mark of honour for many young men to have served on the luggers, and for many their highest ambition in life was to be a stern diver in a bulky brass diving helmet. Many people did not really believe that pearling was finished. There had always been recessions in the industry followed by booms. This was easy to believe when you saw the luggers with their brave show of sail rounding Hospital Point to tack up the channel to Port Kennedy. However, it really hit home for me when I visited the Island Industries Board Shell Store on the waterfront and saw the rows of brass diving helmets for sale for $15 each. I realised at once that I was witnessing the end of a remarkable industry. I cannot believe that I did not buy one of the helmets, but nobody really wanted them then. Torres Strait Islanders were largely too busy to mourn the passing of pearling. New opportunities for travel and work abounded and many were keen to escape the conditions of appalling poverty in which they lived.

In late 1970 we were invited to a 21st birthday party for a young Islander friend from the Central Islands. His mother met us outside the rusted corrugated iron shed they lived in, located on a corner opposite the Thursday Island State School. She took us in through the open gap in the front of the shed, apologising to a family of Islanders who lived in this dirt-floored room, to the back wall where a corrugated iron sheet had been removed from the wall. We stepped through into another room. The furniture consisted of an old table, and coconut and pandanus mats spread on the dirt floor. There was no electricity; a pressure lantern hung from a wire hook under the roof. Water was a single tap at the front of the shed, carried in by bucket through the other family’s room to this one. They paid $10 a week for the privilege of living there. Yet the thing I remember most is that the mother was unembarrassed and greeted us warmly as her son’s friends. She had bought a carton of beer
and prepared turtle stew with rice. Later she brought out a cake and we all sang our friend ‘Happy Birthday’, while he looked suitably abashed. In the finest Islander tradition she had demonstrated her deep love for her son and displayed generosity to his friends. But who would have blamed her for moving to the mainland as so many others had done.

The Territory of Papua and New Guinea was so tantalisingly close to Thursday Island, only a hundred kilometres away, that I just had to visit. As it was an Australian territory, no passport was required, nor any other documentation except an entry visa upon arrival at the airport. In November 1970 Kevin, Chris and I flew to Daru on the Fly River for the weekend, where we met crocodile shooters and plantation owners and returned home in a euphoric mood.

Daru was 200 kilometres north-east of Thursday Island and was the administrative centre for the sprawling Western District of Papua New Guinea. This district included the legendary Star Mountains, and bordered West Papua which had been invaded by Indonesia in 1963. Fighting was still occurring along this border in 1970.

I was fascinated by the crocodiles penned in shallow backyard ponds at Craig’s Store on Daru. A stout wooden stockade enclosed a still pool perhaps five metres in length. As Craig rapped on the stockade a faint whirlpool motion lapped at the leaves floating on the pool’s surface. The swirling grew in intensity and you could visualise the monster ponderously uncoiling itself on the pool’s bottom. Then in one explosive movement gaping jaws and gigantic shoulders rocketed from the water onto the embankment and posed for our inspection — the peg-like teeth the size of your thumb, the huge grey and yellow body glistening in the sun. I was staggered by the croc’s speed and ferocity.

Shortly afterwards I became the proud owner of a 4-metre crocodile skin for which I paid just $50. Thursday Island was the base for croc shooters working the Gulf of Carpentaria. One pair of shooters we knew consisted of a talkative, tousle-haired New Zealander named Johnny Nine Toes and his mate, a taciturn German who had served in the French Foreign Legion. Johnny had one big toe shot off in a hunting accident and, as he always went barefooted, his nickname was a foregone conclusion.

As the year drew to a close many people were returning for the Christmas vacation. I met Murray Islanders returning from Kuri Bay, a pearl culture station in Western Australia near Broome. There were Darnley Islanders returning from working on the Queensland Railways.
Between them it seemed they had visited every little railway town and siding from the Northern Territory border to New South Wales. Others came from building railways at Port Headland and Mount Tom Price in Western Australia. Servicemen and women arrived, some having served in the Vietnam War.

The key to the success of Torres Strait Islanders during this turbulent period was their flexibility, their confidence, their ability to pick up new skills and procedures and, above all, their networking over vast distances. The networking, normally based on the extended family or home island community, permitted Islanders to search out opportunities across the whole of northern Australia. The networking might occur by phone, during casual meetings on the mainland, or at home in the Torres Strait during the Christmas get-together. And it was not only the men who were travelling to find work. Young women from Saibai and other Western Islands were finding employment as nurse’s aides in nursing homes round Cairns and on the Atherton Tableland at this time. Typically, one woman would get a job at an institution. Then after the Christmas vacation she might simply take a cousin with her back south, confident that the work was there. One of these women explained why she liked living in the south. On the islands, she said, the old people were ‘too bossy’. In Cairns she had bought a station wagon and on weekends she drove down the highway to see Islander friends in Townsville, a five-hour drive away. She had become used to her individual freedom, and there was little enough of that for an Islander woman in the Torres Strait.

Life in a traditional Torres Strait clan could be comforting, but it could also be restrictive, even suffocating. Young people were expected to turn their weekly earnings over to their parents. Then there was the alcohol. Islanders had legally been permitted to consume alcohol for only a few years and were still coming to terms with it. One elder lamented to me, ‘We don’t mind the boys drinking but why do they do it at the hotel with strangers? They should be here with their families. They can bring the beer home.’ However, alcohol was not necessarily the problem, for a gigantic generation gap was developing. The elders still thought in terms of the old, insular and hierarchical family and clan groupings, whereas the young lived in a free-wheeling new world where youngsters from all over the islands mixed, travelled and worked together.

Christmas was a time of great excitement. Families still at home on the islands looked forward to greeting their young people. In many
cases wives had not seen their husbands, nor children their fathers, for a year or more. Frequently those returning were wealthy by the impoverished standards of the Torres Strait. In true Islander fashion they would distribute all their wealth as gifts to parents and family.

For a returning Islander, just getting to their home on an Outer Island was a tortuous, sometimes impossible, task. For a start the Outer Islands of the Torres Strait had no telephones, nor airstrips. Communication was by government radio, an awkward process controlled by the white administration on Thursday Island. Transport to Badu or nearby islands might be arranged on a Nona lugger. However, for most Outer Islands the only transport was by government vessels. You registered your name at the Department of Native Affairs office next to the courthouse. If the officials approved, then a berth was found for you. If not, then you simply did not travel beyond Thursday Island. The power wielded by government officials in the Torres Strait Islands in 1970 appears incredible today. The Department of Native Affairs had changed its name to the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs in 1965 but was still universally known as the DNA.

Many people were refused permission to visit the island of their birth because white officials, or the elected councils and chairman on the island, disapproved. Islander officials collaborated with the system and, in Islander fashion, used it to their own advantage. Eddie Mabo, the native title campaigner, was born on Murray Island in 1936 yet was repeatedly denied permission to visit the island. And his experience was not uncommon among returning Islanders. Whites also suffered under this regime, for white husbands were routinely refused permission to visit islands with their Islander wives and children. I saw these men standing on the wharf at Thursday Island waving farewell as their families sailed off for Christmas on the home island. Young Islanders returning after several years living in a free society in the south chafed under these petty restrictions. Something was going to have to give.

I left Thursday Island in December 1970 to spend Christmas with my parents in Brisbane. After a week or two I found myself bored by the city, where life seemed dull and bland compared with the colour and excitement of the islands. I couldn’t wait to return north for the start of the new school year.
CHAPTER 2

Ngaw Lag (My Place)

It was a relief to be back in my schoolroom on the hill at TI, with Seriako chivvying the goats along the slopes and the monsoon storms sweeping in from the north, rain rattling on roofs and the smell of coconut oil. I felt as comfortable as I had ever been anywhere. My Islander students were amiable, gregarious characters who laughed easily. They all wore the school uniform, with bare feet, and concentrated on their studies. Their families had impressed upon them the importance of a secondary education and the students tried hard to live up to these expectations. However, sometimes the frustration of these youngsters labouring with an unfamiliar curriculum in an environment so different from their own society concerned us. The school was a European institution designed to teach European knowledge through the English language.

Our students came from isolated, self-regulating societies. After completing the necessary work at hand, individuals might be allowed surprising freedom, particularly the boys. Adolescent girls were often strictly supervised house servants. They might be involved in quite strenuous activities, such as filling a water tank by buckets from a distant well or cutting firewood, while the boys mucked about in boats, went hunting, or did nothing much at all. The girls had a saying, 'Work the girl and spoil the boy'. And punishment in traditional society could be draconian. I saw a lattice of deep scars on a young woman's back where an uncle had whipped her. Another woman told of being tied to a tree while green ant nests were emptied over her as punishment. As Islanders will, they made a joke of these incidents, but to a young Westerner they seemed shocking.

In Islander society learning was frequently the choice of the individual
concerned. There might be lots of urging but little compulsion, so people took up those activities which interested them or which suited their own abilities. A boy might learn to wood carve, or he might not. A boy might learn to dugong hunt, or he might not. A girl might choose to learn traditional dancing, or she might not. At high school, however, everybody was compelled to sit at a desk and do the same thing at the same time, without help from friends. The students' own Islander communities were structured societies, which worked for them, but these were a world away from European-style compulsory, comprehensive education.

English was another problem. Most students had difficulty speaking, reading or writing in Standard Australian English. Students from the Western Islands generally spoke their own languages, Kalaw Kawaw Ya (Saibai, Boigu and Dauan) and Kala Lagau Ya (Mabuiag, Badu and Kubin). Most other students spoke Torres Strait Broken (now often referred to as Creole or Kriol). Broken is an interesting language, descended from the Pacific English brought to the Torres Strait by South Sea Islander seamen. As might be expected, it has a peculiar nautical strain. You 'capsize' a mug rather than knock it over. To confuse or deliberately obscure is to 'make dirty water'. 'Trim' is used as an adjective in the nautical sense meaning neat, tight, good style. And as a spoken, rather than written, language Broken continues to evolve at a dizzying rate.

Torres Strait society enjoyed an oral culture. Writing had little or no function in the Islanders' lives. People remembered things, rather than writing them down, and they chatted endlessly, rather than reading. The only book in most Torres Strait Islanders' homes was the English Bible, though few read it. This oral culture had prospered for a thousand years. An academic conducting educational research in the islands spoke with us concerning the impact of our European education on Islander culture. Obsessed with literacy as we were, one teacher asked, 'What impact will reading and writing have on the Islanders' oral culture?' Without hesitation the researcher replied, 'The oral culture will be destroyed.' That made us think. I wondered about my job and whether I was really helping these kids.

Officially students were still being deterred from speaking traditional languages in the school grounds, but no one took this seriously and most teachers soon learned a smattering of language words and phrases from their classes. Students eagerly tutored their teachers, then giggled helplessly after hearing our abominable attempts at pronunciation. There
was so much goodwill and hope for the future. In the heat of the afternoon, with cicadas shrilling in the wattle trees outside and fans softly beating overhead, the building would sway to the beautiful Islander melodies. The oral culture of the islands was immersed in song, and there was nothing the students would rather do than sing. Tall, smiling Phillip Epsseg from Mer strummed on the guitar and Joe Reuben from Darnley thumped on the island drum, while other students sang, harmonising effortlessly. Chris and I would lean on the railing outside listening. The students ran their own music class perfectly well without us.

Meanwhile Kevin had devised a plan to inspire his students to write creatively. Reasoning that the boys in his class loved going to the open-air theatre, and enjoyed western gunfights most of all, he arranged for me to stalk into his classroom, commence an altercation, then shoot him with a starting pistol. Kevin would then pick himself up and resume his lesson in the highly charged atmosphere that he seemed to prefer.

At the appointed time I burst unannounced into Kevin’s class where twenty Islander boys stolidly worked at their desks.

‘What’s the meaning of this?’ I roared. ‘You’ve put me on softball again.’

‘Well, I’m the sports master,’ Kevin shouted back. We had the students’ attention now.

‘You can just take me off that stupid game, ’cause I won’t do it, Kearney.’

‘Listen, Singe, you’ll do whatever I tell you.’

Without replying I stepped back, jerked out the cap pistol and pulled both triggers, ensuring that the pistol was pointed towards the blackboard, well away from the gaping students. Kevin toppled back over a desk as I escaped. Everything had gone according to plan.

A moment later Kevin sprang to his feet. ‘Right, class, now write down the first thing you thought of when Mr Singe …’ His voice trailed off — the classroom was apparently empty. Then he noticed a dark figure scrambling to safety through a back window. As it turned out, half the boys were hiding under their desks, but it took some time to round up the others. One boy did not return till the next day. We were trying our best, but you wouldn’t try a stunt like that today.

Islander students were lean and hard muscled, natural athletes. However, girls’ sport had been restricted by Islander custom. Traditional Islander culture attached little sexual significance to a woman’s breasts. Indeed it was not uncommon on the Outer Islands then for women
to appear bare-breasted. It was the thigh that was regarded as highly sexual. Traditionally women wore several grass skirts, or petticoats, to safely conceal their thighs. So girls’ sports were conducted in skirts, with the premise that nothing above the knee could be revealed. Girls ran doubled over holding the hem of their skirt down with their hands. They swam fully clothed in skirts and blouses. Then in late 1970 one girl, Joyce Auda from Boigu Island, wore shorts. Unencumbered by the skirt, she broke a number of school athletic records, and immediately other girls followed her lead. When change occurs it sometimes happens with startling speed. Soon most young Islander women thought nothing of wearing shorts that exposed their thighs, much to the horror of parents and grandparents.

Students were keen to play new sports. One of the other teachers and I took soccer for an hour on Tuesdays and two hours on Wednesdays and it was very satisfying to see the players improving week by week.

One afternoon I had unaccountably worn long trousers to soccer, where rank, uncut grass covered most of the oval. Ignoring the dried grass seeds that riddled my trouser legs, I stood directing students for a while, before I became aware of a picking at my shins. Looking down I discovered several burly Islander boys sitting around my feet, patiently pulling grass seeds from my trouser legs. I was anchored in that spot till they were satisfied that all the seeds had been removed. This spontaneous gesture was so typical of the time.

Inspections were compulsory for all new teachers to determine whether they should continue as teachers. The arrival of the District Inspector caused anxiety among the whole staff, particularly the teacher who was to be inspected. I was shy by nature and performing before thirty adolescents for five hours a day represented an enormous achievement for me. Having the Inspector seated at the back of the room, carefully perusing and recording everything I did, was mind-numbing. Even so, the Inspector was generous in his appraisal. My proficiency was ‘very fair to good’. My preparation and organisation were ‘good’. My interest and zeal were ‘good’ and my power to inspire and control was ‘fair’.

However, as one bridge was crossed another presented itself, for Chris and I were eligible for conscription into the Royal Australian Army. Australian males turning twenty were required to register for the National Service ballot, but our registration had been deferred because of our bond with the Education Department. Selections were made by birth dates and Chris’s birthday and mine were a day apart. If selected
we might be sent to fight in Vietnam and, though we had no radio or television, we read the newspapers avidly. The war in Vietnam seemed never-ending. When Australian troops were ambushed at Nui Le they lost five killed and twenty-six wounded in just one day. Half were conscripts. This did not sound good. Our Torres Strait Islander friends were not required to register. Apparently only non-indigenous males were being conscripted. (I might also add that the legal age for voting and consuming alcohol was twenty-one, so while we were not old enough to vote or drink legally it was all right to conscript us into the army.)

When the envelopes arrived with the results of the ballot, I read mine then collapsed in relief. I had not been selected. Chris, on the other hand, found that his number had come up and he was invited to report to an army base in the south. We farewelled Chris with regret for he was a great friend. The Army recognised his ability, promoted him to Second Lieutenant and dispatched him to a base in Singapore.

By now most of us wore lava-lavas and beads when not teaching, and we spent our spare time carousing with Islander friends who had pierced our ears with sewing needles for our gold earrings. The Principal worried that we were ‘going native’, and there were plenty of examples of white beachcombers who lived in humpies on the beach with Islander women. There were ‘bottle of brandy a day’ men and others I knew who drank a six-pack of beer for breakfast. The Principal was further mortified when our accommodation featured in evidence during a sensational court case. An Islander woman was abducted from a party at our flats then bashed and raped. Her white boyfriend, off a prawn trawler, was also beaten. Charges were laid against two young Port Kennedy men, but shortly before the trial commenced the boyfriend, an important witness, was found hanged on the deck of his boat. Subsequently the two accused men were acquitted and returned to Thursday Island, where one was stabbed to death in a struggle with a white man. The dead man had been in my Social Studies class in 1970.

The frontier violence, the fights, the deaths and injuries had now become part of our lifestyle. We didn’t think twice about it. I remember one Saturday afternoon we were drinking in the bar at the Torres Hotel, the northern-most hotel in Australia. An aging, ramshackle affair, it stood on a corner, obscured by towering fig trees. From the bar you could see half a kilometre up the dirt road to the courthouse, hospital and police station. It was one of those lazy afternoons when the streets are empty and the dogs sleep on the road in the sun. Suddenly Hassan,
a Port Kennedy boy, stormed in demanding that Geoff, a fellow teacher, go outside for a fight. Geoff hardly knew the boy but was told that his girlfriend had insulted Hassan's. Geoff shrugged and went out onto the verandah, where Hassan started throwing punches. As I made to intervene, Jacky Ware, a friend from Moa Island, stepped forward, saying, ‘No, Singe, you stay out of it.' Jacky was thickset and very capable, so there was nothing for it but to sit back and watch. And actually Geoff was doing all right. Tall with a long reach, he was holding his own without becoming too aggressive and starting a real fight. So the two sparred their way across the verandah onto the road, the dust rising around their bare feet. It went on for a while till both were dripping perspiration.

Then far down the road a dust cloud appeared steadily moving towards us. Soon the police vehicle emerged from the dust and pulled up next to the pair, who were still gamely plugging away at each other. A policeman we knew poked his head through the window.

‘How are ya, Geoff?’

Between punches Geoff panted back, ‘Oh good, mate.’

The policeman: ‘And what ‘ave ya been up to?’

‘Nothin’ much. Gettin’ pissed.’

The policeman again: ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Yeah, no worries,’ said Geoff as he ducked a swing.

The policeman nodded. ‘Well, okay then. See ya.’ And the paddy wagon rattled off.

Finally, honour satisfied, we all trouped inside for a beer, the combatants and Jacky included. Jacky explained that he had been drinking at the Grand Hotel when Hassan told him that he was going to fight a white man, and asked Jacky to back him up. But he didn’t know that Hassan was talking about us.

A letter I wrote to my parents in September 1971 described another brawl. ‘One thing led to another and next thing you know the crew of the boat and about twenty Island boys are fighting all over the boat and wharf. Fellows were knocked overboard and off the wharf. One of the boat crew took out a rifle but somehow they got him and threw him overboard.’

Guns were often displayed, and occasionally used. Two months later I wrote again. Brian had ‘shot an Islander through the right shoulder by accident. The Islander said some very unkind things to Brian and consequently he has hung up his shootin’ irons.’ Then an Islander girl I knew was shot dead by a white man on Horn Island. An Islander
policeman told me she had been hit by a shotgun blast at close range. I remembered her in trouble for eating chocolate in class.

Thursday Island in those days was a gritty, combative society. It could be dangerous but that only made it more exciting. However, newcomers were dismayed by the raw violence and promiscuity. One newly arrived male teacher became involved with a female one night after he had been drinking. The incident unhinged him. He was tortured by the delusion that he had contracted venereal disease, which was rife, and that the woman would have his child. There was nothing for it but to transfer him south. Another of my friends described how he assisted at his girlfriend’s abortion, disposing of the foetus in a backyard incinerator. He suffered trauma from this horrible experience and was also transferred. Another teacher, a resident of the teacher flats, killed himself with a rifle. Service on Thursday Island was tough and I think we coped with these tragedies by making light of them.

For Christmas 1971 I did not return home to Brisbane. I had been offered a ride on the Torres Herald III, the Anglican mission vessel, around the Eastern and Central Islands. Most Torres Strait Islanders were enthusiastic followers of the Church of England. Ever since the Church had replaced the London Missionary Society in the islands in 1914 the Diocese, based at Thursday Island, had maintained a vessel for use in the islands. Originally it had been a converted pearling lugger, the Herald, but the vessel I travelled on was a motorised cruiser about nine metres in length. As there were no airfields on the Outer Islands, and visiting vessels were infrequent, the Herald transported passengers and cargo out to the islands and around the islands as well as performing church duties. I had to request permission from the Department of Native Affairs prior to departure. Nothing happened in the Outer Islands without the administration on TI knowing and approving. I suppose they reasoned that one teacher chaperoned on a mission vessel would not cause too much trouble.

It was one of those years when the big storms of the monsoon held off till after Christmas. The sea sloughed lazily under the Herald’s bow, the sun shimmering on the glassy surface, an empty blue sky merging with the horizon as if sea and sky were one.

We left Thursday Island carrying Father Dave Passi, who was to celebrate Christmas services at different islands. Dave’s nephew, a tall, cheerful Murray Islander, was also on board with his family. The vessel was crewed by an Islander captain and a couple of young Islander deckhands. We lounged on deck talking, reading and looking at distant
islands floating in the heat haze out near the unseen horizon. The sea’s surface was occasionally broken by a shark fin or a ripple of bait fish. Dave’s nephew had been working on the railways in Western Queensland for several years. He was returning to Mer for Christmas, accompanied by his Aboriginal wife and two small children. Dave himself was one of the senior Islander clergy. Originally from Mer, he had trained at Saint Paul’s Mission on Moa Island and spent a number of years working in a parish at Rockhampton in Central Queensland. His speech was dignified, calm and precise.

At noon the crew delivered plates of hot rice and tea in enamel mugs to where we sat on deck. We emptied half a tin of cold tinned meat over our rice, and spooned powdered milk into the tea, stirring vigorously. The meat and rice, washed down with tea, were delicious.

We passed Nagi, a large pyramid-shaped island which had been uninhabited for a decade. As the afternoon wore on we passed among the beautiful sand cays of the Central Torres Strait Islands. These are formed by drifting sands on the leeward side of reefs. Since the prevailing winds in the Torres Strait are the south-easterly trades (from April to November), a combination of wind and longshore current ensures that the sand cays are on the north-western side of the coral reef platforms. This is ideal for these tiny communities, as it places their anchorages in the lee of the island for most of the year. While some cays appear dry and desolate, especially after eight months without rain, others sit over aquifers which nourish dense vegetation and abundant fruit trees.

We moored off Coconut Island for Dave to go ashore in the dinghy for his church service. The island is so small that you can walk from one side to the other in a few minutes, and it is dry compared with some of the other cays. The community of less than a hundred had a reputation for good-natured hospitality.

From there we voyaged to Yorke Island, another, larger, sand cay, shaped like a teardrop and surrounded by other cays. You can walk to the nearest, Kodal, at low tide across the reef. Coconut trees lined the beach on Yorke where a crowd had gathered to meet us. Not a lot happened on these remote islands and the arrival of a boat was a community-stopping event. It seemed that every available adult was on the beach to meet us and solemnly shake our hands, while the children milled in the background giggling shyly. Yorke has a reputation for hospitality too, though it has long been regarded as the most regulated island community. The sandy roads and wide footpaths were swept daily by women with coconut brooms, and were bordered by low cement
walls painted dazzling white. Any rocks, shells or other prominent objects were also painted white for good measure. Forests of native plum trees, called *wongais*, flourished in the uncleared bush areas. Around the neat, painted cottages in the village coconuts, mangoes, frangipani, hibiscus and croton were arranged in tidy stands to complement the general impression of orderliness. We spent the night in a council guesthouse.

Our next scheduled landing was at Darnley, a high volcanic island. The church on the foreshore was constructed of coral cement and painted the usual brilliant white. As Darnley was the first Torres Strait community to accept South Sea Islander teachers from the London Missionary Society, it holds a special place in modern Torres Strait mythology. The date the missionaries landed, 1 July 1871, is celebrated annually by Islander communities as The Coming of the Light. The ‘action’ for The Coming of the Light follows the same sequence wherever it is performed. South Sea Islander teachers dressed in long white robes solemnly step from dinghy to beach. They are confronted by armed warriors clad in grass skirts and feathered headdresses who caper and yell, rattling their bows and arrows. The unfazed missionaries brandish the Bible as their only protection. The warriors, of course, do not accept the gospel immediately. They continue to bluster and threaten but finally, grudgingly, lay down their weapons. It is excellent live theatre performed with great gusto and good humour by the warriors. By contrast the South Sea Islander teachers appear as supercilious, wooden caricatures.

Leaving Darnley we cruised southwards towards the legendary Murray Islands. Beneath us were the famous Darnley Deeps where men in helmet and corselet dived from luggers to a depth of 240 feet in the quest for pearl shell. Staging was vital at such depths. A diver went straight to the bottom and worked hard for half an hour, before being slowly pulled up by the tender on the other end of his lifeline. Three hours of staging were required to avoid the bends, nitrogen bubbles in the blood. The dangers and riches of the Darnley Deeps were part of the collective oral tradition of the Straits, and a song, ‘Darnley Deep Water Diving Boat’, was a popular favourite. A lucky pearlling lugger might take ten or eleven tons of shell working the Deeps. An unlucky boat might lose a diver or two. There was a graveyard on Darnley Island where some of the Japanese killed in the Deeps were buried.

Ahead of the *Herald* the sea was mottled lime and hazel where reefs barred our passage. Enormous areas of the Torres Strait were uncharted. The captain showed me a chart of the area. Blank patches displaying
the word 'unsurveyed' stretched on both sides of the narrow sea lane used by international cargo vessels. Lack of charts represented no problem for the Herald's Islander crew who navigated by keen eyesight and a blend of memory and seafarer's intuition.

In the late afternoon distinct crests wavered in the haze to the south. 'Murray Island,' announced Dave.

I had read Ion Idriess's *Drums of Mer* as a boy. Although Idriess exaggerated, his tale of young castaways marooned in the company of fierce headhunters was a classic adventure story. I gazed in fascination at the fabled island. Soon the rugged, thickly forested slopes of volcanic cones could be made out. As we cruised closer I saw that there were three islands. Mer, the largest, was dominated by the grassy slopes of Gelam, a ridge representing the northern, higher rim of the caldera. At the western end Gelam terminated abruptly in sheer cliffs, the soft rocks eroded into fantastic shapes and riddled with caves. According to Meriam tradition, the hill is the dugong brought to Mer by Gelam, a mythical hero who came from Moa Island.

The Herald was greeted by a fleet of aluminium dinghies hurtling towards us at full speed, sweeping under our bow and crisscrossing each others' wakes. In each dinghy were two muscular young men in brightly coloured lava-lavas. One crouched over the outboard's throttle at the stern. The other stood in the bow holding a rope one-handed, riding the surge and thump of the dinghy's movement in the manner of a rodeo rider. On shore, people were gathering to meet us. Once again, the entire adult population seemed to be present. We sat down babuk (cross-legged) on coconut mats in the shade watching the Herald being unloaded.

Later I wandered around the island, visiting the gardens for which Mer, with its rich soil, was famous. Traditionally coconuts, yams and bananas were the mainstay of the Meriam's diet. Coconuts and bananas grew everywhere but the yam gardens were neatly marked off and fenced, the mounds distributed in an orderly fashion, with the green and violet tendrils winding round poles set into the mounds at angles. The size and abundance of garden produce, particularly yams, were an important measure of a man's rank within the Meriam community.

I trudged up Gelam and along the dugong's backbone to the peak representing the head. Caves on the cliff face are said to be the dugong's nostrils. Inside the caves, I was told, might be found riches, rivulets of fresh water and a giant snake. Sorcerers were said to enter the caves but no ordinary mortal would dare. Gelam resided here and, on occasion,
descended to visit his people in the villages. It was said that a beautiful young woman had leaped from the cliff to escape white and South Sea marauders a hundred years earlier.

From Gelam’s peak, I looked back to the east over the sweeping rim of Mer’s caldera towards the edge of the Great Barrier Reef, a line of white breakers stretching from horizon to horizon. To the west are the islands of Dowar and Waier. Dowar’s crater rises smoothly to high peaks at each end, and there is a thickly vegetated sand spit off the eastern side. The island was once inhabited but by the time of my visit everyone had moved to Mer. The third island, Waier, is completely different from its neighbours, being the ruined rim of a caldera into which the sea has broken on the southern side. The rock around the rim has been furrowed and chiselled into crenellations and rugged spires. This island was the home of the ancient cult of Waiet, a god whom many still regarded with awe and some dread. For centuries a metre-high, turtle shell statue of Waiet squatted in a cliff-side cave on Waier. In 1924 a Queensland schoolteacher stole the statue and donated it to the Queensland Museum where it sits to this day.

That night I joined a party travelling over to Dowar by dinghy to catch a turtle. On the far side of the sand spit we sat down to wait and before long, right on schedule, a mature green turtle crawled up the beach to lay her eggs. These green turtles roam widely throughout the tropical seas of Indonesia and Melanesia but always return to the beach where they were hatched, to lay their eggs. We watched while the turtle dug a hole in the sand with her rear flippers and laid ninety-three eggs. After collecting the eggs, we manhandled her into the dinghy and the catch was complete. Back on Mer the turtle was kept stranded on her back in the shade till needed.

It can be a terrible thing to see a turtle being butchered. On Mer and some other islands the reptile is killed or stunned with repeated blows to the head prior to cutting away the belly carapace. However, in some communities it is the tradition to cut the animal up alive. The turtle struggles and writhes in agony as the carapace is removed, spraying blood over the butchers, who laugh and duck its feeble flipper blows. Some people deny that live cutting occurs in the Torres Strait, but I have seen it happen often.

The *Herald* stayed three nights at Mer and every night there was singing and dancing, the booming drums echoing under the coconut trees. Male dancers were dressed in short red lava-lavas and green coconut leaf skirts, with white, feathered headdresses, called *daris*, on
their forehead. They skipped forward in pairs, kicking their heels in unison, streaked with perspiration, eyes and teeth glinting in the lamp-light, as the melodious voices rose and fell in chorus. Sometimes the dances continued all night. In December the heat and humidity made sleep difficult anyway.

Though some traditional grass and coconut leaf huts were in use, most houses were small fibro boxes with little ventilation. In any case, all the windows and doors were closed tight and locked at night, for Mer was a place of superstition and magic, after dark. Friends told me about puri puri, black magic. Puri puri men sought out their victims at night, using magic charms to disable and kill. As well, there were the mythical entities to contend with. Gelam visited the villages at night in the guise of a large black dog and prowled among the houses. Friends warned me against wandering outside alone after dark, but they need not have worried. I wasn’t going anywhere.

Mer was a place of beauty as well as myth and magic. Most young people played the guitar and many were gifted composers, creating hauntingly beautiful songs in English and Meriam Mir. I recall sitting on the beach, Gelam looming behind, starlight sparkling off the glassy sea, listening to a guitar’s strumming as a clear masculine voice crooned:

Mer kakalam
Kara lonely heart
Drifting ...
Into my harbour of dreams.

After leaving Mer the Herald glided across a flat, somnolent sea towards Stephen Island, a tiny volcanic islet far to the north. It was baking hot on deck and most of us dozed. One of the deckhands, whom I will call Will, had befriended me. He was a sleek, muscular young Islander who smiled rather than spoke. For lunch he served us the ubiquitous tinned meat with rice and tea. While we were eating it, Will suddenly stirred and focused his attention on the horizon, then went to the wheelhouse to rouse the captain. Steadying his binoculars, the captain gazed into the glare as Will murmured directions to him. Soon I made out a small vessel with two human figures waving their arms wildly. They scrambled onto the Herald’s deck and told us their story.

A white fisherman had anchored his vessel off Stephen Island and employed young Stephen Islanders to run his dories and catch mackerel for him. These two, one in his teens and the other younger, had trouble
with their motor and had been drifting all day. We had saved them from almost certain death, as they had run out of water and food. The Stephen Islanders invited us to their Christmas feast that night. With the crew of the Herald, the mackerel fisherman and his son, and the entire population of Stephen Island, I think there were thirty persons present at the feast, as thunder crackled and lightning flashed away to the west.

The weather can change with surprising speed when the monsoon storms hit, so the next day we raced south and west, heading back to Thursday Island.

A little while later my smiling friend Will became involved in a knife fight in which another Islander died. He served a short gaol sentence, but upon release he started drinking heavily and has been in and out of gaol ever since.

An inevitable element of life in a remote area like the Torres Strait is that people come and go in a constant procession. New friends are made while old ones are lost. Another teacher, Steve Mullins, moved into the room next to mine. We had similar interests and soon became good mates. One of our friends was Victor McGrath whose ancestors had come to the Torres Strait from the Indonesian islands. Victor drove one of the TI taxis, making coloured bead necklaces in his car between customers, and lived with his parents in John Street. Another friend was Ken Marshall, a loquacious telecom technician from over at Bamaga on the mainland. Ken had a huge stomach and grizzled beard so naturally we called him the Pregnant Pixie. Every few weeks he voyaged to Thursday Island by dinghy and stayed with us. He had an enormous capacity for beer. The last thing we saw before going to bed was Pixie, beer in hand, toasting us goodnight, and the first thing we saw in the morning was Pixie seated at the kitchen table, beer in hand, wishing us good morning. Another new friend was Barney Rumble who sailed in one day on an eight-metre yacht named Lik Lik Balus (‘Little Bird’ in New Guinea pidgin). He had come the thousand kilometres from Cairns with no motor or radio and was on his way to New Guinea.

A highlight of the school year for Thursday Island High School was the annual sporting competition with Daru High School in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. The schools took it in turns to host each other. Daru was the closest high school to Thursday Island. In fact, within Queensland, there was not another high school within a thousand kilometres of Thursday Island, and we were the only high school in Australia to participate in a regular international sporting competition.

Steve Mullins and I were fortunate to be among the four staff and
thirty students who boarded the *Melbidir* at the Thursday Island wharf for the 200-kilometre voyage to Daru. The *Melbidir* was a legendary vessel, the workhorse of the DNA fleet servicing the Torres Strait Islands. It resembled an old river-boat with its verandahs and open decks. Passengers carried their own mats and sheets and slept on the deck using their bags for pillows.

From the bridge the captain, Bluey Bedford, roared at the crew, who bustled about their stations throwing off lines and chattering good-naturedly. Bluey’s bark was obviously worse than his bite.

Bluey and the engineer, Jimmy Levy, were celebrities. Generally dressed in a singlet, shorts and bare feet, Bluey was a ginger-haired giant with a huge bulge of a stomach. He had worked the New Guinea coast before coming to the Torres Strait. Jimmy Levi came from Saint Paul’s Anglican Mission on Moa Island. Short and balding, he had a puckish sense of humour and was universally liked. From humble beginnings and a limited education he rose to the position of qualified engineer on the largest vessel in the Torres Strait.

A visit by the *Melbidir* was keenly anticipated on the islands, both for the supplies it brought and its function as a passenger vessel, and positions on the crew were eagerly sought by Islander boys.

Late afternoon found us anchored in the lee of Dove Island, a tiny uninhabited sand cay in the Central Islands. From a distance a swarm of birds appeared like a fine mist hanging over the island. The crew ferried us ashore in dinghies for a spot of beachcombing. Dove Island was literally a one-tree island, with a single coconut tree standing in a hectare or so of grass teeming with seabirds. While the boys speared fish in the shallows, the girls collected seabird eggs in buckets. The first thing on the menu that night was boiled eggs. Wild eggs were an important part of the traditional diet. Some Murray Islanders liked seabird eggs that contained newly formed baby birds. They knocked the top off the egg and hooked the embryonic bird out, swallowing it beak, feathers, feet and all. I ate seabird eggs but I could never manage the baby bird.

At sunset Steve and I sat on the upper deck where Bluey and Jimmy entertained us with their stories of life at sea. As we emptied our beers, Bluey would bawl ‘Napau’ at the top of his voice and Napau Akee, the steward, would come tumbling up the stairs with a fresh supply. The *Melbidir*’s lights attracted bait-fish and squid. The crew and students occupied themselves spearing the squid and the large garfish that passed through the arc of the lights. The catch was then cooked up and eaten
for supper. I loved those nights sleeping on the Melbidir’s deck with just a pandanus leaf mat under me, a lava-lava for cover and my overnight bag under my head, the stars powdering the sky above, the gentle roll of the vessel in the swell and the sager (south-east wind) humming about the bridge and in the rigging.

Breakfast was damper and tea. As we continued northwards, the sea broke on the Warrior Reefs to starboard. This reef system begins near Yam Island, stretching north to New Guinea. Finally in mid-afternoon we were approaching Daru. The waters changed from clear blue to brown, stained by the silt discharged into the sea from the mouth of the Fly River, thirty kilometres to the east. Daru Island is deltaic, consisting of accumulated river silt, but it does have an elevated area. It was on this rise that the administration settled when police and missionaries moved to the area in 1893. Though Daru’s population was many times that of Thursday Island, there had been little development. Thousands of people had migrated to Daru from villages along the coast, and from inland, to live in bush-material shacks crowded into a section of town called ‘The Corners’. A few had landed jobs with the government or one of the businesses in town, but the rest supported themselves as best they could.

The high school at Daru drew boarding students from the entire Western District, from the Indonesian border to the mountains far away to the north, and the Fly River basin. As the school followed an Australian-type curriculum, taught primarily by Australian teachers, the two schools appeared similar in ethos. However, the similarities ended there. Torres Strait might have been poor and undeveloped when compared with the rest of Australia, but it was not Third World. Daru was. The contrasts were stark.

Our students complained about the brown rice and rissoles they were fed that night. Nobody ate brown rice in the Torres Strait. The Daru teachers pointed out that they had put on the rissoles especially for our students. Daru students never expected such luxuries. During the two days of sports the Thursday Island teams were trounced at everything except basketball. My soccer team went down by an embarrassing eleven to nil. However, although our students mostly lost at sports, they excelled at the social dances held in the evening. Torres Strait Islanders liked to dress well. Money had trickled down from pearling, railway work and government jobs. The boys wore long trousers to the dance usually with leather shoes, and a bright shirt. Our girls were similarly well dressed in colourful frocks, skirts and blouses. By
contrast, most Daru students had only their school uniform, the boys in shorts and bare feet. The cultural divide was obvious. The TI students seemed to know the latest rock songs and the latest dance craze, and most could pick up a guitar and strum away at a moment’s notice. The Daru students, many from obscure villages tucked away in the mountains or up tributaries of the Fly River, had not been exposed to any of this. What was impressive was the Daru students’ maturity and honesty, which they had brought from their struggling villages in the interior. By contrast the Torres Strait students were more complex characters.

Just how complex we discovered on the last night of our stay when most of the Thursday Island boys decamped. This was particularly inconvenient as a special farewell concert was taking place on the school basketball court, attended by local dignitaries and others from the Torres Strait, like Tanu Nona who had flown in especially for the occasion. Daru students, dressed from head to toe in shredded banana leaves, shuffled up and down the court pounding drums. From a distance the display resembled an animated banana farm, but we had no time to enjoy it as we frantically searched for our boys. We were scheduled to present Torres Strait traditional dance and music following the Daru display. Our girls were all there dressed in patal sors, traditional Torres Strait dress, as well as two boys in lava-lavas with drums. We desperately improvised. When the time came the girls marched on to a drum-beat, sat down babule and performed the popular sit-down dances Taba Naba and Banana. It went off well enough.

Along with Steve and other staff, I spent the rest of the night sweeping the town for the missing boys. We checked the airport tarmac, where I fell through a barbed-wire fence into a deep drain, the waterfront, the bars and the streets, and located the missing boys in ones and twos. Some had returned under their own steam. Most were intoxicated. From the Daru teachers’ point of view this represented a serious breach, for their entire boarding system relied on trust. In the evenings their teachers went to their own houses, leaving several hundred male and female students in dormitories under the supervision of senior students. Indeed, the individuals most affected by the affair were the Daru seniors who had undertaken to care for our students. They were shattered, for these events reflected on their own integrity, and I recall one senior male student sobbing in despair.

On that depressing note we left. I had bought a carton of South Pacific Lager beer to share with Bluey and Jimmy on the voyage back to TI. Unfortunately some obliging young fellow attached himself to
me and insisted on carrying the beer carton down to the jetty and onto the boat. I felt like a decadent colonial strolling up the gangway onto the *Melbidir* in front of the assembled crowd, with my little helper tottering at my heels under the carton of beer.

Our boys' drunken behaviour caused a mild scandal on Thursday Island. They suffered regulation punishments — loss of privileges, detention and so forth. However, the general community reaction seemed to be 'Boys behave like that, and we all know it, so what's the problem?' It was very different from the reaction of the school community on Daru highlighting how different from each other these two Melanesian communities were, although so close geographically. After almost exactly one century of colonialism Torres Strait Islanders had evolved into very different social individuals from their kin over the border in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Pearling, missions, oppressive administration, emigration, and a host of other factors had fashioned the Torres Strait Islander of the 1970s into someone whose destiny, it seemed, was to be Australian. At the same time, Papuans and New Guineans were being rushed towards independence.

Another year was ending and *Lik Lik Balus* scudded westwards along the channel from Wednesday Island and into Port Kennedy with Barney trim and suntanned at the helm. He had sailed hundreds of kilometres along New Guinea's southern coast and would wait at Thursday Island for the northerly winds to start before heading southwards for Cairns.

*Lik Lik Balus* was compact and sturdy, and she drew less than a metre so could pass unscathed over shallow reefs. Plates of lead bolted through the keel and bricks inside the hull ensured her stability. The single wooden mast was gunter rigged with ropes and leather that were readily mended or replaced. The Spartan cabin had a narrow bunk with nets strung along the inside holding pots, pans, buoys, canned food, tools, paint and brushes, fishing lines, spears, diving gear and everything else a sailor needed. Up forward, near the sail locker, a large plastic water drum was lashed in place. With care *Lik Lik Balus* would take you anywhere in the Torres Strait.

Barney had a property near Cairns and needed to get back. Finally he felt he could wait no longer. We saw him off into a howling south-easterly. In six days he was back at Thursday Island. It had taken five days to struggle 130 kilometres to the south and one day to return. Reluctantly Barney decided to fly back to Cairns. He offered *Lik Lik Balus* to Steve and me for $1000. We shook hands on the deal and
Barney flew off. A month later we drove to Kuranda, during a visit to Cairns, to pay him.

Sailing the Torres Strait Islands in our own yacht was an experience, particularly for novices like us. The winds are regular, if strong, but the movement of tides and currents can be dramatic. The Torres Strait is a choke point between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and huge volumes of water surge backwards and forwards. In close passages between islands the tidal races grab at a vessel physically, thrusting it in various directions and pulling it along. Diesel-powered motor vessels are driven backwards in these conditions. In places such as Blue Fish Point in Prince of Wales channel, the tide backs up to create a waterfall a metre high in the sea. Add to this deflection, as currents collide in the passes between islands, and gale force winds, and you have some of the most treacherous seas in Australia. Areas of confused turbulence result in a boxing sea where the chop actually slams at a vessel’s hull from three directions simultaneously. It was a wonder we survived at all.

Our trips were carefully planned. Tidal charts revealed the direction in which the tide was flowing, and we went with the tide. If the tide went west, so did we. The sails were for steering. If the tide turned before we reached our destination, we had no option but to return with the tide. Sometimes as we cruised under sail the lumbering grey hulks of dugong wallowed alongside. Perhaps they sensed company in the silent, slow-moving hull sliding through the water. Thursday Island hunters had had a limited impact on dugong numbers at that time.

Once, near Wednesday Island, Steve slipped overboard. I turned to see him metres away, splashing in our wake. Fortunately a rope was coiled in the cockpit and I was able to put the rope end within his reach and haul him back on board. On another occasion the tide change caught us in a narrow passage near Hammond Island and Lik Lik Balus was pushed across a reef. We cut our bare feet to ribbons guiding the boat as she bumped over the coral. Only the vessel’s shallow draught saved her.

We did not get the opportunity to see the area round Cape York often. So we jumped at the chance when Ken Marshall (aka Pixie) offered to put us up for the annual Bamaga Show. Bamaga was an unusual place. It consisted of a number of very different communities scattered about just west of the tip of Cape York, the northernmost point on the Australian mainland. There had been an Aboriginal community at Cowal Creek since 1918, made up of survivors of Aboriginal groups from around the Cape. Then after World War II Melanesians
from Saibai Island arrived on board pearling lugger. Saibai is a Queensland island lying a hundred kilometres north of Cape York, within five kilometres of the coast of Papua New Guinea, and the people there are strongly Melanesian both in appearance and culture. Ostensibly the Saibai people migrated to the mainland because king tides flooded their island. Whatever the reason, they certainly migrated with the enthusiastic support of the Department of Native Affairs.

In June 1949 the annual report by Cornelius O’Leary, the Director of Native Affairs, stated, ‘Well over 340 Saibai Islanders are now established on the Cowal Creek Aboriginal Reserve at Mutee Head …’. In that same year the Queensland government added 44,500 acres (18,000 hectares) to the Reserve with the intention of attracting further immigrants from the Torres Strait Islands. O’Leary made no secret of his plans to develop the area as market gardens to supply fresh food to the islands. It was anticipated that tobacco and timber production would also provide revenue.

Eventually half the population of Saibai moved to the area, concentrating at an Islander village on the coast called Siesia, and at another town some way inland named Bamaga after the Saibai leader Bamaga Ginau. Siesia was named after the leading families who settled there. Sagaukaz, Elu, Isua, Sunai, Ibuai and Aken were brothers in the extended clan. The movement from Saibai to Cape York was a major undertaking, organised by Saibai clans under their traditional leaders and using their own lugger for transport.

Later, Aboriginal people from the Lockhart River Mission, down the east coast, were installed at a settlement called Umagico. Also, refugees from Mapoon, an Aboriginal settlement destroyed by Queensland police in 1963, were forcibly resettled at New Mapoon. So if conditions in the area appeared less than harmonious it is easily understood why. There was an unhappy mixture of Aboriginal and Melanesian peoples as well as the traumatised Mapoon refugees. There was friction between the different Aboriginal groups and the resentment of the local Aboriginal people on whose land all these others had settled. Added to this were the bureaucratic machinations of the Department of Native Affairs and the isolation. In retrospect it is surprising that the area functioned as well as it did.

We arrived for the Bamaga show by boat, disembarking at Red Island Point near Siesia Village. Open trucks took us through choking red dust and the usual drab eucalypt country past New Mapoon. The community consisted of a row of small, box-like, fibro houses lined up next to the
road. Bamaga appeared larger — almost thriving — with its showground, cattle and horses, and throngs of people of every colour. In most respects it appeared just like any small-town show — with horse races, stalls, horse displays, a greasy pig and money at the top of a greasy pole.

The real action was at Pixie’s place. His high-set house was packed with visitors tripping over the mattresses and overnight bags piled on the floor. He was the perfect host, roaring, ‘What you see is what you get’, as he thrust a hamburger and a stubbie at each new arrival. Obviously he had invited everyone he knew on TI to stay with him over the show weekend. After dark Pixie guided us all up town to the motel where seated dignitaries, including Flo Bjelke-Petersen, wife of the Queensland premier, awaited a performance by Islander dancers. ‘Island Time’, as it is called, is flexible. Usually it involves waiting a very long time. After a few minutes Pixie became restless and persuaded us to accompany him to the canteen, leaving the official party to their fate.

Happy revellers crowded the canteen’s bar, yelling above the music being belted out by two live bands. One — Black Magic — was composed of young Eastern Islanders from down south playing the latest rock and blues. Seated to one side, dressed in their lava-lavas and dancing gear, the missing dancers were cheerfully knocking back beer after beer. They were still there when we left an hour later.

The next morning brought new arrivals for the two-day show, but we were already gone, having set out before sunrise in two dinghies headed for Cape York. Bob (Noel) Haslam was with Ken Newport in one dinghy while I travelled in Paul Jeffrey’s dinghy. We were all teachers and were under-prepared for the journey, although we had plenty of fuel. We had not brought a chart, though there was nothing unusual about that, and we had no food, intending to live off the land and sea. Before leaving the wharf at Red Island Point we had netted a bucket of sardines for bait.

We sped towards the rising sun, which bronzed the sea silhouetting the ragged train of hills leading down to the Cape, and past Dayman Island, a few rocks and battered trees thrashed by foam. I had been this way on the mail boat in 1970 and remembered dropping off supplies at a tin scratcher’s camp called Roonga. I almost missed the spot, for it was high tide and the tumbledown grey jetty was low and all but invisible against the mangroves. On my last visit white men, women and even a few children had straggled down to collect their mail and cardboard boxes of supplies. They had looked ragged and worn down
by their labours in this remote place. Now, just three years later, they were gone. We climbed through the scrub about the low hills and found rusting fuel drums, scrap iron and other debris knee high in grass. A wallaby dashed to shelter in a nearby thicket. A few more wet seasons, and dry season fires, and any evidence that the miners had been here would be erased.

After Roonga we were in unknown territory. We came to one point, then peering ahead spied another point with two small offshore islands. Which was the Cape? Fortunately we spotted a house on the nearer point and dashed over to ask. The owner, Mick Mulholland, the last of the tin scratchers, directed us to the next point with the offshore islands. The closer to the Cape we approached the more apprehensive we became, for, whereas the waters to the west were protected, the wind gusting up the east coast burst around the headland that marks the Australian continent's northern extremity. Enormous waves rolled towards us as the wind struck us in the face. We veered across the sea into the lee of the Cape and landed on the beach. It was mid-afternoon and we were hungry, as we had not caught anything all day. All our efforts at trolling and bottom fishing had yielded nothing. We had not eaten since Pixie's hamburger the night before. There was only one thing for it! Within ten minutes we had the remaining, slightly smelly, bait sardines roasting over a smoky fire. They tasted foul.

Then, as we sprawled miserably in the shade of beach casuarinas digesting our sardines, two dingoes loped elegantly past our little camp out onto the sand flats exposed by a dropping tide. We observed them for some time till they sensed our presence and bounded away with elastic strides across the beach and into the bush. This lifted our spirits and encouraged Bob to explore the rocks, where he discovered masses of succulent oysters, delighting the oyster lovers among us.

Shortly afterwards we witnessed an intriguing example of animal antics. A fountain of spray erupted on a shallow sandbank close to the beach. A minute later there was another cloud of spray as a sleek, slate-grey torpedo skidded along the bank showering water in all directions. A school of dolphins, head to tail in the water, were patiently waiting their turn to skip along the sandbar on their stomachs. They kept up the game till the tide turned and the water on the bar deepened.

Just before dark we tried again to catch some fish, but having no luck we finally retired to a small beach hemmed in by towering cliffs on one of the islands. It looked snug and out of the weather, with plenty of driftwood for a fire. While we slept the tide continued to rise,
obliterating our beach and driving us, sodden and miserable, up the cliffs. We clung to ledges for most of the night, hoping the dinghies would not drift away or be dashed to pieces on the rocks. Next morning at first light we recovered the dinghies and fled back to Thursday Island for a much appreciated meal.

Though disastrous, this expedition was certainly memorable, and it was the last time I saw the Pixie. A month or so later he was travelling with two mates in a dinghy when it capsized in rough seas near Entrance Island. His two mates struggled ashore but Pixie was never found.
THE thing which first attracted me to the Torres Strait, and which was to hold me there for twenty-five years, was its remoteness. Thursday Island was quite literally a frontier town. You only had to travel by boat for half an hour to find islands where the sand beaches showed no sign of humans and where you could camp for days without hearing or seeing another soul. Days of sunshine and cool breezes where the fish and crayfish were so plentiful we pulled them from under rocks on the reef flats at low tide — I had found paradise.

Most of the teachers at the school were the same age as myself, but one, Dennis Kitchen, was older and had done a two-year stint on TI previously. He was a keen fisherman and bushman, and was to teach me a lot. For my first Easter on TI he chartered a vessel, the Mary Elton, to take us round the other side of Prince of Wales Island to Barnfield Heads. Prince of Wales is four hundred square kilometres of magnificent, rugged terrain only a kilometre west of TI. In 1970 it was a trackless wilderness with a handful of people living on its fringes.

The Mary Elton chugged past beaches, headlands and river mouths taking us further and further from TI. There were no houses or other boats on this far side of Prince of Wales Island and finally I felt that I had gone beyond the frontier. We passed the mangrove-clogged entrance to North West Creek, rounded the long coral reef which projects from the headland and entered a little bay guarded by high, wooded hills to each side. As we clambered out of the dinghy onto the beach Dennis called to the seaman manning the outboard at the dinghy’s stern, ‘See you Monday — I mean Sunday!’ The seaman, a moustached character
with a tiger shark tooth dangling on his bare chest, waved a hand and roared off back to where the *Mary Elton* was idling off the reef’s edge.

There was not a human footprint anywhere on the white sand, except for our own. A wind whispered among the casuarina trees as we erected our tents under an enormous almond tree. Dennis immediately led us off for a swim in the waterfalls. The bush was green, open woodland. We followed an animal trail through tall grass, skirting clumps of dense bush where vines clung to trunks and looped from tree to tree. Presently we could hear the thunder of the falls ahead. The bush was thicker here and the trail was just a tunnel through the undergrowth. Animals are shorter than humans so the trails they travel are the right height for a child. We scrambled through the tunnel doubled over, sometimes on our hands and knees.

The waterfall plunged down a black, granite gorge, cascading over a sheer drop of ten metres into a surging green pool. At one end under some shady trees was a beach of coarse river sand. The water was cold enough to take your breath away but we splashed and washed away the sweat and the dirt from our hands and knees. It was a place of rare beauty.

Next day we trekked off to North West Creek valley seeking the legendary waterfall called Dugong Story, or *Rabau Nguki*. Dennis had been there once. As there was no walking trail we followed animal trails. Dennis led the way, a double-barrel shotgun slung over his shoulder. We had a saying, ‘The animals know where they are going’, for animals’ lives were not aimless peregrinations about the bush. In hilly country like Prince of Wales animals’ movements were tightly controlled by the need for fresh water, feed and salt. Trails crossed creeks at the shallowest fords, crossed hills at the lowest point and followed creek banks. They led to fresh water and they led to the sea where the animals went at night to lick salt from the rocks. Unless there was a good reason, the animal trails also avoided thick bush. If a trail veered off in an unwanted direction, nine times out of ten another trail would be quickly found to suit our purpose.

Suddenly Dennis stopped, indicating a hillside three hundred metres away. On the grassy slope there were few trees and just one black rock halfway up. But wait! The rock moved. ‘It’s a big boar,’ Dennis said. I was all for creeping over and giving it both barrels, but Dennis just smiled and kept walking. It was the first time I had seen a wild pig. Shortly after, Dennis put up his hand and we all crouched down. Bustling down the track, straight for us, came a white and black spotted sow.
with half a dozen squabbling piglets under her feet. She was so preoccupied that she would have trotted right over us if Dennis had not jumped up and thrown a rock at her. Even then she withdrew reluctantly off into the trees on one side as we passed. Next we passed a large white billy goat which rose stiffly to his feet as we came down to a creek crossing. He had been dozing in some shade there and appeared deeply offended that we had disturbed him. He stalked unhurriedly off, no doubt looking for another cool spot where he might rest undisturbed.

I had a turn in the lead. The hardest part was when I realised that a trail was beginning to wander off where I did not want to go. Casting left and right I might find a new pad immediately, or it might take half a kilometre. However, once back on an animal trail we maintained a brisk pace, for the trails were pounded hard by hundreds of hoofed feet. As I emerged onto a bank overlooking a stretch of dry riverbed I surprised two deer, both does. One screamed, an inhuman shriek that made my hair stand on end, then with one leap from a standing start they disappeared. I never dreamed anything on four legs could move so fast. Shooting one of those would not be easy.

After two hours walk we arrived at a long stretch of creek where branches trailed in the water and kingfishers darted in the sunlight. In a sense we were off the map and this place did not have a name. We called it Half Way Hole. Dennis led us over the ridge and down into a ravine with sheer, rocky sides. Here again an animal trail led us upstream, round a bend and into a large natural cauldron. On three sides red cliffs rose above us. A waterfall tumbled over the cliff on the right, thundering into a huge pool where a crescent-shaped beach arched outwards into the current. I sat there in a state of awe, the coarse sand crunching between my toes. In the fork of a tree over my head was a brilliant spray of purple Cooktown orchids. The trees along the ridges were thick with these orchids, a sure sign that white people had not been this way, for orchids are often the first things to be taken. The trek back to the beach in the afternoon was just as adventurous. I felt the exhilaration of walking in country where the bush and its animals lived by their own natural rhythms.

The following day was Sunday and the *Mary Elton* was due after lunch to pick us up. So we had a last swim, wolfed down what was left of our food, then dug a hole and buried our scraps and rubbish. We waited ... till sundown. There had been no sign of the *Mary Elton* or any other vessel. We dug up our rubbish, brushed the sand off it and
ate anything that resembled food. It was a relieved group of campers that greeted the Mary Elton on Monday afternoon.

Another expedition organised by Dennis very nearly had serious consequences for myself and my friend Peter, a fellow teacher. When Dennis suggested a week-long excursion by dinghy up the Jardine River we jumped at the chance. The Jardine drains the mountains on the east coast before meandering west and north for two hundred kilometres, finally emerging on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula.

We had chartered the Lady Pat from the Catholic mission for the voyage across from TI. The skipper was our friend Joe Sabatino from Hammond Island. Joe was short with jet-black hair and a wiry body. His long years on the boats had burned him a coppery brown. His son Francis, in grade nine at school, was the deckhand. Young Francis ferried us ashore in a dinghy to the Jardine’s north bank where we set up camp. Francis also towed ashore our aluminium dinghy. The river at the mouth was half a kilometre wide set in a sandy, flat, featureless landscape.

Dennis was armed with his double-barrel shotgun, and Peter and I had recently taken delivery of two semi-automatic .22 rifles. We had heard that the Jardine swamps were infested with pigs and were determined to shoot some. It is obvious today that we were woefully under-gunned for feral pigs, but in those days people used .22s on everything from rabbits to deer. We hoped to compensate for the small calibre of our rifles with semi-automatic firepower. Nevertheless, one look at the Jardine bush should have told us that we were in trouble. Rather than the open woodland of the Torres Strait Islands the Jardine was a maze of tangled scrub, dried swamps and impenetrable mangroves. Not ideal country for taking on feral boars with peashooters.

On our map it appeared that by landing on a river bend some kilometres upstream Peter and I could walk into the back country of the famous Jardine swamps. Most people approached the swamps from the beach, but Dennis reluctantly agreed to drop us by dinghy at the bend. Peter and I set off with rifles, knives, water bottles, compass and map leaving an unhappy-looking Dennis to motor back to camp. He was to pick us up again at the same spot at about 5 pm.

Unfortunately the ‘woodland’ marked on the map was a nightmare of vines and low scrub. The dry branches splintered easily, scratching our arms, legs and faces. They tore at our clothes and plucked buttons from our shirts. We looked for animal trails to follow but visibility was rarely more than a few metres. As the sun rose higher the bush became an oven. By early afternoon we were in trouble. Not once had we
broken free of the scrub and our water was running low. There was nothing for it but to return to our drop-off point. By now our legs and arms were a mass of cuts and our sweat stung the open wounds. Vines seemed to have a mind of their own, entangling feet and grabbing at our rifles. We were tiring fast when we finally emerged onto the river bank.

We were an hour early and knew just where we were — exactly one kilometre upstream of our drop-off point. However, the river meandered out in a loop so the distance by river was more like three kilometres. Hoping that Dennis would look for us upriver, we slogged along the riverbank through dense mangroves. As the light faded, we heard three reports as Dennis fired off his shotgun to signal us. We blazed away with our .22s with little hope that Dennis would hear. Ahead of us was a milky-brown channel. Floating leaves choked its surface and a rotten log protruded from one end. Peter and I instinctively sensed the danger here, but we needed to get across. On this side we floundered in stinking mud and mangroves. On the other side we could see a high sandy bank with green reeds facing the river. Peter and I looked at each other — we were a sight — then nodded. We had to do this thing. We opened up with the semi-automatics, spraying the creek at point-blank range, then plunged in. In a second it seemed we were across and scrambling up the sandy knoll. Soon we had collected wood and lit a fire. When Peter saw some fish feeding on the surface near the creek bank he shot one then leaped in to retrieve it. I looked on incredulously as he floundered about in the murky water. Had he forgotten about crocodiles? Well no, but he was so tired and hungry he just didn’t care any more.

We crouched next to the fire as night fell. The tide rose, gradually surrounding our knoll and inundating it, and soon we were reduced to a circle of dry sand three metres in diameter. I desperately pulled at branches and reeds to keep the fire going as the flames reflected off the water rippling in every direction about us. Then from the river close by came the roaring of a crocodile. It bellowed and thrashed about as we huddled about our fire with guns aimed into the dark. I remained awake, but Peter dozed off with his feet in the water and the river lapping his clothing. It’s a miracle we survived that night.

By dawn it was low tide and we staggered through mud and clambered over mangrove roots until, after three hours, we were facing our camp a kilometre away on the other side of the river. We plunged in, wading along sand bars, swimming deeper channels and finally climbing up the
beach to our camp to be greeted by a very relieved Dennis. He had been about to set off to Bamaga for help when we arrived.

For the next four days we motored up the Jardine, feasting on fresh barramundi speared by Dennis who dived in the river, largely ignoring the slide marks of large crocodiles on the sand bars and beaches. Gradually the scrub opened up into pleasant woodland where wallabies darted about and red-legged scrub hen fossicked amid masses of ground orchids and clumps of insect-eating pitcher plants. On the south bank we came across an apparently deserted camp, bark sheets thrown over a ridge pole from which hung a lantern. Scattered about were saucepans, knives and a few odds and ends. Later, across a swamp, we glimpsed two Aboriginal children and a dog. In a second they were gone, and we never saw another soul during the four days upriver.

There was still a day before the Lady Pat collected us so we walked down the beach south of the Jardine River. A dozen black-tipped sharks were working a shallow beach lagoon for bait-fish. The larger sharks, two metres in length, threshed about with their humped backs exposed. The schools of bait-fish frothed and swirled as the brown torpedo-like shapes speared through them. Unfortunately we chose to bypass this busy scene by stepping into the narrow channel connecting the lagoon to the sea. Instantly every shark turned and streaked straight for us. We jumped and hopped, and the sharks dashed and dodged between our legs. It was five seconds of complete pandemonium.

At dusk that evening a pearling lugger anchored off the river mouth. We could see the red spot on the bow that identified it as a vessel belonging to the Nona family from Badu Island. A dinghy rowed ashore and the crew dug up a green turtle nest some distance from us. That night we could hear the Badu boys singing at their camp up the beach. Away to the south over the swamps was the rolling red glow of a bushfire and I thought of the two children we had seen out there. I realised how harsh and lonely the bush could be and it was comforting to have others around.

One weekend Dennis asked me round for meal of venison. He had sneaked over to Prince of Wales Island a few nights earlier with his shotgun and stalked a deer in the hills using a spotlight. It was my first taste of venison. The meat was lean and tender with a delicious flavour all its own and I decided there and then to start serious deer hunting.

This was not pure blood lust, for in those days most people in the Torres Strait ate tinned meat, usually hamper. You could not buy fresh meat in the shops on TI, nor fresh milk or fresh vegetables. We mixed
powdered milk out of tins and used tinned vegetables. It's a wonder we didn't suffer from scurvy. In some ways Outer Islanders enjoyed a better diet than the TI community, for they farmed sweet potatoes, cassava, taro, bananas and other crops. Also they hunted dugong, turtle and birds for fresh meat. Some communities also kept pigs though these were mostly for special occasions. Our obsession with hunting had more to do with nutrition than anything else.

Our .22 rifles were obviously unsuitable but just then a shipment of old carbines once used by the Spanish cavalry arrived on Thursday Island. The weapon I purchased was manufactured in 1904. The foresight was so thick that I actually had to peer over the top of the sights to see what I was shooting at. However, it was .308 calibre and the steel butt plate kicked like a mule. I remembered our trip to Dugong Story on Prince of Wales Island when the bush had been alive with pigs, goats and deer. Dennis had passed on the rudiments of hunting. You walked silently while continuously scanning the bush for animals. Listening was important and it was essential to stalk into the wind. Without the wind in your favour you were wasting your time.

In those days it was common to observe game wandering on the beaches in broad daylight. There were few boats around and fewer still dedicated hunters, so when we arrived at Bamfield Beach we were not surprised to find pigs sauntering about under the trees. They cantered off, but I had selected a large black boar and proceeded to blaze away at him with the .22. I saw the bullets striking behind the shoulder as he galloped on and finally disappeared into a patch of dense scrub. Peter arrived and I exchanged the .22 for the .308 carbine, before cautiously circling the scrub downwind. Suddenly through a gap in the foliage I spotted him, standing side on, gazing intently towards the place where I had been moments ago. I gingerly shouldered the carbine, aimed in the general direction of the boar’s shoulder and fired. The report was like a thunderclap under the trees and the heavy, soft-nosed bullet dropped the pig where he stood. I advanced cautiously to examine my first victim. Wild pigs have chunky shoulders and necks, lean hindquarters and long, hairy tails which do not curl. This boar had evil-looking tusks, triangular in cross-section and stumpy, as if broken off. Boars’ shoulders are protected by coarse, matted bristles and a layer of tough skin. My .22 slugs were embedded in the shoulder skin and had not even penetrated through to the flesh. I realised that I needed a larger calibre weapon but one that I could aim with more precision than the carbine. Fortunately a departing Customs Officer was selling his rifle,
a .243 Remington 700 fitted with a scope. I paid $170 for it and never regretted the purchase. Now I could start to deer hunt seriously, for sport as well as food.

Deer were introduced to the Prince of Wales group of islands early in the twentieth century. They are a small variety of rusa, an Asian deer found in Indonesia and elsewhere. Rusa are extremely adaptable. They love wallowing in freshwater swamps and swim long distances at sea when obliged to. However, when pressed these deer are content to retreat to the mountains and high, rocky slopes where hunters rarely venture, descending to the flats at night to feed and water. They inhabit Prince of Wales Island, Friday Island and Entrance Island but have occasionally been found on Horn Island, Hammond Island and even Thursday Island.

Although we hunted for meat, we knew that deer hunting had a long and honoured history in European society. It was the prerogative of kings and venison the choicest of meats on a king’s banquet table. We were conscious of this hunting tradition that had come down to us from medieval and Victorian times and we decided not to hunt deer at night with a spotlight. We would stalk ethically during the day, taking them with a single bullet if we could. I have shot hundreds of deer and I did not use a spotlight on any one of them. We quickly understood that pig shooting was not in the same league. One of our sayings was, ‘There is no honour in shooting a pig’, and we meant it.

We discovered too that our Islander friends accorded the highest respect to their hunters. These were the men who went out on the sea to hunt dugong and turtle with the traditional harpoon or uap. In the social hierarchy of Torres Strait Islanders these hunters were among the most respected of men. They were respected for their skills, frequently involving magic, their courage and the generosity with which they shared the meat to feed their community. Our Islander friends understood perfectly that deer hunting was a sensible activity for us to engage in, for it fitted well with their traditional view of society and a man’s role in it. However, when it came to deer hunting tactics we were on our own. Islanders were hunters on the sea, not the land, and several months passed before we were rewarded with a successful hunt.

A group of us had departed the TI wharf for Prince of Wales Island in the cool, dark hour before dawn. The aluminium dinghy thumped through the swell rounding Hospital Point, before cruising into the calmer waters of Friday Island passage. Shortly the dinghy’s bow crunched on the sand below the great, looming silhouette of the cliff
at Little Buttertin Beach. Halfway up this cliff are two native wells, cisterns of fresh water which never dry up. On angles of the cliff face overlooking the wells are rock paintings executed by Islander clans who frequented these beaches in pre-European times. One that can be discerned features the body of a reptile surmounted by a semi-circular head from which rays radiate outwards. We climbed the hill following an animal trail over the saddle and down into the valley behind. I carried my new .243 rifle while one of my mates had the old .308 carbine.

In the grey, pre-dawn light we separated. I moved through the trees towards a mangrove-fringed beach on my left. As the dawn light strengthened, deer, which had been licking beach salt during the night, would be wandering back towards the hills on my right. I followed an animal trail, tunnelling through the bush at right angles to the deer's imagined line of retreat. The rising sun suffused the pathway with an amber glow. Abruptly I pulled up in mid-step. A deer ambled across the path from left to right about thirty metres ahead. As I slipped the rifle to my shoulder, a second larger deer stepped into the open behind the first. He shook his head, the points of his antler rack stabbing the air. This was the first wild stag I had seen and he was magnificent. However, in a second he would step off the path and out of my life, so I killed him with a single shot behind the shoulder.

I approached this, my first stag, with something like awe. He had beautifully balanced six-point antlers, their rough, veined texture burnished a deep brown with pale ivory tips. His dun-coloured coat blended perfectly with the dried grass and scrub at the side of the track. I noticed a distinctive, cloying aroma hanging in the air. This smell, which the animals give off when alarmed, can be detected over long distances. His frame was elegant, almost dainty, and his coat surprisingly coarse, like pine needles.

A Prince of Wales stag is just about as much as a strong man can carry across his shoulders. My friends and I took turns at lugging our prize back to the dinghy. The others had shot a large boar with the .308 and we would be feasting on meat for weeks. Back on TI we distributed venison and pork among Islander friends who had provided us with fresh dugong and turtle meat in the past. Few had tasted deer meat before. Elated but tired, I hung the antlers on the verandah till I could attend to them the next day. During the night someone stole them.

As time went on, our expeditions to Prince of Wales became more
organised. There were a few dinghies around, some bond wood, others aluminium, and I owned both types at different times in partnership with mates. We travelled as lightly as possible, wearing just dark shorts, a khaki shirt and sandshoes without socks, for socks collected needle-like grass seeds. A gun belt with twenty rounds, a hunting knife and a blanket roll completed the outfit. We might carry a plastic water bottle, but often we went without one, trusting on waterholes and creeks. Sometimes we included a packet of biscuits; otherwise we lived off the land for days at a time.

Many people assume that Torres Strait deer are nocturnal, but left to themselves deer will contentedly feed during daylight, though during the heat in the middle part of the day they will seek out a cool, shady spot to lie down in, chew the cud and digest their food. Only when they are under hunting pressure do they revert to a safer nocturnal lifestyle. Also they are browsers rather than grazers. When gutting deer we were continually amazed at both the size of the animal’s first stomach and its contents. A deer that has been feeding all night has a packed first stomach the size of a basketball, and the contents are always green. Even in very dry country the deer browse through the terrain nipping new shoots from plants, trees and grasses. Burned areas immediately throw up tender new shoots and are a magnet for deer.

On another hunting trip with Steve Mullins we left our dinghy at the beach to walk inland up a valley in the evening. I had the .243 Remington, while Steve shouldered a cut-down .303 ex-service rifle. Cut down .303s were very effective weapons and ammunition was cheap and plentiful, though available only in full metal jacket. For hunting, soft-nose ammunition is preferable and some shooters were known to doctor their .303 heads to produce dumdums.

Prince of Wales Island was a wildlife paradise in those days. We encountered a herd of fine-looking wild horses. As the mares and foals thundered off, the stallion advanced on us stamping and snorting. Shortly afterwards I shot a red-legged scrub hen which Steve roasted over the fire on an improvised spit. We rolled up in our blankets on an animal trail, the only clear space, but got little sleep. The surrounding bush seemed alive with animals, which was not surprising since we were camped on their road to the beach.

As soon as there was sufficient light we crept along parallel trails towards the beach. Almost immediately I spotted the familiar rectangular blobs lined up through the bush ahead. There were a dozen or so deer, and all of them were looking directly at me. There was no hesitation
in choosing my target. It was the unfortunate fellow with the large rack of antlers standing with its head towards me forty metres away. I never take head shots as a first shot. In this case the aiming point was the base of the neck between the shoulders, straight at the heart. As soon as the flame shot from the muzzle, every deer leaped forward and darted off. The does in flight extend their necks and appear almost camel-like. My stag careered off but soon faltered, as I raced after him. He was floundering when I overtook him and despatched him with a second shot to the head. My first shot had missed the heart and hit the lungs.

Deer hunting was always challenging, but we had worked it out and were eating venison regularly, and sharing the meat with our Islander friends. Long Beach on Prince of Wales was one of the best deer hunting beaches. At the northern end Arthur Ahmat was building a house and had a plantation of banana trees which the wild pigs really enjoyed. The rest of this park-like arcadia was popular with deer and horses. Actually the herd behaviour of deer and horses is very similar and it is not unusual to find them running together. A stag herds and protects his does in much the same way that a stallion manages his mares. One morning Peter and I arrived at the beach at dawn on board our old bond-wood speed boat. With us for the outing were Azzie and Lillian, Murray Islander friends who lived on Thursday Island. Peter shot a large doe at the top of the beach almost before we had disembarked, but the return journey wasn’t quite so trouble free. Prince of Wales Island was leased by a Texan rancher, Jean Cox, who resented people treating his property as a free-fire zone. Also, shooting deer in the Torres Strait Islands had always been illegal, a ridiculous white man’s law that was universally ignored. Cox lived on Prince of Wales at Coless Beach close to TI and as we motored past his house we saw that he was in his dinghy. Cox guessed that any boat returning to TI at that hour of the morning was probably carrying illegal hunters and he set out in pursuit. Fortunately we had a short head start but it was touch and go. We roared behind Engineer Jetty, temporarily out of his line of sight, and zoomed to the beach, just as the only teacher who owned a car drove past. We quickly flagged him down, threw the doe and rifles in the car’s boot and assumed attitudes of casual innocence when Cox arrived.

The stag’s instinctive management of his doe herd often worked against him. On one early morning hunting trip, accompanied by Manu Isua from Saibai Island, we were stalking inland from Big Buttertin
Beach when we heard the characteristic rock sliding on the hill slope above us indicating that deer had detected us and were fleeing to the safety of the hills. On the hills any movement displaces rocks, and the resulting noise makes it easy for the deer to keep ahead of a hunter as he blundered about. I ran to the base of the slope and as luck would have it a bushfire had burned out the undergrowth allowing me a clear view under the trees. Near the top of the slope a line of deer cantered up an animal trail heading for the saddle. The stag brought up the rear, shepherding his three does along, halting now and again to look back and check for pursuit. The does streamed over the crest of the saddle. The stag paused right on the crest for one last look. Unfortunately for him I had a clean line of sight on him and the angle for a shot behind the shoulder was perfect. He jumped as he took the shot then vanished. It took Manu and I several minutes to scramble up the slope. We feared that the stag had kept running, but need not have worried. He was lying where he had fallen five metres over the crest. His antlers were long and shapely but a point was broken off leaving just five points. Saibai people back on Thursday Island expressed great surprise when they inspected the deer. They had never seen, nor eaten, one before. They fell in love with the meat at first bite and the antlers ended up proudly mounted on the wall of a Tamwoy home, five points and all.
AFTER several years in the far north my life was a pattern of work punctuated by adventurous and frequently riotous weekends. A transfer south to the mainland was looming. The Queensland Department of Education expected teachers to spend two years in a remote area, then the department expected them to leave. For this purpose you were supplied with an air ticket from Cairns to Thursday Island when appointed, and two years later you were supplied with an airfare from Thursday Island back to Cairns. To stay longer than the required two years was regarded with extreme suspicion by departmental officers. Only a very small group of teachers on Thursday Island had been permitted to stay longer than the two-year limit, Barry Osborne and myself included. We seemed to defy the natural order of things. It was as if you could hear them thinking, ‘He actually wants to stay a fourth year … Hmm … What’s wrong with him?’ So in my fourth year I knew I was living on borrowed time.

The problem was that the Education Department saw us as vulnerable young people. A short time earlier, a popular white female teacher had been permitted to stay an unprecedented fourth year at Thursday Island State School. She became pregnant by an Islander man and caused a scandal in the Department, for such things simply did not happen in those days. The Inspector of Schools, who had approved her application to remain at the school for a fourth year, famously inquired, ‘How could you do this to me?’ To which she replied, just as famously, ‘Well I wasn’t thinking of you at the time!’ The teacher was transferred south, the child was given up for adoption and the Islanders talked about the event for years afterwards.
It was Steve Mullins who provided the catalyst for change. Steve and I had a close, but frequently competitive, relationship. This came to the fore when deer hunting, where I had the advantage, and sailing, where he was undoubtedly the more competent. It was he who usually skippered the *Lik Lik Bains*. Sometimes, the night before a sailing trip, he would jeer at me, 'Tomorrow, decky, I'm going to work your arse off.' Since we had equal shares in the boat I reacted with predictable indignation.

As I speculated on my career options, Steve clarified my circumstances with one challenging statement: 'You'll never do anything because you value your security too much.' He had thrown down the gauntlet, simultaneously defining my predicament. I loved life in the Torres Strait, but for my own personal growth I would have to go. But where?

The answer came in an advertisement in the newspaper calling for qualified teachers to apply for positions with the Australian Staffing Assistance Group, to help prepare Papua New Guinea for Independence. By now I had visited the Territory of Papua and New Guinea half a dozen times, including a week in Port Moresby, and I knew my way around. Then, of course, it had been my adolescent ambition to work there. I applied immediately and was given a two-year contract beginning in January 1974. This left me with six months more to serve on Thursday Island.

One hot June afternoon I was stumbling along the goat track from Green Hill Fort with thirty amiable but noisy students. The path led through the patch of rainforest on the ridge, then meandered down through waist-deep grass to the high school. I had taken my class for a visit to the meteorological station located within the walls of the old fort. John Reid, the meteorologist, was a bearded Antarctic veteran and a fellow sailor. He put on a great show for the kids, displaying the sticky sheets used to measure the radioactive fallout from the French nuclear tests near Tahiti, and letting them inflate and release weather balloons then track them with the theodolite. It had been an enjoyable afternoon of education, yet I was dissatisfied. Now the decision to leave was made I was chafing to be off. As we descended the ridge, we overlooked a friend's flat. His battered blue Holden utility sat outside, 'Salvage and Diving' emblazoned across the door. It struck me that I knew what I had to do.

I dismissed the students at the bottom of the track and tramped across the dusty yard past the ute. The door of the flat swung open as I approached. Ron smiled crookedly from under his beaked nose. 'Hello,
Ron was a professional diver the same age as myself. His unruly blond hair, athletic body and suicidal attitude were by-products of his trade. His two-room shack clung to the side of Green Hill, enjoying panoramic views over the town and harbour. It had an outside thunderbox toilet and he paid an exorbitant rent, but the way accommodation was on TI he was lucky to have it. He was on the lookout for an offside and offered me a job and accommodation immediately. I gave notice at work the next day, and a short time later moved up to Ron’s flat, where I slept on a sofa in the tiny lounge.

The mainstay of Ron’s income was crayfishing. There were few divers working cray, although the crayfish were plentiful and prices for craytails were sky high. Torres Strait Islanders had not entered the crayfish industry at this stage, although one or two skippers were exploring it as an alternative to pearling, which was now defunct. These skippers refitted old pearling luggers or other large vessels with freezers and attempted to use similar labour-intensive methods as in pearling. At that time it was not self-evident that these methods were not suited to crayfishing. By contrast, most non-Islander divers worked from smaller vessels with a crew of two, the diver/captain and the dinghy driver/crew. The efficiency of this combination has been demonstrated, and adopted almost universally, over the last few decades.

Ron and I worked from an eight-metre cabin cruiser, powered by diesel, with a 250-kilogram freezer. Ron dived from an aluminium dinghy powered by an outboard motor. He used air tanks, which we refilled each night with a compressor on the larger vessel. This was unusual. Most people were free diving, or experimenting with hookah gear. Hookah involves using a compressor in the dinghy to pump air down a plastic hose to the diver working on the bottom. It would take several years for Islanders to assimilate diving masks, snorkels, fins and hookah and become effective in the industry.

Ron had arrived in the Torres Strait from the Tweed River in New South Wales. He was superbly fit and a superlative diver. He was also a real character, whose last name remained a mystery as he used at least three pseudonyms regularly and haphazardly. Fishermen commonly did this for taxation purposes. Usually people referred to him simply as Ronnie Crayfish.

For once the south-easterly winds dropped as we cruised off down the channel between Prince of Wales and Horn Island. I sat on the roof in the sun, my legs dangling through an open hatch, my feet on the steering wheel. To my right the sun shone on high peaks of tumbled
granite and monsoonal forest, waves slapping on the fringing reef at their base. Ahead, beyond an island-studded sea, the hills of Cape York lined the horizon. Shades of blue, brown and green dappled the sea, in patterns and configurations that we read like a book. Indigo meant deep water. Patches of hazel and lime indicated coral bommies on a sandy bottom. Broken brown lines showed a reef edge. And so on.

Ron dived the quarters of the moon when the tidal race was not as great, working round the ebb tides. I would follow the bubbles as best I could in the dinghy as Ron cruised the reef edge spotting brown crayfish feelers. The painted crayfish, or tropical lobsters, of the Torres Strait are magnificent animals. During daylight they shelter in holes on the reef, their long whip-like feelers protruding. The feelers thicken towards their base where black button eyes peer from a horned carapace shimmering brilliant shades of blue, green, yellow and orange. The crayfish have horns on their heads and serrations down the edge of their tails, but no claws. If given the opportunity, they will back into a crevice, using their horns to jam their tail and carapace into the narrow space. The diver uses a hand spear propelled by a thick rubber strap to impale the cray between the eyes, pinning it, while he reaches in with his other gloved hand to remove it. Ron carried a net bag that held six or eight cray at a time. When it was full he would surface, I would empty the cray onto the floor of the dinghy, then he would go down for more. Later, back at the larger vessel, we cut the tails away from the heads, carefully packed the tails in plastic in the freezer and threw the heads into the sea. It seemed a terrible waste, but the heads were of no commercial value. If we were near town we might keep the heads to give to Islander friends.

Crayfish in those days were plentiful. Reef walls near Thursday Island displayed forests of feelers waving like brown sea grass in the tide, the cray often piled four and five to a hole. Crayfish were an important part of Islanders' traditional diet. At low tide people walked the reefs and pulled them from under coral rocks. Another favourite method was to spear them at night from a dinghy or canoe with a pressure lantern in the bow. At night the cray left their holes to range far and wide in the shallows to feed. Fishermen used the butt end of a long bamboo fish spear to pole the dinghy, and reversed it when they needed to spear a cray. This method was very productive and a fisherman might collect twenty or thirty cray in a few hours. A logical consequence of increased commercial fishing was the impact it had on subsistence fishing. Inevitably the Islander people employing traditional methods.
found it harder and harder to get the crayfish they were accustomed to.

The facilities on Ron's boat were rudimentary: a foam mattress on each side of the compressor, the diesel engine forward and the freezer at the stern. Our diet consisted of bread and baked beans. For variety, a baked bean can was wedged against the compressor while the air tanks were being filled, and then we enjoyed hot baked beans with bread.

We only ever went out for two or three days at a time, returning with plenty of cray tails and a good income. However, Ron invariably celebrated our return to port with a party. He would purchase a dozen bottles of champagne for me and a dozen bottles of vodka for himself. The party continued till his vodka ran out. In practice this meant that we worked for perhaps two days per week and partied for five. This gave me the opportunity to meet lots of interesting characters, such as George and Patrick, two eccentric Irish beachcombers who slept under an upturned dinghy in front of the Federal Hotel, and 'Baked Beans', a Danish seaman who jumped ship at TI. Unable to speak English, the Dane was adopted by an Islander family and spoke execrable Torres Strait Broken with a Danish accent. One of my favourite memories of that time involves an Islander dancing display at the Anglican Cathedral, where rows of burly Islander men in lava-lavas sang as they stamped and whirled, while a chubby, spectacled, very white Dane leapt about in the front row and roared away with the best of them.

It slowly dawned on me that Ron's drinking might be a problem. Our lounge-room window opened onto a glorious view of the harbour. Ron had pointed out that it was possible to sit in the lounge all day and by watching the reefs and red marker buoys in the channel calculate the tidal movements precisely. His fixation with the movement of the red buoys developed into an obsession. I entered the flat one day to find Ron drunkenly hanging out the lounge-room window with a loaded .303 rifle aimed roughly south. 'That fuckin' buoy,' he exclaimed, 'it's always there ... Well, I'm gonna sink the bastard.' The muzzle described erratic arcs and circles for a while till Ron gave up in exasperation, concluding that the sinking would have to wait till he was sober. Fortunately that never occurred.

On a weekend excursion to Daru in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea with myself and some friends, Ron vanished with a vodka bottle and bundles of fireworks he had bought at a Chinese store. He was detained by PNG police later that evening as he fired skyrockets
over the police station from the empty vodka bottle. On returning to
Thursday Island he was detained by Queensland police a few nights
later while shooting skyrockets over the Torres Hotel from the Anzac
Park opposite. On another visit to Daru he disappeared, spending several
days in a drunken haze before being apprehended and deported.

Another aspect of our work involved salvage and demolition. Ron
routinely dived down to wrecks for salvageable metal, particularly brass.
Where necessary, this was blown off the wreck. Ron practised his
demolition techniques by blowing up drums and trees. When I first
went to stay with him I had inquired about where he kept his explosives,
imagining that there was a secure bunker hidden away at the back of
Millman Hill perhaps.

‘I’ve got my plastic under here,’ he said, hauling a large cardboard
box out from under the sofa I slept on. The box contained twenty or
so tubes of plastic explosives, enough to devastate half the town.

‘Isn’t that dangerous?’ I ventured.

He laughed. ‘No. The detonators are under my bed in the other
room.’

With his reputation as a diver Ron was sometimes called in to help
the police. Towards the end of 1973 they asked Ron to search for the
body of a young Islander named James Pitt, who had fallen from a
dinghy. I had taught James, a quiet youngster with a charming smile
and shoulder-length brown hair. Ron searched the bottom for hours
without success. Old pearl divers had told us that a body would float
to the surface in three days due to the accumulation of gases. I had
been involved in the search for a Navy seaman who had fallen from a
wharf on TI. The tides were too strong and the conditions too danger­
ous to dive. The seaman’s corpse floated to the surface within hours of
the three days predicted by the pearlers, but James’s body was never
recovered.

Ron’s behaviour became more and more erratic. On one occasion
I had persuaded him that it was time for another diving trip, and we
fuelled up at the Navy Wharf, filled our water drums, and were actually
leaving port. For some unaccountable reason Ron had taken on board
a teenager from Saibai named Peter Waigana. Peter was not a diver and
I did not know what he was going to do on the trip. However, as Ron
steered past the Grand Hotel, he abruptly threw the wheel over,
announcing that we would have one last drink. We left Peter on board
while we zoomed ashore in the dinghy. Ron shouted me a beer. For
himself he ordered a bottle of Blue Curacao, most of which he poured
into a very large glass with ice and downed on the spot. Within ten minutes he was comatose. We did not leave that day or the next, and Peter left in disgust.

The money seemed to come so easily, yet one afternoon in the Royal Hotel we found ourselves flat broke. Unperturbed, we walked down to Ron's dinghy on the beach outside the Federal Hotel and zipped out to the reef marker directly in front. Ron speared seven cray immediately. Returning to the bar we sold them and continued drinking. It occurred to me that crayfishing was just a sideline we engaged in to support our enjoyable, if extravagant, lifestyle. I also realised that alcohol was playing too large a part in my life. Although much of the population on Thursday Island appeared to be more or less permanently sozzled, I did not feel that we could continue in this fashion.

I was not the only one who felt this way. Ron had acquired a New Zealand nurse from the hospital as a girlfriend. Tall and robust, she was dedicated to saving Ron from himself. She counselled him. She diverted him. She hid his cartons of vodka. But Ron resisted manfully. He got roaring drunk while she worked her shift, and was blissfully asleep when she arrived home. He bought more vodka and hid it from her on the roof and behind selected clumps of grass on the hillside. One night, in exasperation, she swung a mighty roundhouse punch and flattened him. Ron was impressed. 'Geez, Singe' — he smiled crookedly under his beaked nose — 'she gave me a beauty last night.'

The issue came to a head at a party on another crayfish boat anchored in the harbour. Some fool wagered that Ron could not skol a bottle of vodka. Of course Ron tried, and he woke up three days later in intensive care at Cairns Base Hospital, a thousand kilometres away. He had collapsed with alcohol poisoning and been flown out on the aerial ambulance.

I was already looking for another job and a place to stay. The job I found with Noel Clark, a taxi owner. He kept neat flats on Summer Street, a neat fuel depot/garage behind the flats, and three neat green and white Falcon taxis. He was fastidious in all he did, to the point of obsession, keeping his little fleet in tiptop condition. He serviced and repaired them himself, insisting that drivers wash and chamois their vehicles before taking them out each morning. This was unusual on Thursday Island, where most taxis were rusted, disintegrating hulks normally found on the town dump. Taxi driving was a prestigious vocation in a town where privately owned vehicles were virtually
unknown. Indeed the Torres Strait Broken term for car at the time was ‘taxi’. There were no buses.

The taxi drivers represented an elite, and they were a great bunch to work with: Yamba Nona from Badu, Dougy MacDonald from a farm in New South Wales, Oxen Pryce from Saint Paul’s, Ray Pau from Darnley, Andrew Soki from Saibai, and a dozen others. Years later when Andrew passed away, a taxi driver to the last, his family had a picture of a taxi carved onto the headstone over his grave. Because so many Islanders lived at Tamwoy at the back of Thursday Island, taxi driving involved constant trips from Tamwoy to town and back again, on a road that was rocky, potholed, muddy after rain, and overgrown on either side by grass and overhanging trees.

Walkers and bicycle riders represented an additional hazard. Each morning and evening long lines of Islanders trekked over the rocky hillsides to emerge unannounced on streets and roads. Bicycles bounced and rattled along the road’s verges. Because there were so few motor vehicles people had little road awareness, riding or walking as if cars did not exist. Indeed there were no vehicles on the Outer Islands. Outer Island residents experienced this wonder of modern civilisation only on Thursday Island.

When the Melbidir discharged passengers from the Outer Islands at the wharf, we regularly encountered people who had never been in a wheeled vehicle in their lives. This was a marvellous experience. The elderly exuded a stoic dignity, their faces blank and inscrutable, as some youngster explained how this contraption on wheels worked, and that it was really very safe. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for strong, self-sufficient elders, who had walked or sailed all their fifty or sixty years, to be locked up inside a metal box controlled by some alien, long-haired markay.

Often as I eased off the clutch a collective sigh was heard from the back seat, or a muttered ‘Auggadh au!’ (Oh my god!). But Torres Strait people are wonderfully adaptable and in a short time the newcomers would be mounting the taxi with aplomb, chattering excitedly and gaily waving handkerchiefs to acquaintances we passed on the road. Children having their first ride sat wide-eyed and still, starting as the doors slammed, shrinking against their parents as the engine hummed and we pulled away. But within a minute or two they were twittering and jumping round in excitement, instant converts to the internal combustion engine.

With the motor car came the inevitable tragedies, but considering
the state of the roads, the dilapidated wrecks that most people drove and the lack of road awareness, it is surprising that there were not more accidents. One I remember involved Timothy Sambo, a wonderful young fellow from Murray Island. Timothy was a school prefect. Dressed in sparkling white shirt and dark tie, trousers and shoes, he had compered the high school speech night, his electric smile and quiet confidence delighting everyone in the hall. A few days later, on the outskirts of Tamwoy, a taxi knocked him from his bicycle, killing him.

Taxi driving on Thursday Island involved long hours. Noel expected his drivers to be in their cars by 7 am and expressed displeasure if they returned their vehicle before 11 pm, and you were on the road continuously between those hours. One day off driving in seven was grudgingly allowed, though many drivers worked the full seven days. This was the end of my hectic social life, but the pay made up for it. There were no meters so we charged what we felt like at the time. This sometimes led to arguments as we thrashed out a price with an upset customer. Large, burly drivers like Yamba charged higher prices without dispute. These drivers even overcharged their fellow drivers, but we paid because the only other option was to fight your way out.

In theory a driver received one-third of the total week's takings, one-third went to the car, and one-third went to the owner. In practice owners normally stated what they believed to be a reasonable return ratio, for example 45 cents per mile. Accordingly we ensured that the owner received, say, 50 cents, and skimmed off the rest. Often the amount skimmed off was equal to, or more, than the one-third share we were paid on Friday. The big, burly drivers skimmed off much more than the less aggressive drivers and were doing extremely well. Some Islander drivers found themselves caught in a bind as friends and family cadged lifts from them for free. It was difficult for a man with his roots in the Outer Islands to deny his 'countrymen'. Consequently these drivers returned a ratio of only 20 or 30 cents a mile, earning low weekly wages and the disapproval of the owner. However on the credit side they were celebrities among their own people, those who really mattered to them. For traditional Islanders, reputation, or 'make a name', was always more important than money, and if they had to endure the ire of their white or Chinese boss then they had broad shoulders.

Driving taxis brought me into daily contact with thousands of ordinary Islander people. They were delightful, full of vigor and optimism, and acutely aware that, for all their problems, things were rapidly changing for the better. The job took me to their homes: the square
fibro boxes at Tamwoy, the shabby garage near the primary school where I had attended a friend’s 21st birthday party, derelict buildings on boat slips where families squatted six to a room, and ‘old Queenslanders’ built in the heyday of pearling, their paint peeling and their verandahs collapsing. And my customers expected me to know exactly where they lived, on which side of the house to drop them, even the distance from the steps where they liked to alight. Their peculiar exactitude in these things was not haphazard, there was method in it. For Islanders are people-oriented people. They relate personally to people and expect others to do likewise.

Transactions in traditional society were conducted on the basis of patronage. A supplier supplied and they bought. But it was more than that. This represented a bonding of the two into a mutually dependent relationship. The concept of a free market was anathema to many traditional Islander people, for where was the sense of obligation and reciprocal loyalty in a system where anyone could buy anything from anybody. In a sense regular Islander customers adopted a driver into this traditional realm of mutual obligation. They favoured their preferred driver with their custom to the exclusion of others. ‘I bin wait for you long time. Dem other drivers pass me, like me. But me, I must wait for you.’ However, they expected reciprocal loyalty from the driver. If they asked you to pick them up at such and such a time, you had darn well better do it. If several people whistled for a taxi at once in Douglas Street then you immediately spied out your regular customer from among them, the one who had established a relationship with you. And woe betide you if you let them down, for they would let you know in no uncertain terms.

There were many pitfalls for a young markay dealing with individuals from many different islands, all with differing characters and customs. Also Islanders gloried in an oral culture where conversation, flattery, exhortation and deception had been elevated to art forms. They are masters of verbal subtlety, innuendo, charm and bon hommie.

One of the most interesting locations for a driver was Boigu Camp located at the back of Thursday Island below the present dam wall. In 1973 the dam had not been constructed, nor the Rose Hill suburb. On the sandy beach facing Hammond Island, Boigu migrants had constructed low shelters from scraps of iron and flattened flour tins. Dinghies bobbed in the rocky anchorage below the camp, for this was a dugong hunters’ camp. Boigu people are renowned for their happy-go-lucky attitude, boisterous good humour and their sea hunting skills. Employing
a *wap* (harpoon) and *kiyur* (barbed head made from a three-cornered file), they stalked the once abundant dugong herds around Horn Island and Friday Island. After a successful hunt the dugong would be hauled up onto the sand at Boigu Camp and cut up in long slices, the traditional way, while someone walked towards town to find a taxi. On a number of occasions I was recruited.

Each slice of dugong showed a pink layer of flesh, a thick layer of pale fat and the gray/brown skin. The slices were trimmed and arranged on strings for sale. A couple of grinning, sweating Boigu men would climb into the taxi for the drive to Tamwoy where they would sell the strings for one dollar each. As word spread, crowds gathered and the men were sold out in no time. Dugong meat is delicious, but the fat, oozing its fine oil, is considered therapeutic and the dugong herds round Thursday Island were hunted to extinction in a generation. If the hunters had had no luck with the dugong, they might sell turtle meat or fish they had speared.

On Fridays many men, and women for that matter, went to the pub and by ten o'clock had spent much of their meagre wages. Frequently individuals booked up a ride when they ran out of money altogether. Some paid promptly when they had cash, but with others it might take weeks to retrieve the money as they prevaricated, affected vagueness or deliberately avoided you. They might play one driver off against another, skilfully assessing when one had just about reached his credit limit, so to speak, before switching to another driver and booking up with him. One cunning individual drove his ‘countrymen’ around town for most of a day, arranging a funeral, before announcing to me that he would book it up. He had built up kudos with his kin, and basically did not care what I thought about it. He had an incredibly thick skin. I hounded him for years, but he went to his grave happily owing me fifty dollars.

Along with my change in jobs, I changed my accommodation. Close friends from Murray Island had a two-bedroom flat on Victoria Parade near See Hop’s shop, and they squeezed me in with the others living there. Lillian had enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force in 1967, the first Torres Strait Islander to do so, to my knowledge. Her partner, Azzie, had recently returned from working at a Japanese pearl culture station at Kuri Bay in Western Australia, and enjoyed recounting stories of Broome and the West. There were six of us in all, yet we never felt crowded, counting ourselves lucky to occupy such salubrious quarters.

The flat was part of an ancient fibro home, with a corrugated-iron
roof, an outside shower and a thunderbox toilet. The ceiling and walls were unlined, so the flat’s interior was unpainted fibro, bare grey wood and rusting nails. The house had been divided into three separate flats. As often happened, the flat had passed to Lillian from a relative, an auntie whose husband had been the bosun on the Melbidir and was absent for three weeks in every four. Unfortunately he also had another, younger, partner and children living round at Tamwoy. When in port he divided his time and his meagre wages between the two families. The wife lived on flour, rice and tea, went to church, yarned with her Eastern Island friends, and pined for her son who was working on the railways in Queensland. She was quiet, cheerful and uncomplaining; and it was not long before she passed away.

I acquired a limited fluency in Meriam Mir and spent many pleasant hours in the flat enthralled by tales of the islands, stories of puri puri, and the day-to-day encounters of life made outrageously funny in the telling. In Islander life people are often called by nicknames. They called me Yawaney.

Lillian’s mother was descended from one of the Pacific Islander sailors who settled on Darnley. Her father, Sam Passi, was a highly respected schoolteacher and elder on Mer, and brother of Dave, the priest. Sam and Dave were descended from men who had been leaders on Dowar, and who were associated with the cult of Waiet on Waier. Their grandfather, Aet Passi, was an important informant and friend to A. C. Haddon, and one of the most celebrated Torres Strait Islanders of his time.

Azzie’s father was custodian of Wasikor, the only remaining ‘drum of Mer’. The other drum was reportedly destroyed in a raid by South Sea Islander seamen from the Woodlark in about 1866. These unique, handleless drums appear to be a cross between the traditional, wide-mouthed wanup and the slim, modern bunburu drum. They were used in the worship of Malo, the prevailing god of Mer. Malo looked like being consigned to the history books at one stage, but Malo traditions were crucial in the Mabo case and Malo worship is practised openly today.

Sorcery, called puri puri in Torres Strait Broken, or maydh in language, was a major concern for Islander settlers on Thursday Island. In their own communities Islanders knew who to watch for, and practised effective measures to protect themselves. But on Thursday Island, with people from all islands mixing together, along with Aborigines and New Guineans, who knew whether the person next door was a maydhalayg (sorcerer) or not. And who knew what methods he might
employ to poison you. Dogs, cats, spiders and flying fox were all suspected agents. Walking alone at night was leaving yourself open to attack by sorcerers, who prowled the night seeking victims. The sorcerer, usually accompanied by an apprentice, immobilised the victim, then performed secret acts, which would later cause the victim to fall ill and die.

In fact almost every death in the islands was attributed to malevolent sorcery. Sorcerers were compelled to seek victims, as the dark power needed release and would eat away at the sorcerer himself if an outlet was not found in a victim. I was warned that puri puri men, who carried poison under their fingernails, could poison food and drinks at feasts or gatherings. People spoke of incidents where a clan member had presented a plate of food to a respected elder, resulting in the latter's death. At the hotel ‘countrymen’ from one island tended to drink together, careful to avoid drinks, cigarettes and even matches unless they came from a trusted ‘countryman’—or from a markay, for everyone knew that white men knew nothing about magic.

Puri puri permeated every level of Islander society and every activity. Boys playing football at school rubbed anti-puri puri medicine onto their ankles and arms before a football game. People going out at night did the same. The medicine usually consisted of ‘blessing oil’, coconut oil blessed by a priest or, even better, the Bishop. Remarkable healing powers were attributed to this oil, apart from its function in warding off sorcery. At night on Thursday Island residents locked their houses securely, leaving an electric light burning on the landing. These lights were commonly referred to as puri puri lights. A medical report in 1944 had remarked that the high rate of tuberculosis in the Torres Strait would not be reduced while people slept huddled together behind locked doors and windows through fear of puri puri. Not much had changed thirty years later.

Deliberations concerning puri puri and the identity of sorcerers generally occurred in confidential sessions at night in guarded whispers. Open accusations were rare, but it did happen. The names in the following account have been changed to avoid giving offence. One evening, while Benjamin, Christian and I were visiting a house at Tamwoy, Albert offhandedly mentioned in our presence that Benjamin’s father was a puri puri man. I’ll never know whether Albert was just careless or if this was a calculated ploy on his part. There were always complex, ongoing power plays occurring, most of which were beyond my simple understanding. The effect was instantaneous. Benjamin, his fine features contorted in fury, leaped to his feet, looking like he would
explode. He stepped over to where Albert sat babuk, and stood over him with his chest heaving, the muscles knotting his arms. Albert expressionlessly turned his face upwards towards Benjamin, who gave him a resounding smack across the left cheek, whereupon Albert offered his right cheek, receiving another resounding slap for his troubles. Christian led Benjamin, still shaking and crying in frustration, outside to be comforted. Albert could have discussed the matter privately and in confidence with others, but bringing it before us all in this way caused Benjamin to lose face, a terrible thing in Islander custom.

Though warned often enough, I never worried much about puri puri myself. I saw it as the business of the Islander people. It is bound up in Islander lore, it belongs to them and they most certainly believe in it. I believe that puri puri is there, but I also believe that it will not affect a markay like myself. Some might consider this as convenience and expediency, but this is my accommodation with puri puri, one that I have lived with for thirty years.

The 1970s were a very special time on Thursday Island — a time of real reconciliation and openness between races. As young people we had no comprehension of what our elders collectively had experienced, and we probably would not have cared. Young people seldom do. All we knew was that we were making friends, good friends, in other cultures and learning and changing and growing. This was a bridging process. After seventy years of artificial separation Torres Strait Islanders were engaging with the world, and at times I was that point of engagement. But always it was a two-way process. As a lamur (Meriam for ‘white ghost’) in an Islander world I felt clumsy, awkward and without guile. My friends did their best to set me right.

Steve Mullins also was aware of the vibrant social atmosphere we inhabited. One evening he confided to me that he had come to the Torres Strait on a voyage of self-discovery, to determine if he were a racist. If this sounds affected today, it seemed perfectly reasonable in the context of the times. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of ferment and dynamic change in Australia and throughout the Western world. This was the era of Civil Rights in the United States, Woodstock and the Vietnam War. In Australia we had voted to give indigenous Australians citizenship rights in 1967. ‘Freedom Rides’ in New South Wales opened up swimming pools and public facilities from which Aboriginal people had been barred. It was a time for self-examination and challenging accepted notions. We were aware that we were at the cutting edge of change, but what did it all mean?
Steve decided that the word 'racist' meant nothing on Thursday Island in 1973. Sure there were chauvinistic white people. However, what about the way 'TI half-castes' related to their less-well-off Islander kin — was that racist? And what about the chauvinism displayed by Islanders towards Australian Aborigines and New Guineans? Was that racist? I didn't know. We were adrift in a kaleidoscope of races and relationships, assessing each, and coping with each in turn.

I vividly recall one simple incident that has remained in my memory to this day. I drove the taxi into the driveway near our flat. A young woman who stayed with us stood in the drive. She had skin the colour of milk coffee and high cheekbones in an elfin face. She was so shy that I had only ever heard her smile. I braked the taxi near her, making some innocuous, off-the-cuff remark to her. I wish I could remember what I said because the response was remarkable. She shot me the most dazzling smile and stepped over to me, her eyes shining. With her fingers she reached out and gently traced the line of my jaw, murmuring 'Yawaney'. And that was all. It was the only time she spoke to me, or that we touched. And there was nothing sexual in the exchange. I took it as a spontaneous gesture of deep, sisterly affection.

Young Islanders were not given to public demonstrations of affection towards those they were romantically involved with. In fact the reverse often seemed true. If you saw a young man joking and laughing with a group of girls, you could be certain they were his sisters or cousins. The girl across the street looking in the opposite direction, whom he studiously ignored, was most probably his lover. Secret assignations were arranged by go-betweens, or discrete signs, or body language, or whatever other method could be devised to mislead the general public. You were more likely to see a young man hand in hand with his best male friend than with his girlfriend. Needless to say, you needed first-hand intelligence to keep abreast of these clandestine romances. There was a potential for disastrous misunderstanding, as occurred on one occasion when some Australian expatriates from Port Moresby flew into Thursday Island for the weekend.

It was customary for Steve and me to attend the Royal Hotel Cabaret each Saturday night. We had put on thongs and clean t-shirts for the occasion. Right from the start the Australians from Moresby looked like trouble. They were overdressed in button-up shirts, smart slacks and leather lace-up shoes, but they were also noisily over-confident. I suppose we looked like hippies and yokels to these suave city folk. However, they made the error of assuming that the vivacious girls sitting at the
tables in one corner of the dance floor were unattached, not realising, of course, that their partners and boyfriends were at the tables on the other side, or outside where it was cooler and less noisy.

With a brashness born of ignorance, the Moresby expatriates descended on the young women, chatting them up, inviting them to dance and shouting them drinks. And they played their part, enjoying every moment. Smiling indulgently, they leaned into their dance partners and threw sultry glances over their shoulders to their boyfriends crowded at the doors and tables. The boyfriends were becoming restless, and there was much head turning and shifting in seats. Steve and I saw the signs and moved out of the danger area.

Shortly afterwards a TI boy reached in through the open louvres, grabbed his girlfriend by the hair, pulled her head into the louvres and slammed them closed on her head. Simultaneously another crashed a heavy chair into a Moresby expatriate’s back, and there was instant pandemonium. With every man’s hand against them, the Moresby expatriates were bundled from the scene within minutes. Steve and I were proud of our TI boys. They had defended their patch, and ours, from brash intruders and highlighted the pitfalls of the direct approach to romance.

But now another year was almost gone. Steve resigned from teaching to go crayfishing on the *Manahiki*, a professional cray boat skippered by Alfie Mills from Nagi Island. Paul Jeffries, another teacher, went with him. We sold *Lik Lik Balus* to some other teachers. Within the year they had sold it again. Some say it was wrecked on the beach near Hospital Point on Thursday Island. Others say an adventurer bought it, sailing off down the east coast and the Great Barrier Reef. In any case we never saw her again.

In December 1973 I said farewell to Steve and Azzie. As a going-away present I gave Azzie my Spanish cavalry carbine and a Papuan drum I had picked up somewhere. A month later I was in Rabaul in the New Guinea Islands.
In January 1974 I flew into Rabaul, a place of spectacular beauty on New Britain Island. Out of the window I looked down the smoking barrel of Matupit Volcano. The circular, blue depths of Rabaul harbour, itself a massive crater, were surrounded by numerous dormant cones. Apart from the slopes of Matupit, stripped bare by heat and sulphur fumes, the landscape glowed a vibrant emerald. A combination of rich, volcanic soils and daily rainfall produced astonishing rates of plant growth and fecundity.

On disembarking I was accosted by a tubby fellow dressed in a lap-lap and smiling through vermilion lips and brown teeth. He was the driver from my new high school who had been sent to meet me. When I asked him whether the school was in town, he shook his head, pursed his betel-nut-stained lips and pointed at some high mountains to the west. I threw my suitcase onto the truck and my new friend drove us through town. Rabaul was a modern town with high-rise motels, Chinese restaurants, bustling open markets and busy wharves. In many ways it resembled Cairns in size and appearance.

Soon we were winding up verdant slopes out of the giant crater in which Rabaul was located. Coconut trees, sheltering cocoa trees, lined both sides of the road, and there were thriving villages perched on knolls, and pick-up trucks roaring about. Pigs, chickens and children wandered along the road edge, and vegetation sprouted everywhere.

Malabunga High School, at the base of the Gaulim Mountains, straddled the border separating the majority Tolai population of the Gazelle Peninsula from the Baining mountain people. The Tolais were
a worldly, prosperous people well versed in commercial agriculture and trade. As a group they entertained political ambitions that set them apart. For some time Tolai leaders had been agitating for the return of traditional lands lost during the century of colonial rule. After 1967 this took the form of direct action in which Tolais moved onto white-owned plantations, daring the administration to remove them. On a political level they resisted multiracial local councils on the Gazelle Peninsula, maintaining that they should consist of indigenous Tolais only. This was unacceptable to the Australian administration, as it would mean excluding migrant Papua New Guineans and Chinese and European residents. The Tolais formed their own councils and a security force under the umbrella Mataungan Association. Serious rioting occurred, drawing police reinforcements from the rest of the Territory. By December 1969 one thousand police, a third of all the police in Papua and New Guinea, were assembled in Rabual, which resembled a town under siege. In August 1971 Jack Emanuel, the District Commissioner and senior Australian administrator in the Gazelle, was stabbed to death by Tolais during a meeting to discuss land disputes. Tolais raided migrant settlements, burning and pillaging. Migrant settlers and plantation workers from the Highlands of New Guinea responded by killing Tolais. When I arrived in January 1974 the situation had resolved itself into an armed truce, both sides wary and watchful, as the country awaited self-government and independence.

Before the school truck reached Malabunga we were halted at a road block by riot police armed with shotguns, shields and wooden clubs. They were surly and on edge as they searched the truck, although I had no idea what they were looking for. Further along the road we approached another road block, this time manned by casual, betel-nut-chewing individuals in lap-laps. They grinned at our driver, waving bushknives and axes at us as we passed. In an open area nearby, squads of Mataungans were performing close-order drill. Tolais who had served in the government police supervised the training. In a sense we were behind Mataungan lines, but the road blocks were not there every day — they seemed to go up or down depending on the level of tension. Riot police from their base on the main road seemed to come and go freely enough.

Teaching at Malabunga was different from anything I had experienced before (or have experienced since). Our six hundred hand-picked students — boys and girls — were being groomed to lead a new nation to independence. They represented the elite, the top 10 per cent of
those finishing primary school. I taught all five grades, mostly history and social science. Because nation building was a priority, heavy emphasis was placed on developing a national consciousness through education. We studied the history and sociology of Papua and New Guinea, then compared it with that of Indonesia, China, Japan and other decolonised, nascent powers. The pressure-cooker atmosphere was regulated by spaced exams after which the least successful students were shed. By the fifth year only the most talented and hard working remained. The students studied for two hours each night in their classrooms, then often studied in their dormitories till the early hours of the morning. They were forever coming to our houses, which were dotted about the school grounds, seeking help with school work or looking for more study exercises.

The school was largely self-supporting. The students maintained the extensive grounds, sporting fields and roads in their spare time. They constructed pathways and repaired stairs. They also produced much of their own fruit and vegetables, such as sweet potatoes, cassava, bananas, corn, lettuce, tomatoes and cabbages. Students operated the school piggery and the poultry farm, and when not otherwise occupied they excelled at sport. They were mature, responsible and punctual. Significantly there was never any suggestion that punctuality was a non-Melanesian characteristic. However, while these students were easy to work with, they knew what they wanted, and asserted themselves to achieve their goals. On one occasion the school kitchen ran out of rice. Acting collectively under their own leadership, the students boycotted classes, even blocking a road to their dormitories, till a truck-load of rice was brought in.

Sprawled across a plateau high in the mountains, Malabunga High School was frequently cloaked in thick morning fog. One of my jobs involved checking to ensure that students were out at 6 am trimming grass using the long grass knives issued to each student. The knife’s blade was straight for about a metre, curving upwards near the point. Each dormitory cut a specified area for forty-five minutes each morning prior to breakfast, under the supervision of senior students. It was an extraordinary experience trudging along enveloped in fog, the silence absolute save for the rhythmic whisper of hundreds of unseen grass knives, and ghostly figures emerging from the mist, dull grey in the half light, swathed in lap-laps from knee to neck to ward off the chill, their exposed right arms rising and filling in unhurried, economical strokes.

The wild appearance of the jungled landscape was deceptive, for the
thick forest choking the ridges consisted mostly of regrowth. This was a densely populated region where people lived from what they grew in the soil. The bush was full of people walking to gardens, hacking at the forest, digging, planting, or returning home burdened with garden produce. Whatever ground lay unattended the forest quickly reclaimed. On weekends we trekked to little-known rivers and waterfalls, explored cave systems and ascended volcanoes. Matupit, the active volcano near Rabaul airport, featured a knotted rope descending to the floor of the caldera. We climbed down and back up again, then stood on the rim amidst clouds of sulphur and steam.

To the west loomed the mysterious Baining Mountains, with peaks higher than Mount Kosciusko, peopled by enigmatic mountain tribes. Roads went into the foothills but basically stopped there. There were stockaded Baining settlements along the road, but further up in the mountains people lived by shifting agriculture. Few Bainings attended Malabungu High School, but those who did were just as motivated and hard-working as the rest. They had to be.

One evening I drove up into the mountains to attend a fire dance, for which the Bainings were famous. Inside the stockade we waited while attendants fed a roaring bonfire, and musicians rattled on wooden drums, chanting monotonously. Finally, with the fire reduced to a few flaming branches on a bed of coals, the chanting reached a crescendo and a train of outlandish figures emerged from the dark under the trees. Most sported huge, pale, birdlike masks a metre wide. Except for a fringe of green at their knees, a large forest leaf over their buttocks and a strange round device over the penis, they were naked. Later I learnt that these last two coverings were stitched to the skin. A black substance like pitch had been rubbed onto the dancers’ bodies, so they glistened and shone in the firelight. Huge pythons trailed from their arms and shoulders as they tramped around the fire. Then one at a time the dancers mounted the fire in their bare feet, prancing and kicking at the coals then leaping out to rejoin the dance, as another dancer took their place in the fire. From time to time attendants threw more branches onto the fire so the performers actually danced in the flames. The pythons soon expired and were casually tossed aside. One dancer’s mask caught alight. He fled off into the trees, but the dance continued: the tramping round the fire, the chanting and drumming, the sooty bird figures in the fire, the flames reaching to the dancers’ navels, the roasted pythons. I drove home at midnight. Next morning a Baining student brought me a coat I had accidentally left behind in the stockade and
he told me that the dance had continued till dawn. Only the dancers’ underarms were scorched; their bare feet were fine. The dance was a coming-of-age ritual for young Baining men, though it was gradually developing into a tourist attraction with a commercial base. In fact the next fire dance I saw was just such an event, starting on time, ending abruptly on time, performed on the school oval.

Rabaul’s war history is tragic. When the Japanese captured the town in 1942 hundreds of Australians were killed in action or massacred while held as prisoners of war by the Japanese. Rabaul became a major military base occupied by 100,000 Japanese. American and Australian aircraft bombed the harbour daily. Thousands of Tolais and other New Guineans perished, as did Chinese and Indian slave labourers brought in by the Japanese conquerors. Even thirty years later reminders of the war were everywhere. A Japanese tank sat in Rabaul’s main street near a massive concrete bunker that had been a Japanese command post. Bomb shelters and caves, cut by slave labourers, lined the roads, honeycombed the cliffs and littered the jungle. One tunnel south of the town contained three large barges on a railway track, rusting away underground where the Japanese had hidden them from Allied bombing. When bushwalking we sometimes came across downed aircraft overgrown with jungle vines and ferns. The students at school, while tilling their gardens, dug up rusty bullets, bayonets and even a six-shot revolver.

In Rabaul there were shrines for the Japanese who died in the Pacific War, and memorials for Indian and Australian dead, but a World War I memorial near Kokopo had special significance. Here were buried Australia’s first dead of the Great War. When war was declared in 1914, Australian troops occupied German New Guinea. Rabaul was the German colony’s capital, and a radio station outside Kokopo comprised an important military target. On 11 September, defending German forces ambushed the Australians on the Kokopo road, killing six before being routed. On the German side one German and a score of New Guinean troops were killed. My grandfather was wounded in the trenches in France during World War I, but this memorial, under waving coconut trees and a tropical sky, seemed a world away from the killing fields of Gallipoli and Europe.

In a deserted cargo cult village we came across another, more baffling, reminder of the Pacific War. Off a dirt track in the bush, cult adherents had carved out an airstrip and constructed warehouses out of bush material to store the goods they expected planes to deliver. They had
been waiting thirty years, since 1945, and the planes had not come. Some cult members had lost faith but others still waited in hope.

Cargo cults were rooted in New Guinea’s colonial history. The first had been recorded at Milne Bay in 1893–94. They were an attempt to address the disparity between the poverty of the native villagers and the material prosperity of their white colonial masters. Ships arrived discharging cargo consigned to the whites. How was it that so little of the cargo came for the native peoples? The origin of these goods was not immediately obvious to New Guineans. In the absence of any other reasonable explanation, some fell back on superstition and magic, devising rituals and procedures which they believed would bring them cargo. Most cults were harmless, localised phenomena. During the Pacific War, however, the massive influx of overseas troops, and the huge quantities of supplies arriving by ship and plane, caused a resurgence in cargo cults throughout Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The construction and organisation of new villages specifically dedicated to the cult was normal and had been before the war. Clearing airfields and building warehouses in cultist communities were new features. Over the years, a widening cash economy and broader-based education has led to support for the cults falling away.

Although I had learned a lot at Malabunga, I wanted to be closer to the Torres Strait. I requested a transfer and was sent to Daru High School in Western Province in January 1975.

The Malabunga students had impressed upon me how much Melanesian students were capable of when focused and committed. I had also learned that though I was an Australian assisting the decolonisation process I was not, at heart, a colonialist. It was the custom in New Guinea to have ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ to perform menial tasks. Here the terms ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ were demeaning in a way unknown in the Torres Strait. It was comfortable for the colonialists, who effectively did nothing round their houses but issue instructions to servants. However, New Guineans also found this system of patronage comfortable. I did not employ boys or girls to do the menial jobs that I was used to performing, such as mowing the lawn or hanging out the washing. This aroused the ire of colonialists who felt that white men really should not be seen cutting their lawns. New Guineans, on the other hand, felt that I was cheating them out of their rightful employment. I have heard all the arguments in favour of the servant system, and I understand them. I guess I just felt foolish employing someone to do simple tasks that I was used to doing for myself, a critical flaw for a colonialist.
Arriving at the small island of Daru was like coming home. It was only twenty kilometres from the Queensland border, two hundred kilometres from Thursday Island and sixty kilometres from Saibai Island. With independence approaching fast, and localisation in full swing, the number of Europeans had fallen dramatically, from several hundred to barely thirty. Many of the Chinese had also departed. The town presented a ragged, down-at-heel appearance with vacant shop fronts and unkempt buildings.

Craig's Store on the waterfront was winding down. Craig had gone to Green Island off Cairns, taking his largest crocodiles and best artefacts with him. Marineland Melanesia, the attraction Craig developed there, remains a tourist drawcard today. What remained at the store was supervised by a grey-bearded Fly River trader named Sweeney who was packing to move to the Philippines. The fate of several hundred crocodiles, large and small, hinged on negotiations between Sweeney and the government. When the government's final offer seemed unsatisfactory, Sweeney's workers released the crocodiles into Daru harbour. For some weeks afterwards people approached the waterfront with understandable caution.

Daru High School was an impoverished copy of Malabunga. The poor soil and monsoonal rainfall severely restricted the range of crops that could be grown at the school. Limited supplies of cassava, sweet potatoes and bananas were produced to add to the brown rice and tinned fish supplied by the school. We had a school hunter who brought in a turtle or whatever else he could forage. On one occasion I inspected the cooking shed to see a gigantic drumstick protruding from the top of an enormous cauldron bubbling over an open fire. Someone had brought in a cassowary leg for the students' dinner.

Western Province (previously Western District) was the poorest of all the provinces of Papua New Guinea. Barramundi fishing was viable if there were freezers nearby, and crocodile shooting was a low-key money earner for some, but most communities eked out their existence from one year to the next with little or no cash income. The generally low level of income was reflected in the low living standards across the province. This was also reflected in the school, which relied heavily on the fees paid by students' families. Fewer facilities, and a very restricted diet for boarding students, were inevitable. I also discovered that the high standards of hygiene maintained at Malabunga were not easily replicated. As was usual, students were rostered to clean the toilets and ablution blocks, as well as other facilities. When I insisted that toilets
were not clean enough, student leaders insisted that they were, walked off and refused to complete the job.

I arrived in the middle of the annual wet season, which turned most of Daru into a quagmire. The early administration had occupied the island's only elevated area. The rest of the island could really be described as reclaimed swamp. Grids of drains around each building led off to deeper, wider drains bordering the main roads. Slippery wooden bridges beneath sodden banana trees crisscrossed the drains, which had become swollen, chocolate-coloured torrents during the wet. Large areas of the school grounds were under water more or less permanently till mid-year, and experienced staff wore gumboots. Mosquitoes rose from the drains and swamps in grey clouds every evening.

Medical problems were more obvious here. I think every single student suffered from malaria. When I was on boarding duty at night, students would come banging on my door and I would find myself plodding through the mud to a dormitory where some poor kid, hundreds of kilometres from home, was burning up with malarial fever. The only recommended treatment consisted of huge dosages of malaria tablets. Another common disease was grilli, a skin ailment which, if left untreated, would eventually cover the whole body. The affected skin peels and flakes away as if from a bad burn. Attractive young women, disfigured by the disease, were coated from head to toe in bright green medication. Coupled with other problems was poor nutrition. The school simply could not afford to feed its students well. A meal might consist of a small bowl of brown rice for each student with, on a good day, a tin of fish shared among six students. For vigorous, growing adolescents this was not enough.

For all that, Daru was an interesting place to be in such interesting times. Western Province included the border with Irian Jaya and I spoke with Irian Jaya refugees who had fled Indonesian repression there. The province included the Fly River and Lake Murray, a huge freshwater lake teeming with barramundi. It also included legendary, half-mythical locations such as the Star Mountains, Bolivip and Nomad. Nomad was probably the last place in Papua New Guinea where cannibalism was practised. Traditionally humans had been eaten for protein in a densely forested environment where meat was an uncommon luxury. A patrol post had first been established at Nomad in the 1960s, and a decade later unreformed cannibals were still appearing in the Daru courthouse.

With the departure of the Australians many administrative positions were filled by Papua New Guineans. This was localisation and, with
independence scheduled for September 1975, it was occurring on a vast scale all over the country. Frequently Australians were replaced by other foreigners on short-term contracts or under volunteer programs. Consequently the staff of a high school might consist of PNG nationals, Australians, English and Welsh people, New Zealanders, Filipinos, Canadians and others. It was said of one Australian who left Daru after many years in Papua New Guinea: 'He couldn't cope with localisation.' And I could understand that. The Papua New Guinea he knew was gone.

In April that year we received our first visitors from Saibai. Nawia Elu (usually referred to as Koey Bab or 'Big Uncle') from Mauba Village arrived with three other men and a small boy named Seisia. Saibai men were famous sailors and at this stage they were experimenting with large outboard motors on their double outrigger canoes. The Mauba canoe, named Koranga or 'Eagle', retained the mast without sails, and was powered by a forty-horsepower engine dropped over the canoe's transom. What is generally forgotten today is that through all of their long history the northern islands of the Torres Strait looked to their north rather than the south. Their trading partners, kinsmen and enemies came from along the Papuan coast. In colonial times Saibai people shopped at Daru for the simple reason that it was half as far as Thursday Island, and a much easier sail with the wind on the beam in both directions. Daru also had the reputation of being much cheaper than Thursday Island.

Our Saibai visitors spent the weekend shopping, loading their goods into the deep hull of their 10-metre-long canoe and into several 200-litre drums they had lashed to the mast amidships. The goods they had purchased were typical for that time: saucepans, cooking pots, bolts of brightly coloured fabric, lanterns, clothing, shot-gun cartridges, fishing gear, bush knives, grass knives, axes, cartons of cigarettes and lots of South Pacific Lager. The cartons of bottled beer were piled into the drums on deck. I can still picture them as Koranga cruised from the anchorage at Daru with Koey Bab in his lava-lava standing four-square on the forward deck, his hands clasped firmly behind him. The carved wooden figurehead on Koranga's bow was adorned with a headdress of black samii (cassowary) feathers, which shook and tossed bravely in the wind.

Unfortunately the south-east winds which had favoured sailing so much were not as kind to the powerful motorised canoe. Just before the mouth of the Pahoturi River, 50 kilometres west of Daru, a giant
swell swept in on the canoe’s port beam and the vessel capsized. Her crew swam and waded ashore over mud flats and through mangroves onto a desolate, uninhabited coastline. All they had saved from the capsize was one bottle of port. Without food or water and with the wind whistling through their wet clothing, they took stock of their situation. The nearest village, Mabadawan, was several kilometres to the west, on the opposite side of the Pahoturi, but it was their only real option. During the remaining hours of daylight they trudged westward, finally camping in the bush as dark overtook them. Without a fire they shivered through a long cold night, taking swigs of port to sustain them. Even Seisia, the boy, had a share of it. In the morning they reached the river and attracted the attention of people on the opposite bank. The Mabadawan men sailed the Saibai men back to the scene of the wreck, but little was recovered. It was said afterwards that the weight of the beer bottles in the drums on deck had made the canoe top heavy, thus causing the accident. The incident was remembered, and although people laughed at the idea of young Seisia drinking port, it had clearly been a disaster. The Saibai chairman Wagea Waia composed a song to remember the event.

Koranga

Wahari ki samu tete ngaw gul a Koranga
pa bubuya bawa generan
yal pawpa thayangu
thapepa — e Dhawdhay beropa
yan thapepa — e.

Ngaw thoeyam Koranga a
malu adhal wanai
gami sumay asinu ngay sawp — e
Mauba a poethayl nga
kaziw ngepaw ngulay nga — e

Eagle

Moving with long steps as a cassowary runs, my canoe Eagle rides the tide, dancing with the waves, feathers thrown back, swimming towards the shore of New Guinea but could not make it.
My friend Eagle
left behind in the sea.
Body feeling cold — I am a castaway.
Mauba seems so far away
where my children and grandchildren are living.

There was a cultural aspect to such a mishap at sea. In traditional times those who were shipwrecked were *sarup*. Thrown up on shore, exhausted and without the means to defend themselves, they were at the mercy of whoever discovered them. In the Torres Strait *sarups* were generally, though not always, tracked down and massacred, even when returning to their own island. Islander legends from Badu to Mer record such instances. In her landmark account of Torres Strait lore, Margaret Lawrie wrote, ‘A sarup was a man without hope from the moment that his canoe sank.’ In contemporary Islander society the term *sarup* is used as a term of derision for one who is helpless and alone. Therefore the loss of *Koranga*, with Koey Bab and other crew members *sarup* on the coast of New Guinea, was a major blow. Significantly the loss of *Koranga* marked the last occasion on which Saibai men used traditional canoes on a large-scale trading enterprise.

Shortly after this incident I visited Saibai in a plywood speedboat with friends from Daru, an Australian teacher, an Australian patrol officer and a Canadian volunteer teacher. The sea’s surface was oily and brown, sliding smoothly under our bow as we roared west down the coast towards Saibai, past broad river mouths choked with mangroves. In succession we passed the Oriomo River, the Binaturi and the Pahoturi. The coastal terrain here is absolutely flat, the land a mere string of green between sea and sky. To the west two pinnacles rise above the otherwise featureless seascape. The first is Mabadawan Hill on the Papua New Guinea coast. The second, higher peak is Dauan Island. Between them lies Saibai Island.

Saibai is a deltaic island fifteen-kilometres long, lying just five kilometres from the coast of Papua New Guinea. The village clings to a narrow strip of ground between the sea in front and freshwater swamps behind. As our speedboat idled into the beach, small children raced off under the coconut trees spreading the word and before long the landing was thronged with people pressing forward to shake and kiss our hands. Visitors were rare. The border between Papua New Guinea and Australia was wide open at that time. It was rare to see a white man in the area, let alone a government official. There were no airstrips and no planes.
in the sky. There were no visas or passports. I did not even possess a passport. There were only a few smugglers, and they were hard-working entrepreneurs, mostly white. They considered my contacts on the Australian side of the border very promising and had made me a number of interesting proposals, which I tactfully declined.

We progressed from house to house along the village, greeting more people, arriving at length at Middle Village where two remarkable Islander leaders welcomed us. Asai and Mebai Warusam were middle-aged brothers and heads of their extended families. Asai, the older, was a genial giant with a barrel chest and poor hearing. He had been a boxer when younger, and a good one I expect, and had worked on Thursday Island before returning home. Mebai, though not as large, was just as solid, with a constant smile and lively eyes that were always thinking. By way of entertainment Asai decided that we would go duck hunting, recruiting a number of young men to accompany us. Several rusted single-barrel shotguns appeared. The barrel of one was bound together by wire and I made a mental note to keep at a safe distance when it was fired. Mebai contributed a .303 service rifle, minus the foresight and Asai produced a 30/30 lever action Winchester.

Asai went on to explain how dogs had recently chased a deer through the village into the sea. He had used his rifle to shoot it as it swam near his house. It was the first time they had shot a deer. ‘Are there many deer?’ I inquired casually. Asai replied that they were a plague. Herds swam over from New Guinea. They ate the gardens that Saibai people relied upon, browsing on banana, cassava and sweet potato leaves. Traditional garden land in the interior of the island had been abandoned. The deer even crept in at night close to the houses to forage. Mebai had brought rolls of barbed-wire from Daru to fence his gardens. I listened in a kind of reverie, for this must surely be deer hunter heaven: a thriving deer population that had never been hunted. And the Saibai people wanted them controlled. I thought that I might be able to help them with that. But not today.

At this stage Simon, the Australian teacher, enlivened proceedings by asking Asai what he thought of the Torres Strait Border Dispute. Asai, who was holding the 30/30, swept the rifle towards New Guinea and roared, ‘If that bastard Somare comes here, I shoot him.’ Michael Somare, the Chief Minister of Papua New Guinea, was negotiating with Australia to have many of the Torres Strait Islands, including Saibai, transferred to Papua New Guinea administration. The Whitlam government in
Canberra had warmed to the idea but the proposal had outraged Torres Strait Islanders.

The Saibai freshwater swamps consist of blue sheets of water broken by hedges of green reeds and little forested islands. Hundreds of ducks bobbed about squabbling raucously and ducking down to feed. Although we approached the water's edge through thick bush bordering the swamp, the ducks seemed to cruise serenely out of shotgun range every time. Our rifles were for the larger magpie geese. It was beginning to look like a futile exercise until a youngster named Abraham resolved to use an old stalking method. He edged into the water, crawling on his knees with the shotgun balanced, muzzle forward, over his right shoulder, gripped by his right hand. Then laboriously he worked towards the ducks, just his head and one shoulder breaking the surface. It took a very long time but eventually he was moving through the scattered outriders of the flock. It seemed impossible that they did not see him only metres away. Finally he neared the main body of birds, slid the shotgun forward and fired.

Several hours later we staggered into the village carrying bundles of fat ducks, fourteen in all. They were soft brown creatures, with metallic jade patches on their wings shining in the sun. For dinner that night we enjoyed stewed duck with rice and fresh damper, washed down with tea and powdered milk. Our accommodation was a typical Saibai residence, corrugated-iron sheets nailed onto a mangrove frame, the floorboards adzed by hand. We slept on mats on the floor, pulling a lava-lava over us for cover. One of the village dogs named Gangster decided to move in with John, the patrol officer. Although he pushed the dog away, Gangster kept sidling in, so John finally gave up and used him as a pillow.

The wind awakened us next morning, rattling and banging the iron sheets on the house. Off the beach our speedboat tugged at its anchor amid white caps and breaking waves. Simon was uneasy. He had lost his boat the previous year while it was anchored in a rough sea. We decided to leave before conditions worsened. As we piled into the boat, our Saibai hosts pressed bowls containing stewed duck and damper into our hands. In our hurry to get away there must have been some breakdown in communication. As the tide was very low, I asked two bystanders, whom I trusted, to point out the channel from Saibai towards Mabadawan Hill. We believed that we were directed towards a small island which lay south of Mabadawan.

As we slammed through a vicious chop, nearing the island, John
suddenly yelled for Simon to stop. Just metres to starboard a thumb of rock splashed out of the chop, and as we looked at the broken sea about us more could be seen. We were astride a reef, and any one of these rocks would have ripped through our plywood hull as if it were made of paper. Cautiously we retraced our course and gingerly felt our way north towards the New Guinea coast. If we were going to sink we might as well be close to land. It was a very relieved group of seafarers that motored into the anchorage beneath Mabadawan Hill. I never did get to the bottom of the misunderstanding, but the very next time I saw Mebai I asked him to draw me a chart of the area. His hand-drawn chart, based on a lifetime of observation and memory, is as accurate as any chart you will find anywhere. I have it on the desk before me as I write this twenty-five years later.

Mabadawan Village has a hill, which is the only elevation on the coast for fifty kilometres. The Pahoturi River adjacent to the village provides access to dozens of villages such as Tog, Ngaw and Kupair further inland. Below the hill, in the anchorage, half a dozen double outrigger, schooner-rigged canoes rocked at anchor. These 10-metre-long craft were used for trading and hunting, and I had seen them at Daru frequently. They plied traditional trade routes throughout the Torres Strait Islands, even voyaging to Thursday Island over one hundred kilometres south. We had noted their huge, sharp-pointed, admiralty-type anchors as we threaded our way past the canoes to the beach.

Champion Tabua, the school principal, greeted us heartily. I knew Champion from Daru and was happy to join him in a tour of the village. The village houses seemed bursting with people, smoke and noise. Square-shaped, standing on piles off the ground, the houses had been built using bush materials: bamboo, mangrove wood, coconut leaves and grass thatch. A large pet cassowary stalked carelessly and the house piles and shrieking children. For centuries the cassowary’s glossy black plumage had been traded into the Torres Strait Islands where it was a highly valued decorative item. Mabadawan entrepreneurs were middlemen in the trade. Champion led me up the hill to his little school — a bush hut with an earthen floor. A well-used blackboard was the only furnishing, but then there were no furnishings in the village houses either. Students brought their own mats to school for sitting on.

When we returned to the beach we found a heap of plastic rice bags stuffed with bananas, cassava, yams and sweet potatoes, each bag bearing a name tag, and destined for students at Daru High School.
Unfortunately we could not fit all the bags into our boat, clearly disappointing a number of parents. They knew how finely drawn the nutrition was at the school and used every opportunity to augment their children’s diet with garden produce from home.

By now the wind had dropped to a gentle breeze. The canoes slouched lazily in the calm. The late morning sunlight skipped across the anchorage to where Champion and I sat in the shade of a large tree munching on the damper and stewed duck provided by my Saibai friends. At this point the Canadian teacher decided to go water skiing. In these surroundings water skiing seemed a bit bizarre, but Champion and I just shrugged as the other three prepared.

Word spread and people came tumbling onto the foreshore to witness this unusual event. The excitement was palpable as John and Simon climbed aboard the speedboat. Its outboard motor burbled and the skier braced in the shallows as the crowd murmured in anticipation. Simon gunned the motor and the boat shot forward a few metres, hit a large admiralty anchor belonging to one of the canoes, and promptly foundered. With marvelous presence of mind a score of villagers plunged into the sea, hoisted up the boat and ran it bodily up the beach with Simon and John still sitting stunned in the front seats. It had all happened in a twinkling.

An inspection revealed a metre-long gash in the hull. In fact my companions had been lucky not to lose a foot. It looked like we were faced with a slow canoe voyage back to Daru and civilisation. But we hadn’t reckoned on the true genius of New Guinea bush carpenters. Within minutes the boat was hull up, surrounded by a dozen perspiring villagers flourishing saws, hammers and nails. We stood back and let them go. Simon observed, ‘If there’s one thing I have learned in New Guinea, it’s that when these guys know what they are doing, don’t get in their way.’ A sheet of plywood appeared. It had fallen off a vessel at sea and drifted ashore where some Mabadawan beachcomber had come across it. Men emerged from nearby bush carrying sheets of paperbark, which they trimmed and positioned under the ply to seal the gash. It was at this point, however, that the head carpenter appeared to be stumped. Nails would not do. For this job he required screws, but where could we get them? From out of the watching crowd a wizened old man shuffled forward holding, of all things, a water ski. He had picked it up in the Pahoturi River. Goodness knows where it had come from. He had placed the ski in a corner of his home, not sure what to do with it but reluctant to throw such a rare artefact away. Embedded
between barnacles and dried seaweed were six beautiful stainless-steel screws, which Simon promptly purchased for three kina. The screws fastened the plywood and paperbark in place. When we tested the arrangement in the water it hardly leaked at all. Simon always carried money in the bush in Papua New Guinea, and he paid off the head carpenter and the man who had contributed the plywood, and everyone was happy. We reached Daru late that afternoon, distributed the students’ food and reflected on our mixed fortunes. The irony of the situation was not lost on us. Water skis had been our downfall and our salvation.

Meanwhile I did not forget Saibai’s unhunted herds of deer. I flew my .243 rifle into Daru airport, hoping to use it on future trips to Saibai, only to have it confiscated by Customs and the police. The senior police officer I spoke with, a Tolai from Rabaul, told me that my rifle was an illegal weapon. When I informed him that it was perfectly legal in Queensland he reacted with disbelief. Anyway, he said, I had no licence to use it in Papua New Guinea. Could I have a licence? No. Could I take it back to Queensland? No. He obviously resented my badgering, so I left it at that and trudged down the road to Daru’s Western District Club to collect my thoughts.

The club was a spacious, high-set wooden building that had clearly seen better days. At a table to one side of the bar were just the people to help me. They were as motley and unlikely a group as you might find anywhere. Lenny Holland greeted me. He was an Australian my age whose father operated a plantation up the Fly River supplying fresh beef to Daru. Next to him sat burly Tony Kirori with his engaging smile. I had met both Lenny and Tony when they visited Thursday Island. With them was Frank Narua who was in his late fifties. He had the powerful South Sea Island build and looked as tough as teak. Descended from Samoan families in the Torres Strait, he had married a Papuan and settled on Daru. Like many others along the New Guinea coast he had worked on the pearling luggers, and was never happier than when reciting tales of his days at sea. However, this was difficult, for an operation on his throat had removed his ability to speak. The operation had left a small hole at the base of his neck through which he coughed into a small Japanese flowered towel, so he communicated by rasping hoarsely and miming. But his interpreter was always by his side — his youngest daughter, about ten years old, who acted as his voice. It was an unusual experience in the rough and tumble atmosphere of the Western District Club, amid cigarette smoke, spilt beer and manly
oaths, to listen to Frank’s stories of his days at sea told in the reedy,
piping tones of a young girl’s voice.

As I explained my problem with the police over my rifle, we were
joined by Gary Selwood and Miles Poanoa. Gary, an Australian, fished
the waters of Lake Murray up the Fly River for barramundi. Miles, a
Maori, was his mate and worked with him. I quickly received excellent
advice, for all five of my friends at the table had been back and forth
over the border more times than they could count, carrying weapons
ranging from cut-down rifles to unlicensed pistols. I was told that, since
I had declared the rifle as I entered, the police would be compelled to
release it when next I left for Australia. I suggested that the Tolai police
officer would not see things that way. Gary instructed me to go straight
back to the police station, demand the return of the rifle, refusing to
take no for an answer and, in effect, to call the Tolai’s bluff. So I did. It
was play-acting, but it worked. The officer caved in immediately. Two
weeks later my precious .243 rifle was on a plane back to Thursday
Island and safety.

I had purchased a fibreglass speedboat with a 25-horsepower Yamaha
outboard. I called the boat Sager Gub after the prevailing south-easterly
winds, and had visited Saibai several times without mishap, usually
calling at Mabadawan Village on the way. Life on Daru was beginning
to pall. Independence was coming within months and I did not feel
that I belonged in this new nation. During debates over the Torres Strait
border dispute on Daru I had backed the Torres Strait Islanders and
was uncomfortably aware that I was the odd man out. I longed to be
back among the wonderful, warm-hearted people of the Torres Strait
Islands. It was time to go.

The opportunity to leave came suddenly. On a stormy day in July a
battered trimaran reeled into the protection of Daru’s anchorage. A
kilometre to the east the sea raged white, but in the lee of the island
the vessel wallowed near the wharf in water the colour of toffee. A
crew member swam ashore to arrange for lines to be thrown onto the
vessel to help it berth, as it had no anchors. A couple of hours later I
met the crew at the Western District Club.

Jerry, the owner/captain, was a tall, gangly, sandy-haired Australian
from Rabaul. Bill, the fellow who had swum ashore, sported black,
close-cropped hair and beard, shot through with grey. He had worked
as a boilermaker at the Bougainville Copper Mine, a place with a
reputation for violence. Bill’s wiry frame seemed to quiver with sup­
pressed fury. His manner was gruff and abrupt. Every second word was
an obscenity spat from the corner of his mouth. He referred to Papua New Guineans as 'spooks', yet he was accompanied by a stocky young Highland woman, named Raba, and their six-month old child. Bill and Raba communicated using a bizarre mixture of Pidgin and foul language. Bill called her a 'fuckin' bush kanaka' and she replied in kind. They were definitely an odd couple.

Jerry had sailed the yacht from Rabaul to Port Moresby, where Bill’s family had come aboard for the sail to Thursday Island. Jerry explained that he had not reckoned on the strength of the south-easterlies and failed to allow sufficient leeway. They had missed their course to Bramble Cay and been pushed up against the coast somewhere east of the Fly River. When they attempted to anchor, a hatch cover was torn away and they lost an anchor. Clawing westward along the coast they finally found shelter in the Fly’s vast estuary where the mangrove banks are thirty kilometres apart. Passing numerous low, deltaic islands they sailed upstream before anchoring. Unfortunately they had overlooked the notation on the chart which stated that the Fly is subject to a tidal bore, a wave a metre or more high. That night the bore swept up the estuary, crashing into the vessel, spinning it round and snapping the anchor chain. As the yacht surged upstream, it collided with a large mangrove tree to which a line was secured.

This had happened the night before they reached Daru, so it was little wonder that Jerry appeared drawn and haggard. He would not put to sea again unless he had an experienced navigator, additional crew and new anchors. I think he had lost his nerve. The new anchors were no problem. Sweeney allowed Bill the run of his workshop behind Craig’s Store and Bill used his metal-working skills to produce a couple of very impressive plough anchors. As for additional crew, I signed on immediately.

When it came to securing an experienced navigator, the best man on Daru was seated at the table at the club that day, his daughter speaking for him. Frank Narua had spent a lifetime navigating luggers under sail from Daru to Thursday Island. He knew every rock and reef and current. He had the long tacks and reaches mapped out in his head. Jerry offered him $60 and a flight back from Thursday Island if he would come. Although $60 might not seem like much, on Daru in 1975 it represented a month’s wages for a Papua New Guinean. Frank obviously relished the chance to go to sea again. He gesticulated, his mouth puckering and grimacing noiselessly, as his daughter droned on in that high girlish voice, her face an expressionless mask. When he
made a humorous sally there was a time lag until his daughter’s delivery of the punch line, during which Frank leaned forward eagerly with his hands on his knees, his face radiant with gleeful expectation. When his daughter completed her rendition of the joke he broke into hoarse giggles, which were infectious. Frank’s son Anton, a young fellow about my age sitting at my elbow, remarked reverently, ‘You should have met father when he had a voice.’ Later, as we planned stores, times and routes in greater detail, the daughter began to make mistakes. Frank rose to his feet fuming, and she gave a little squeak and fled, while Frank fell into a moody silence. As Jerry, inebriated, slid from his chair onto the floor, the meeting came to an end.

I wandered home by way of the waterfront accompanied by Nick, a Hungarian mechanic who part-owned a shop near the wharf. He lived above the shop. The night was balmy, coconut fronds rustling beneath the stars and waves lapping gently along the seawall. Suddenly we both stopped. At the furthest reach of our vision the dim outline of the trimaran was visible at anchor. Its hull and rigging were vaguely discernible but what startled us was its profile. The deck appeared almost awash, although it was hard to be sure. Nick and I moved to the section of the seawall closest to the vessel. Though it remained a poorly defined smudge in the darkness, the vessel was certainly low in the water. After the battering the trimaran had received this was not surprising. In an instant we devised a strategy. I would swim out to the vessel and effect emergency repairs while Nick roused the crew from the club.

Nick raced off up the road as I slipped off my thongs and slid into the sea. The water was blood warm and tasted of mud. From sea level the boat seemed so much further away but I closed on it steadily, trying not to think of the scores of crocodiles Sweeney had released here only a few months earlier. Finally I approached the starboard side of the hull, splashed the last few metres and reached up. I gripped the gunnel which felt suspiciously like bamboo. Heaving myself up in one thrust I sprawled gratefully onto the deck, and found myself face to face with an open-mouthed Papuan woman squatting next to a smoking fire. I looked about me. I was on a darkened canoe, a bamboo deck under my arse, mats piled in a corner, fittings of carved mangrove, with the woman sitting bolt upright like she had seen a ghost. I suppose it was not every night that a sodden white man hauled himself aboard at 11 pm. With a polite ‘Sorry, wrong boat’ I plopped back into the sea and swam to the beach in absolute disgust. I marched home, threw off my wet clothes and went to bed. In my anger I never even thought about my thongs.
At six o'clock the next morning I woke to a pounding on my front door. Tony Kirori and Lenny Holland looked very relieved when I opened it. They had been searching for me for the last seven hours in the anchorage and along the waterfront. When he left me Nick had chased up the trimaran's owners, heard that they had shifted the boat in the evening, come back for me at the seawall, found my thongs and no sign of me, and had raised the alarm. They had all but given up hope of finding me alive when someone thought to check my house.

I obtained leave from my teaching job at the high school, still half intending to return, and three days later sailed away with as wild a crew as you'd find anywhere on the high seas. Our captain was drunk. Our navigator could not speak. Bill and Raba were still cursing each other. The baby was bawling. And I clung to the forestay, happy to have the sea riding beneath me once again, sensing the surging swells through my toes as the coast of New Guinea dwindled in our wake.

The weather was kind to us, a steady south-easterly on a rolling sea. Seated solidly at the helm, Frank relinquished the tiller only at meal times, when Jerry or I took over, our eyes glued to the compass, glancing occasionally at the canvas or the reefs and islands gliding by. Frank had marked the course on his own chart, which he had brought aboard. He allowed twice the leeway Jerry had calculated originally. His course took us within a hundred metres of Gimini Reef south of Daru, then we steered in behind the Warrior Reefs. These were Australian waters but Papuan canoes in ones and twos were scattered about the reefs everywhere. The Kiwais in their large sailing canoes harvested dugong, turtle and crayfish from these reefs to sell at Daru. The gradual depopulation of the northern Torres Strait Islands, the loss of their canoe-building culture and the demise of pearling meant that Islanders were not utilising these reefs to the extent they had in the past, and the New Guineans had moved in.

On the first night we anchored in Moon Passage, with wide sheets of half-exposed coral reefs to port and starboard. Towards the eastern horizon three white vessels appeared. Using binoculars we decided that they were probably Taiwanese fishing boats plundering giant clams on the Warrior Reefs. Hundreds of these vessels had descended on the Great Barrier Reef and the Coral Sea seeking clam meat. The navy intercepted some of them. Others sank. But the countless empty shells of giant clams, some a metre wide, dotting Queensland waters testified to the damage they were doing.

At dawn the next morning I was shaken awake by the rolling of the
boat and immediately sensed that something was amiss. We had anchored in a sheltered passage. If anything, we should be pulling sharply against the anchor, rather than experiencing the plunging/climbing motion I could feel. From the deck I was startled to find clear, open sea in all directions. Where were the Warrior Reefs? I yanked at the anchor rope, dragging in thirty metres of rope, several metres of chain, a shank and that was all. Bill's welding had not stood the test and the lower plough section of the anchor had broken away from the shank, leaving us to drift twenty kilometres or more down-wind during the night. Saibai and the coast of New Guinea were visible as a sinuous thread between sea and sky off our stern. Accustomed to such disasters, Jerry and Bill took it in their stride, but Frank grunted in disgust. Apart from losing much of our gain from the previous day's sailing, we had lost valuable leeway. The comfortable reaches Frank had planned for today had been transformed into desperate tacking. The trimaran tacked poorly, so the diesel engine would have to be run all day, adding several valuable knots an hour to our speed. While utterly capable of handling the sudden crisis, Frank was nevertheless clearly disgruntled. He shrugged and grimaced at me as if to say, 'What can one expect from such amateurs?'

All day we ploughed into the sea, reaching Yam Island at dusk and anchoring to its north with plenty of sea space, in case Bill's remaining anchor broke. We gathered in the cockpit, tired and a little dispirited. However, Jerry poured us all black coffee heavily laced with rum, and Frank, recovering from his earlier displeasure, entertained us with his mimed stories and voiceless anecdotes. This was not easy. Without his daughter, the process resembled a never-ending game of charades, with Frank bristling in mock anger at a wrong guess and beaming one of his cherubic smiles when we got it right. Presently the others drifted below decks leaving Bill and me gazing at the herring bones of cloud glowing violet and mauve in the western sky. The peaked silhouette of Yam rose inky black to our south, points of light winking from the unseen village at its base. It was a time for reflection.

I asked Bill what they would do when they reached Thursday Island. He said that he would get work, save some money, then he, Raba and the baby would be sailing on down to Cairns with Jerry. I had my doubts. His experiences on Bougainville had embittered him even more than he realised. And his rough manners might not be tolerated on Thursday Island, or anywhere for that matter.

Then Bill set me back by asking what I would do when I reached Thursday Island. I thought for a moment. With Papua New Guinea
behind me, I felt no inclination to return. I would get a job crayfishing, or taxi-driving, or even teaching. I would shoot deer to feed my family and build myself a house on a beach somewhere. Bill's reaction was typically mean-spirited. 'Yeah,' he sneered, 'I guess we all have our dreams.' His dismissive sneer provoked a similar stubborn reaction in me as Steve Mullins' comment had two years earlier. Steve's comment had prompted me to set off for New Guinea. Now Bill's put-down made me all the more determined to prove him wrong.

Next day was a glorious day of sailing, bowling along with the wind on our beam, racing past sand cays and reefs and the triangular peak of Nagi Island where Frank's Samoan ancestors had once worked. We sailed as far in this one day as we had in the previous two, sliding into Thursday Island harbour at sunset. Moored nearby were several Taiwanese clam boats. Constructed of wood, they were high in the bow and stern, dropping away amidships almost to the water line. Each vessel carried between a dozen and two dozen crew crammed into coffin-like shelves below decks. These vessels had been intercepted in Torres Strait waters by the Australian Navy and would be forfeited and destroyed. The crews would eventually be flown back to Taiwan.

We all trooped ashore to report to Australian Customs at the two-storey, shuttered colonial customs house near the main wharf. We thumped on the office door. We thumped on the door of the residence upstairs. We went to the Post Office on the next corner and phoned Customs, but could not raise them. In desperation, we even toured the pubs looking for off-duty customs officers, all to no avail. We gave up in the end and went to bed. The next day we reported during office hours and the uniformed officers took our forms without batting an eyelid. In 1975 Australian Customs on Thursday Island only knew you were there if you bothered to inform them. A hundred kilometres further north on the border with Papua New Guinea, people came and went at will.

I found accommodation at Tamwoy on the northern side of Thursday Island. Technically Tamwoy remained a reserve for Torres Strait Islanders, and non-Islanders required a written permit merely to visit the place, let alone live there. However, the powers of the Department of Native Affairs were waning and the reserve was thoroughly infiltrated by outsiders. A number of European men lived with Islander partners and some Taiwanese fishermen detained by the Navy had even moved in with hospitable Islander families. One Islander explained to me, 'They [the Taiwanese] come from a poor country and we are sorry for them.'
Within days I had a visit from Ronnie Crayfish offering me employment. I was wary, not wanting a replay of our riotous interlude two years earlier when the drinking had overshadowed the diving. Ronnie promised that this time it would be different. I'd drive his dinghy but we would be working out of another vessel managed by Kevin Fogarty, who had his own dinghy driver. Ronnie and Fogarty had reached an arrangement whereby they shared the vessel's facilities and expenses. I would be on one-third of Ronnie's catch. On their last trip they had brought in a thousand kilograms of cray tails. I knew Kevin Fogarty. He had a good reputation as a diver and ran a tight ship, so I trusted him to keep Ron in line. A couple of month's hard work dinghy driving could set me up. I flew to Daru, resigned my teaching position there and consigned my personal effects to be shipped to Thursday Island.

Meanwhile my hard-boiled friends from the yacht were struggling to get their lives on an even keel. I last saw Jerry, unshaven and dishevelled, legs askew, sprawled down the steps of the Royal Hotel. As I watched, two Islanders stepped over his inert body without a second glance. A day or two later he flew south, abandoning the yacht and voiceless Frank. In the end Frank borrowed money from Samoan families on Thursday Island and flew home to Daru.

This left Bill and Raba. Bill found employment in his trade building the new wharf on Thursday Island. The tottering, creaking structure it replaced had been demolished to universal satisfaction, even though the new wharf was considerably shorter. Bill lived on the beached trimaran only a hundred metres along the sand from his workplace. Unfortunately the yacht lay only a short distance from a battered fibro shed which housed New Guinean immigrants. This small shed accommodated more than a dozen people, the majority of them young men engaged in pearlimg. Such an influx of New Guineans was a new phenomenon. Yet Australian Customs and Immigration knew nothing of them and cared less. Most had been brought in by pearling operators in a desperate attempt to prop up the ailing industry by using a dirt-cheap, docile labour force. However, in the way of immigrants, the New Guineans soon spread out into other jobs and roles, which the labour importers had not envisaged. The New Guinean immigration scam, winked at by governments at the time, was out of control almost from its inception. Local Islanders were by no means hospitable to these early immigrants. The shed near the trimaran was peppered with holes as local Thursday Islander youths took to stoning the shed, hurling abuse
and skirmishing with its inhabitants. The New Guineans resisted with a resilience born of desperation.

Inevitably Bill and Raba were dragged into the conflict. While he worked his long shifts on the wharf, the yacht became a hang-out for dissolute New Guineans. In the way of her people Raba fed and entertained them. On his return from work Bill scattered the visitors he found lounging about the yacht and roundly abused Raba, who gave back as good as she got. It was an unhappy situation. Bill complained to me that the ‘spooks’ were eating him out of house and home. One had even stolen his tape recorder, but Bill shot him through the leg as he ran up the beach. The shock must have shown on my face, for Bill added that it was only a .22 calibre bullet, and the victim would not go to the police. It was a small island, so officials did hear of it, but as the victim was an illegal immigrant Bill was let off with a warning. He remained the same furious, abusive dynamo of negativity I had known on Daru, but his luck was running out.

Just a fortnight later Freddie Baira, a Badu Islander my age, had an altercation with Bill at the Wongai Basketball Courts in Millman Street. A game was in progress and crowds milled about outside the corrugated-iron walls enclosing the outdoor stadium. Bill had the worst of the confrontation and stormed off, while Freddie and his mates just shrugged and laughed, thinking no more about it. Minutes later Bill roared back up Millman Street in a utility which screeched to a halt outside the courts. He stepped out with a rifle. Freddie and his mates instinctively dived for cover, ending up in a deep drain as bullets whined up the road towards the local primary school. One young Islander, an innocent bystander, was struck down with a bullet in his groin. Though the victim was not critically injured, Bill was in deep trouble. He would not get out of this one.

I went to see Bill at the Police Station and came across him leaning on the fence in the front yard under supervision. He had already received a lengthy gaol sentence and was just waiting to be flown south to prison. Though visibly chastened he still tried to brazen it out. But his toughness was transparent. He was back in Australia and within a month he had shot two people and gone to prison. Not a happy homecoming. With Bill gone, Raba and the baby joined her New Guinean countrymen. I never saw them again. Then one day the trimaran too disappeared.

For a month Ron and I waited to set out crayfishing, but everything went wrong. There were delays at the wharf. The weather was atrocious.
Fogarty's dinghy driver had his jaw broken in a fight with Islanders and had to fly to Cairns for treatment. Fogarty searched unsuccessfully for a replacement driver. All the while my savings were running out fast. Ron and I were paid to unload aircraft at Horn Island a couple of times, and we caught a few crayfish when weather permitted from Ron's dinghy. I even tried for work at the new wharf, but they wanted construction workers with trade qualifications. While I still had some money left I resolved to fly back to Daru to retrieve my dinghy Sager Gub, which I had left behind.

I arrived in Daru before lunch and by 1 pm I had Sager Gub in the water near Daru jetty. Miles Poanoa, Gary Selwood's Maori mate, waved farewell from the jetty as I surged out of the anchorage, pushing south-west along the coast towards Saibai. Miles later confessed that he never expected to see me alive again. The trouble was that Sager Gub would have been a smart, handy little boat in a river or lake, but in the open sea its flat, blunt nose shoved through a wave rather than cutting through. With only a 25-horsepower motor it was dangerously underpowered. In choppy seas a larger motor might have pushed the bow over the crest of the waves. Instead water cascaded across the bow, tumbling over the windscreen and sloshing about the bilge. However, with the sea on the beam down to Saibai the boat performed quite well. The test would come when I headed south into the teeth of the gale the next day.

Sea conditions along the New Guinea coast are quite different from those experienced throughout the rest of the Torres Strait. As well as being just as choppy and treacherous, there are additional dangers. For a start the brown, silt-laden sea hides reefs, bars and shallows. The water might be ten metres deep or a mere half a metre. Wave patterns give an indication of water depth, but in this case you are reading the surface of the sea rather than what you see beneath the surface. To complicate matters, huge rainforest trees float down the New Guinea rivers and out to sea, their enormous trunks frequently lying awash, barely visible in a heaving, broken sea. Though trees are washed into the Straits most often during the wet season, they can be encountered at any time. As an additional hazard, coastal villagers string long nylon fishing nets at right angles to the coastline. Poles driven into the mud anchor these nets across the path of coastal vessels, which on a high tide can only hope to spot the poles' tops breaking the surface. However, I knew the run from Daru to Saibai well by now and arrived without incident.

I needed a navigator for the voyage south. There was only one
candidate for this vital role, Mebai Warusam. The meeting with Mebai at Middle Village was less successful than I had hoped. The wind still howled in from the south-east, and everyone remembered Koey Barb's canoe disaster of only a few months earlier. I was inclined to risk it. I could be weatherbound here for weeks as the south-easterly trades blew unabated. Finally Mebai agreed to join me, though without much enthusiasm. Surrounded by a crowd of small boys, I walked to the other end of the village to see the chairman, Wagea Waia. I needed outboard petrol, lots of it, from the Saibai Store. Wagea listened to my request carefully, then asked how much fuel I already had on board. He thought for a moment then gave me a very considered reply. He referred to Koey Barb's accident near Mabadawan, which he attributed to overloading. He felt we had sufficient fuel for the run south to Mabuiag Island in the Torres Strait where Walter Tabuai, another Saibai man, was Store Manager. We could stay with Walter and purchase more fuel there. This sounded like a good plan.

Dusk that day was grey, the sky dull as iron. The wind rose, whipping leaves from the trees, scattering them towards New Guinea. I bedded down on a pandanus mat. The building creaked and swayed in the gusts, as I lay awake marvelling at my own folly. I was pushing this expedition. No one else seemed to have any enthusiasm for it. Miles, Mebai and Wagea, all of whom I respected, had all expressed strong caution. Should I go on? Did I have a right to risk Mebai in the enterprise? As usual my stubborn streak asserted itself, though with less confidence than usual. Mebai was an experienced sailor and it was his decision to come, even if I had pressured him. I slept fitfully and at dawn the wind was subdued, much to my relief, and, I think, everybody else's.

We pulled away from Saibai to the northern end of Dauan Island, then down the lee side. As we cleared the southern point of the island we were met by the full fury of the sea raging in from the south-east. Mebai stretched his arm towards the south with fingers stiffly extended to indicate our heading. It was difficult to be heard above the roar of the outboard, the wind and the crashing sea. The swell relentlessly pushed our boat westward and Mebai constantly corrected our heading. In this fashion we zigzagged south.

After four hours we were in front of Turnagain Island, boring into a terrific sea, struggling for sea room. In desperation we drove directly into the swell and were pounded by several waves that swept right over the bow and windscreen. For the next half-hour we were fighting for our lives. Solid sheets of water lashed us, stinging our eyes and soaking
us to the bone. My shoulders and knuckles ached from wrestling at the wheel. Mebai bailed constantly with a bucket as water slopped at our ankles. Every now and again he looked up and peered blearily into the raging grey seascape around us, to check our heading.

At last Mebai called that we should stop for lunch. We were still more or less half-submerged, battling to remain afloat, but Mebai pointed and mouthed that it was only a little way. The new heading was across the sea rather than into it and Sager Gub responded nicely, lifting and surging with the wave crests, and directly ahead lay a patch of relative tranquility. A horseshoe-shaped reef, its open side facing away from the swell, enclosed a sandy lagoon. Waves thundered along the reef edge, but only rippled across the face of the lagoon, as we munched on our damper and fried fish.

‘When I bin work on luggers we swim and clean hulls in here,’ said Mebai. The waves danced around our little refuge as Mebai, smiling enormously, continued, ‘Rough weather finish now. We go straight down Orman Reef for Mabuiag.’ He gave the impression that we were as good as home. The Orman Reefs reach north from Mabuiag towards Turnagain Island in a long strand, sometimes bulging to hundreds of metres in width, sometimes less, and broken in places. We ran down the calm western side in the lee of the reef, the only hazard being isolated coral bommies lying off the reef’s edge, and finally cruised into Mabuiag anchorage as a red sun shrank into banks of grey clouds on the western horizon.

The anchorage at Mabuiag is on the north-eastern side of the island well away from the village which faces into the south-east. A dry stone breakwater, built a century ago during the pearling days, shelters the little harbour. The village store, run by the Queensland government, and the store residence sit on a lonely track near the anchorage half a kilometre from the village. With Sager Gub safely moored, tucked in behind the seawall, Mebai and I trudged wearily up the track to a splendid welcome from Walter Tabuai and his wife. We bathed Islander fashion from a bucket, then Walter presented us with clean shirts and lava-lavas to wear, before sitting us down to a hearty meal of tinned beef, onions and white rice, followed by tea and damper. We were feeling very content as we leaned back in our chairs to listen to Walter’s version of a strange event that had occurred here in recent days.

Walter had been woken in the early hours of the morning by someone thumping at his door. He approached the door cautiously, wielding his long, heavy torch, as a voice from beyond the door cried, ‘Help! Let
me in. They're after me!' Walter prised open the louvres adjacent to the door and shone his torch through. What he saw horrified him. A naked markay, shockingly white in the stark torch beam and with a mop of blond hair, pounded on the door, twisting to look back into the night with wide, terror-filled eyes. The markay's torso and limbs were smeared with blood and charcoal. The only markay on Mabuiag was the school principal, whose house was a kilometre away, and Walter knew that the apparition at his front door was not the principal.

The figure outside became more agitated, screaming 'Let me in!', as it leapt about and rattled the louvres. Walter stepped back just as a naked body hurled through the louvres and tumbled across the floor in a shower of splintered glass. Instinctively Walter whacked the intruder over the head with his torch. The 'devil', as Walter referred to the visitor, promptly vaulted back through the broken louvres and disappeared into the night.

It was quite a story. Walter presented his torch for our inspection, pointing with obvious satisfaction to a deep dent in the metal rim where it had impacted on the devil's head. Mebai looked suitably impressed and shook his head wonderingly. I pointed at the gaping hole in the windows left by the missing louvres.

'He was naked?'

'Wa, the devil was naked. Blood everywhere.'

Walter nodded emphatically. And no one had seen the devil since. No one knew where he had come from, nor where he had gone. Apart from the physical evidence of the broken glass and dented torch, he might never have existed.

Mebai walked down to visit relatives and friends in the village. I turned in early, lying half-asleep, reliving the day's struggle at sea and pondering the mystery of Walter's devil.

Early the next morning I rose and promptly walked into a kerosene lantern. In those pre-electric days lanterns were hung in doorways at night to throw light into the rooms on either side. Experienced island travellers developed an instinctive ducking movement at doorways. As it was, I smashed Walter's lantern, woke the household and received a lump on the forehead to boot.

Later, outside the store, I was pouring outboard oil into the drums of fuel we had bought, when who should come striding up the track from the anchorage but Kevin Fogarty. I greeted him in astonishment and asked him where Ronnie was.
That mad bastard,' he replied. 'After what happened here he's probably in gaol.'

Kevin did not elaborate. He was in a hurry and I did not hold him up, but a suspicion was forming in my mind.

That day's run in *Sager Gub* was a dream. The boat handled the diminishing swell between Mabuiag Island and Badu Island with ease. Soon we were gliding through the passage between Badu and Moa Island, past the pearl culture station at Poid on Moa, and on to Kubin Village on Moa's south-western extremity. We stopped at Kubin to have lunch with Solomon Aniba, a Saibai man who managed the store there. Kubin Village is built on an elevation above a snug little anchorage. From this vantage point we gazed south. The sky was a soft, egg-shell blue dotted with fleecy balls of drifting cumulus clouds. The purple hills of Hammond, Goods and Prince of Wales Island crowded over the southern horizon. Nestled among them lay Thursday Island, and home. Coral reefs, exposed by the low tide, stood out as coffee-coloured streaks in the turquoise sea. Between Kubin and our destination we needed to negotiate a series of long ribbon reefs running east to west across our path.

Mebai guided us through passages in the reefs which he knew from his time on pearling luggers. Once or twice we climbed out in our bare feet to haul *Sager Gub* over shallow stretches of reef in calf-deep water, while small reef sharks darted and circled about us. Finally we arrived at Tamwoy Landing at Thursday Island. I immediately caught a taxi round to the Customs House only to find they were closed for the day. Next morning I was on the Customs House steps as the doors opened. The officers seemed a trifle put out. Apparently I should have proceeded directly from Daru to Thursday Island. My stops at Saibai and the other islands worried them. However, after quizzing me for a while they appeared satisfied, charged me $540 import duty for bringing my boat into Australia, and let me go.

I purchased a towel and a folding travel clock to give to Mebai for risking life and limb with me, and arranged for his return to Saibai. After that I was flat broke and needed work. Almost the first person I met was Ronnie Crayfish and one glance at his hangdog expression showed that something was very wrong.

'I've done it this time, Singe,' Ronnie moaned, and proceeded to describe his latest exploit.

Fogarty's dinghy driver had arrived back from Cairns and they had immediately set out from Thursday Island in their vessel with Ronnie
who was, as usual, drunk as a lord. Fogarty steered directly for Mabuiag and anchored near the breakwater. Even in the crayfish industry’s infancy it was recognised that Mabuiag and the Orman Reefs were the heart of commercial crayfish country. At 2 am Ronnie awoke in his bunk in the dark below deck. He peered groggily about him, totally disorientated. A dull murmur echoed down the stairs from the galley where two figures could be seen huddled over a table in a patch of light. The figures of course were Fogarty and his driver, but in his disordered state Ronnie failed to recognise them. The boat rocked and creaked. The sound of their low voices crept all the way down the stairs to where Ronnie crouched in the dark like a cornered animal.

With his brain befuddled by vodka fumes and several joints of New Guinea marijuana, Ronnie assumed that the two figures in the galley were conspiring to murder him. And he was caught like a rat in a trap. But no, they would not get him that easily. He sprang up the stairs, dashed through the galley past an astonished Fogarty, and went straight over the side in a shallow dive. He was stark naked. Fogarty, recovering from his surprise, quickly launched a dinghy to pick Ronnie up. And they almost caught him once or twice before it became evident that he was evading them. Still convinced that they wanted to do away with him, Ronnie dived underwater, swimming towards the safety of the island. Soon he had left them behind, coming ashore at the base of a rugged hill that had recently been burned. So as Ronnie clambered upwards the charcoal and ashes rubbed across his naked body. He tripped and fell innumerable times. Blood from cuts and scratches smeared him from head to toe. Below him in the anchorage he saw the lights of the murderers’ boat. He had to find help, but where?

Then Ronnie saw the dull glow of a lantern and the shadowy outline of a house. He made for it, stumbling and sliding down the rocky slope. He thumped on the front door but they would not let him in, so he launched himself at the window in an act of suicidal desperation. Gashes from the broken glass were added to his other injuries. Then he was belted across the head with a torch. His nightmarish delusions fled and were replaced by the sudden realisation that he was sitting naked on the glass-strewn floor of a strange house, confronted by a very large person who was even then pulling his arm back to strike again. In an instant it came to him that real safety lay back on the boat with Fogarty. He leaped back out the window, ran to the anchorage and stole the first dinghy he found with a fuel tank and hose.

In Ronnie’s absence Fogarty had reported to Thursday Island by
radio that he had a man overboard, probably missing. Although relieved when Ronnie returned safely, he gave him a thorough tongue-lashing. They upped anchor and went directly to Thursday Island and the police station. The police, who had recently been called to the Torres Hotel to disarm Ronnie when he prowled into the bar with a loaded .303, had tired of Ronnie’s pranks. They gave him a week to leave the Torres Strait forever, or they would start laying charges. I was sorry that he would be going. He had always been generous, boisterous and good fun. It also meant that I had no job.

However, within hours I was seated behind the wheel of a taxi once again. Ronnie Laifoo, merchant and property owner, had given me a job immediately. Whereas Noel Clark, my previous employer, had operated a fleet of excellently maintained vehicles, Ronnie Laifoo seemed to operate on the opposite philosophy. His taxis were rusted, shambling wrecks driven by men who frequently resembled their vehicles. But he was a good man to work for, always smiling, easygoing and ready for a yarn. I was not pleased to be working the sixteen-hour days, six days a week, once more, but the pay was good.

I began driving on a temporary licence. The formal document arrived a week later dated 9 September 1975. Issued in Brisbane, it contained a fascinating addendum stamped in purple ink on the bottom:

SHORT TROUSERS of wool or terylene mixture of a minimum inside leg length of 7 inches and/or no higher than 2 inches above the knee cap measured from its centre, with a maximum bottom width of 23 inches; SHIRT, tie optional; Shoes fully enclosed and SOCKS.

The notion of zealous transport inspectors, armed with measuring tapes, accosting burly taxi drivers and sternly measuring off their inside leg and trouser bottoms sounded like a script from a Monty Python skit. In reality, for taxi drivers on Thursday Island, shirts were optional and bare feet the norm.

A fascinating aspect of Thursday Island in those days was the novelty of a motor vehicle ride. And the ride was not so much transportation from one place to another but a leisurely indulgence which people keenly anticipated and prepared for. Two or three friends, for example, might book the taxi for a ride from 6 pm till 7 pm on Friday, climbing aboard with several six-packs of beer, tape players and food. For the next hour we would perambulate about town in second gear while they laughed and sang and waved to friends. At different times acquaintances might be collected and dropped off at random. On one occasion
some Saibai boys just back from Kuri Bay pearl station, near Broome in Western Australia, booked my taxi for an entire night. Having worked at that remote outpost for a year, they were determined to have a huge party before returning to their families on the island. Each time I informed them that their fare had expired, one of them would simply pass me another twenty-dollar note. By sunrise my pocket bulged with notes.

However, I quickly tired of taxi driving and was on the lookout for a better line of work. One day I was visited at home by a trio of mates with faces like undertakers. They appeared vaguely surprised to see me and made stilted conversation for a bit before one gathered up his courage and blurted out, 'We heard about your trouble but we know you didn't do it!' I gave him a blank look and he ploughed on, 'We don't care what they all say. We know you're innocent.'

'What exactly are you talking about?' I asked.

It seemed that a high school teacher had been interfering with his male students. This teacher wore glasses, had dark hair and was named John, and many people had assumed that I was the culprit. On TI in those days surnames were rarely used and many were pseudonyms anyway, so it was easy to understand how I had been confused with the other teacher. The mournful expressions on my friends' faces broke into smiles of genuine relief when I explained the mix-up. I was touched that they had cared enough to come to express their support for me as soon as they had heard the news. Subsequently the man was convicted and gaolled. I presented myself at the high school and the Department of Education employed me immediately to replace him.
CHAPTER 6

Saibai Ngoeymun Lag
(Saibai Our Place)

I had married a Saibai girl from the koedhal augadh (crocodile god) clan and we had two beautiful children, Russell and Keru Vicki. We made many trips back to Saibai but one I remember in particular. It was early December and we travelled on the new Melbidir, a sleek, white, steel-hulled vessel. Bluey Bedford and Jimmy Levi were still in charge, assisted by a dozen boys from all over the Straits. The Melbidir visited all the inhabited islands monthly to resupply the stores and drop off passengers. As usual the passengers camped on the deck under a canvas awning — bags, pillows, mats and suitcases piled everywhere. Children scampered amidst the luggage squealing with excitement, while the adults, sitting babuk on mats, yarnd or played cards, or, propped at the rail, chatted, pointing out reefs and islands as we churned by. Some just curled up on a mat and dozed.

We stopped at various islands, edging as close in shore as we dared. A port opened in the Melbidir’s side and the crew passed down bags and cardboard boxes into aluminium dinghies. Boys clung to the gunnels of bobbing dinghies with their toes, tossing loads over their shoulders to others who stacked them on the dinghy’s floor. The unloading continued at a frantic rate, with the competing teams grinning and bawling encouragement to each other. Flour tins, rice bags, cartons of tinned milk and tinned meat, sacks of potatoes and onions, twenty-litre drums of outboard fuel, drums of kerosene, boxes of cigarettes, bolts of coloured cloth, and everything else an island community needed were heaped into the dinghies. As one loaded dinghy lurched away, another slid in to take its place. On the beach lines of figures could be seen
rushing cargo ashore so the dinghy could speed back for another load. The last few dinghies from shore surged alongside with passengers who climbed up through the port, pushing their rolled mats and bags into waiting hands. As the steel port clanged back in place, the new passengers emerged from below decks smiling and waving. Soon the new arrivals were settled on mats gossiping and joking.

In late afternoon we anchored behind Gebar Island, also known as Two Brothers for its high twin-peaks. The crew made the most of the last hours of daylight, roaming the shoreline and reefs with their spears, returning before dark laden with crayfish and reef fish which we ate with rice for dinner. Clutching mugs of tea we leaned on the railings watching boys spearing squid in the water under the lights along the ship's side. When it was time for bed I decided to try out one of the boat's new cabins. Everyone else seemed comfortably bedded down on deck, so I went below, found an empty cabin and climbed onto a top bunk, below a porthole. The heat was stifling and the air fetid with diesel fumes. The hum of the engine vibrated through the bulkheads. I lasted about two minutes before rushing back on deck to the comfort of my coconut mat with the breeze ruffling my cover, the swish of water under the ship's bow and the silhouette of the island's twin peaks against a starry sky.

The ship's arrival at Saibai sparked the usual happy excitement. We strolled along the seafront, under the coconut trees, family trooping alongside, eager hands grabbing our bags, rounds of handshakes and waved greetings. Our procession paused at each village for a formal cup of tea and soft damper with the headmen, Mebai and Asai at Middle Village, Koey Bab at Mauba Village and so on. The most important items in my baggage were my reading books and my Remington rifle. Life in these villages crawled along at a snail's pace with much talking and cups of tea, punctuated by bursts of activity. It could be relaxing and interesting, or extremely boring. It was what you made of it.

'Ngay urupu' translates as 'I am going to bathe', though in Broken you would say 'I go swim'. The bathhouse was a tiny shed made of corrugated-iron nailed onto a timber frame with a wooden platform to stand on over the dirt floor. You took your bucket, soap and towel into the shed, rubbed yourself all over with wet soap, then rinsed off using an old jam tin. Frogs, geckos and, occasionally, snakes infested the bath shed but it was the only way to wash. The muddy water and the crocodiles discouraged people from swimming in the salt water, though
on fine, clear days at high tide children could often be seen frolicking in the shallows.

Some houses had new gas stoves installed in them, but the shortage of gas bottles meant that most people cooked with wood. Every day parties straggled off into the bush with axes and wheelbarrows. Foraging for wood was not as simple as it seems, for people who use wood daily become connoisseurs. Not just any wood would do and we sometimes walked kilometres, trundling the wheelbarrow along bush tracks, to get the right stuff. Cooking was done in another little shed near the house on ovens cut from twenty-litre drums, called *muykun*. Stooped over the fires women prepared damper for breakfast and lunch, with fish, rice, tinned meat and occasionally turtle and dugong for the evening meal. Ducks, geese, mud crabs, crayfish, *akuls* (mussel shells) and other wild foods appeared from time to time. Gardening was in decline. Although traditional mound gardens were still being built, produce from the gardens was no longer crucial. Some sweet potatoes and cassava in the gardens had been saved for Christmas. The fat, brown tubers bulging out of the soil were quite safe providing they were not ravaged by deer herds.

A recent fishing party had come across a stag swimming two kilometres from land between Saibai and New Guinea. They had pulled him aboard and taken him home to eat. Herds of deer patrolled the village outskirts at night. Men, roused in the night by barking dogs, shone torches around the rear of the village revealing deer eyes, glowing like ribbons of sparks. I had arrived at just the right time. Westerners assume that indigenous people are natural hunters. What they forget is that hunting skills have been honed over generations to suit the hunting of a particular animal, in a particular environment and using particular technology. Saibai men were experts using the *uap* (harpoon) for turtle and dugong, and the shotgun on wildfowl, but deer hunting was different. I learned this the first time I went out, guided by half a dozen enthusiastic young men including Peter and Arthur Walit.

We threaded through tunnels in the low scrub, emerging onto rust-coloured claypans which were mottled with patches of dried reeds. These pans were slippery following recent rains and the boys taught me to push my big toe deep into the mud with each step and to walk on the reeds to avoid slipping. On the further side I found myself on open grassland. A huge almond tree marked an old village site named Waum. The grass was as high as my waist and so thick that you pushed
through, feeling your way along. Hidden in the grass were the traditional
garden mounds complete with ditches, like moats, at their base.

We had walked only for a few minutes when we came to a shady
copse, like an island in the sea of grass. As we entered the tree-line
brown deer shapes sprang from the grass all around. I pulled the rifle
into my shoulder, aimed and froze as the boys rushed forward like a
pack of hounds, pursuing the deer through the tall grass. It was chaos —
boys shouting, deer ducking and weaving — but I was already
planning my next hunt.

Two days later Arthur, Peter and I tried again. I needed guides and
we would all help to carry the meat back, but I instructed them to stay
behind the gun, to keep quiet and to pause when I paused. We walked
a long way, past the ancient wells at Mag and Meth. These wells, high
mounds capped by groves of coconut palms looming over the flat
landscape, had been dug out with digging sticks by the old people.
Dotted about the horizon other coconut trees waved above the native
bush, marking old garden and village sites. Close by was a mangrove
creek. We had walked right across the island and were on its uninhabited
southern coast. A claypan to the east showed deer tracks converging
towards a patch of scrub trees, with shallow water in a swamp to the
right and open grassland to the left. I motioned Arthur and Peter to
follow, putting my finger to my lips for silence, and we crept under the
first trees. Immediately the bush exploded: kicking legs, pale belly skin
flashing and bronzed antlers jerking. Hoofs pounded, but I could not
focus on any particular animal. Then Arthur shouted from my right. I
plunged through the scrub, sliding onto the claypan as a string of deer
hurtled past. They cantered through the hock-deep water amid sheets
of spray, four does with a very large stag at the rear shepherding them.
I dropped the stag with two shots behind the shoulder. He splashed
forward on his chin. A shout from Peter on the left and I crashed back
through the scrub out onto the grassland where deer were bobbing
about like rabbits. I rested the scope on a stag as he gathered to spring,
followed him into the air and squeezed off a round, which hit him in
the mid-section in mid-air. It plucked him out of the air and he dropped
into the grass.

It had all happened as quickly as it takes to tell of it. I had shot my
first two rusa stags on Saibai. I sat on the largest specimen, water over
my ankles, the Remington propped on the enormous antler rack,
basking in the satisfaction of it. These Saibai rusa were massive, possibly
four times the weight of stags on Prince of Wales Island. At the edge
of the grass Peter and Arthur got a fire going, and began roasting fresh
deer ribs. These brothers in their early twenties from Redlynch Village
displayed the regular facial features and sturdy build typical of Saibai.
Arthur was the louder of the two, though they both enjoyed a laugh.
They were laughing now, munching on SAO biscuits while the venison
sizzled in the flames.

We gnawed on the ribs, discussing how three men might carry two
large deer through six kilometres of bush. We finally commenced walking
with all eight legs strung on a pole suspended between Peter and
Arthur’s shoulders while I carried the deer heads, rifle and other gear.
Navigation was easy for Saibai is flat and Dauan’s high peak is always
visible to the west. But we had underestimated the weight and awk­
wardness of our loads and it was getting late. Dauan shone purple and
gold as the sun dropped to the horizon. Reluctantly we abandoned the
four fore legs, blundering along with the huge rear quarters hoisted on
our shoulders.

We stumbled into Middle Village in the dusk to an ecstatic welcome.
Asai shone his torch on the two massive stag heads, remarking ‘Hey!
We got this kind monster on our island?’ Mebai grinned from ear to
ear, a devilish gleam in his eye, and I knew it would not be long before
Middle Village had its own deer hunting rifles.

Ait Walit, the uncle of Arthur and Peter, was recognised as the best
duck hunter on Saibai. He had inherited hunting lore from his father
who had also been a gifted hunter. Ait smiled a lot but said little. His
close-cropped hair was balding on top and he sported a slim pencil
moustache which gave him a rakish appearance. For some reason I felt
he would look good in a tuxedo. When he dressed for hunting, however,
you sensed that you were in the presence of a professional. He stripped
down to a short green lava-lava, kilted above the knees and secured at
the hips by a thick leather belt from which hung a leather cartridge
box. His feet and upper body were bare so that he could creep
unhindered through the bush.

The first time I went duck hunting with Ait he left us undercover
while he stalked forward, squirming through the tangle of foliage
without disturbing a leaf. The waterbirds were in their thousands. From
our hide we could hear the ducks squabbling and carping, and the
honking of magpie geese. Finally there was the dull thud of Ait’s shot,
followed by a thunderous roar like a locomotive rushing past. A dense
cloud of black and white geese rose en masse above the trees. The cloud
mushroomed and billowed as the vast flock of birds blundered about
the sky, streaming this way and that, milling about, gradually consolidating. Eventually they streamed off to another swamp on the island. You might see them circling kilometres away at Meth or Masai or Methalap, a grey smudge which slowly settled into the landscape, and the keen hunter would follow them to stalk them on this new swamp. With Ait this was unnecessary. He bagged nine magpie geese with one shot. It was all that three of us could do to carry them home.

The boys had rounded up a motley collection of firearms for deer hunting, a couple of old .303 service rifles and the ubiquitous shotguns. Ammunition was always in short supply and hunters would sometimes borrow a single cartridge for a hunting trip. On one occasion we gathered an hour before dawn with the wind moaning in the trees. Hunt leader Dunwoodie Kabai whispered to us to check our pockets for money. Money taken on a hunt was bad luck. Then we set off in the dark across the swamps. Within the hour we had emerged onto grassland and shook out into a long skirmishing line. We swept south then east without sighting deer, finally arriving at Mag mid-morning.

Dunwoodie led us up the mound to the well, our feet crackling on the coconut fronds piled under the trees. There were snakes, guardian spirits of these special places, and to placate them one spoke quietly and behaved with circumspection. No laughing or playing was permitted. Dunwoodie took our plastic cordial bottles down the well's sloping sides to refill them while we lounged about in the shade. The mound provided a rare vantage point to look out across Saibai's flat landscape: the emerald sea of grass, rippling and shaking in the breeze; the fringes of dense woodland, for all the world like farm hedges, hemming in freshwater swamps which shimmered sapphire and silver in the tropical sun. Suddenly someone pointed back along the track of our approach. There, out across the grass, four brown dots galloped towards us. Even as we watched they surged closer — four deer apparently intent on suicide.

Only their heads and shoulders could be seen, though every few strides they bounded into the air. As usual the stag thundered behind the does pushing them along. While they were still 150 metres from us the .303s started blasting away over iron sights. In a few moments the boys had shot off their few cartridges, but their fire had turned the deer obliquely across our front so they would pass to our left. I spotted a lone pandanus tree out there, perhaps fifty metres from the mound. I scrambled down the slope and into the grass, tripping twice, rolling and coming up running each time. Then I was at the tree and finding
a rest. I settled the scope on the stag, following him till he bounded up swinging his great antlered head round to check for pursuit. My shot knocked him into the grass. I had seen the bullet's impact yet it took six men twenty minutes to find the body. Finally someone stepped on him in the long grass.

We had expected the Melbidir to visit again before Christmas with supplies to carry the island into the New Year. However, the council received word by radio that the vessel would not arrive till mid-January. As essential supplies dwindled, people began food gathering in earnest. Garden food was nearly exhausted but there was plenty of wild food about. The level of activity in the village increased noticeably.

I helped drag a long net along mangroves in neck-deep water with girls wading behind the net. When fish hit the net the girls pulled them out, bit them on the head and pushed them into a bag. Though we caught a few barramundi and salmon, most of our catch was catfish which have three slimy spines sticking from the gills and the back. These barbed spines are poisonous, causing intense pain and infection. They can break off in a wound and have to be cut out. I winced as the girls put the wriggling catfish to their lips to snap the spines off with their teeth. However, they survived unscathed to share the catch around the village on our return. Sharing was important. Hunters often gave away most of their catch, for a hunter's stock in the community was determined by his generosity rather than how much he caught.

Even with all the food-gathering activity there was plenty of time for socialising. One morning a girl walked down from Mauba to invite me to lunch with Koey Bab and Francis Abai. A prosperous-looking fellow with silver hair, Koey Bab had visited Daru on Koranga's last voyage. Francis had come across by dinghy from Dauan Island where he was the school principal. I arrived before noon and chairs were brought for us to sit under a shady fig tree near the seawall. We enjoyed a cup of tea and surveyed the coastal scenery for a while. The New Guinea coast is so close that you can see the village huts at Sigabadur with the naked eye. I commented on that. We chatted amiably about Francis's school. They inquired politely about my deer hunting. Time dragged on. After two hours I asked how lunch was going. Koey Bab replied that the women were running late and we would be having dinner rather than lunch.

As the hours passed, conversation died. A New Guinea canoe scudded by, its triangular sails made from plastic rice bags. A gaggle of adolescent girls carrying buckets tripped by on their way to draw water from the
well at Bhuttu. An hour later they toddled back, giggling, their buckets full. We observed them with frosty dignity. Some ducks winged over. I looked up and followed their course till they were tiny dots in the distant south.

Finally in the dusk we were called to a delicious meal of fresh duck, turtle, rice and tinned vegetables. Koey Bab said grace then the men and boys piled their plates while the women flicked at flies with tea towels and quietened the children who were sitting on mats to the side. Later, when the men had eaten their full, the women and children would enjoy what was left. However, perched on the chair next to Koey Bab was a light-skinned child, his grandson. The two were inseparable, for this was his first ‘white’ grandchild. There were several other ‘white’, or mixed race, children on the island and they tended to be spoilt by everyone.

An elder said to me about her three adopted grandchildren, ‘I can let those two black ones go back to their mother, but not that one. She’s my first white child.’

Intermarriage between Saibai, Dauan and Boigu was common. Ait’s wife Flora was a plump, feisty character from Boigu. In those days lawns were unheard of and yards were chipped with bush knives. Leaves and detritus were raked and burned daily. Indeed women seemed to spend much of their day raking. As I passed Ait’s house one day there was much yelling and flamboyant gesturing. Apparently Flora and her neighbour claimed ownership of the same rake. I can still see Flora prancing about, jeering ‘Yak-a-loo-la-LIE’ while brandishing the captive rake at her neighbour. Her opponent, a quiet, middle-aged woman, interjected when she could, but against such an impassioned display there was little she could do.

The weeks passed pleasantly enough. The nights were the worst. The humidity closed about me like a fog as I lay perspiring inside a mosquito net under a spluttering kerosene lantern. Mosquitoes droned ceaselessly, both inside and outside the net. The air was thick with the smoke of smouldering coconut husks lit by people to discourage the mosquitoes. When lightning crackled over the New Guinea mainland we prayed for the storm to move south over Saibai to give us the momentary relief of its cool, drenching rain. I got so little sleep during the night that a catch-up sleep during the day was obligatory.

With only rudimentary medical assistance provided by untrained Islander staff on the island, most people continued to rely on traditional healers. I witnessed one of these healers, a middle-aged woman, at work
one day. A man had been complaining of pains in the lower back. He lay face down on the floor on a towel placed on a mat. The healer sat babuk beside him arranging her items on a towel in front of her — a bar of soap, a box of matches, an empty vegemite jar, a thin slice of cardboard and a long splinter of glass. She took a dozen matches from the box and stuck them in the soap, heads upright. Then she examined the afflicted area, prodding and massaging, till she had targeted the pain zone. A word to the patient, who braced himself, and she picked up the glass shard and made a number of deep incisions at this spot. As the blood flowed, she placed the soap and matches on the laceration and lit the matches then pushed the rim of the glass jar downwards into the skin around the burning matches. The vacuum drew dark, viscous blood, the colour of ripe mulberries, upwards into the jar. When it was about half full, the healer slid the cardboard under the jar's mouth, upended the jar and removed it. She displayed it to the patient and they regarded the bottled blood, commenting on this and that as healers and patients will. The treatment apparently worked.

Without professional medical assistance, serious illness could lead quickly to death, which was blamed more often than not on sorcery. When a death occurred, the extended family were hastily gathered from the garden, seafront or wherever at the home of the family head. When all were assembled, the leader would announce the name of the deceased. Until that moment the identity of the deceased was kept secret, so family members might experience hours of harrowing speculation before being officially informed. Afterwards, the funeral took place quickly, as one would expect in the tropics: perhaps a night to dress the body and knock together a coffin, and a church service in the morning followed by an immediate burial.

Communication by council radio might take days to convey word to Thursday Island, and from there it spread slowly to the mainland. So it might be weeks or months before people discovered that a parent or favourite uncle had passed on.

A week before Christmas two pearling luggers, wearing the red spot of the Nona family painted on their bows, moored in front of Middle Village. A dinghy detached itself from the nearer vessel to make its way ashore. The Saibai Chairman, Wagea Waia, and other elders hurried down to meet the dinghy as it grounded, shaking hands with the large, impassive figure who stepped ashore. The visitor, Tanu Nona, was head of the Nona clan on Badu, head of the family pearling enterprise and Representative for all the Western Islands in their dealings with the
Queensland Government. He was the most wealthy, powerful and influential Torres Strait Islander in all the Western Islands. The luggers were transporting their New Guinean workers back to Mabadawan and other villages further up the Pahoturi River for Christmas, and would return in the New Year to recruit more workers. Heaven knows what the respective governments of Australia and PNG thought about it, if they knew at all.

The visit gave Tanu the opportunity to discuss matters with the local council and elders. The debate over the Torres Strait border with Papua New Guinea still raged and, though far from Brisbane, Canberra and Port Moresby, Saibai's leaders were vitally interested in developments. They had erected a large sign on the Saibai foreshore in front of the council office which said 'Queensland Border Will NOT Change'.

Also Tanu was renewing family links with Saibai. Tanu's Samoan father had married a Saibai woman named Ugarie, from the *thahnu aavagaadhu* (snake god) clan, before moving to Badu with his family. Though the Nona dynasty had grown and prospered at Badu and Thursday Island they did not neglect their ties with Saibai, and were respected all the more for it.

Soon the luggers drifted away up the coast to Mabadawan taking a few Saibai men on board to liaise with the Pahoturi communities. Saibai traders had travelled the Pahoturi River and its remote villages for generations, establishing long-standing friendships with the people there. A day or two later the luggers dropped the Saibai men back and returned to Badu.

In the days preceding Christmas there was a last flurry of activity as dugong, turtle, deer, duck and goose hunters bagged fresh meat in a community without refrigeration. Women checked gardens for the last of their sweet potatoes and cassava, and checked the rice and flour which they had been hoarding in preparation for the celebrations.

On Christmas Eve the whole of the Saibai community attended midnight mass at the church. The church had been built of cement made from crushed coral by the Saibai people themselves. The men and the older boys sat in pews on the left of the aisle, and the women and the younger children sat on the right. After the service worshippers wished each other well then retired to their respective villages for a light supper. Traditionally villagers 'carried dance' to other villages, dancing their way along the foreshore and performing at each village in turn. Mebai and Asai had their girls dress in flowered sarongs and perform Hawaiian-type dancing. The inhabitants of Redlynch Village
had enlisted me to play the bagpipes for them. I had learned the Scottish pipes as a boy in Brisbane and had played in a number of pipe bands. We mustered Redlynch's population into two lines behind me. When we approached a village the skirl of the pipes was joined by the throb of Islander drums from the ranks behind me and we swaggered round the village to ‘Scotland the Brave’ and ‘Bonnie Dundee’ while the stunned inhabitants sat about their supper tables in the lamplight. After our performance we all shook hands and enjoyed cups of tea and sweet damper. The festivities continued till dawn.

New Year celebrations were similar to those at Christmas, except that on the stroke of midnight anyone with a firearm aimed it skywards and blasted away. The length of the shoreline erupted in flashes and twinkles of light in Saibai's version of a fireworks display. In the daylight next morning the entire community delighted in a no-holds-barred 'rubbing play', wherein anybody might be attacked by assailants hurling flour, talcum powder, or anything else that came to hand. Briefly dignity was forgotten. It was not unusual to see your respected clan elder whooping and hollering, flour bomb in hand, pursuing victims at a run, or being pursued in turn by laughing children through a mist of thrown flour. Soon everyone was white from head to toe, but the shortage of flour and talc led to this game's premature end.

Partly as a result of the midnight shooting display Mebai found himself without shotgun ammunition. He asked if I wanted to accompany him over to the Sigababur Store in New Guinea to purchase more cartridges. We crossed the narrow passage between Saibai and New Guinea, Mebai's little six-horse outboard burbling at the stern. There were few people about as we walked up through the village houses to the store, a corrugated-iron box on posts with rough steps at the front. Inside, the shelves were empty, except for boxes of shotgun cartridges. Mebai bought several packets, then, as we turned to go, I noticed an odd calm had descended. Indeed an eerie silence hung over the place. As Mebai and I reached the door of the store I saw why. Gathered at the bottom of the steps were ranks of villagers standing grimly silent, all watching us with an air of breathless expectancy. I glanced at Mebai. He squared his jaw and darted a look at me that said 'watch out', then took a step down. Quaking inwardly I followed. The only sound was the scuff of our bare feet on the rough steps, but you could sense the rising tension, like a coiled spring, in the crowd about us.

As our feet touched the ground the villagers were on us. Arms clutched at me, wrenching this way and that, lifting me bodily off my
feet and above the heads of the crowd. Powerless to resist, I was borne through the village on a sea of hands, amidst shouting and confusion and barking dogs. Then abruptly I found myself thrown down into thick mud, with anonymous hands rolling me in it, smearing the stinking mess into my face and hair and over my body. When it finally stopped I stumbled to my feet, calf-deep in mud, and looked for Mebai. A pile of mud nearby sprouted arms and Mebai’s eyes and teeth. Around us the crowd was laughing and cheering, and now they came forward to wish us a happy New Year and shake our hands. I realised with relief that this was the Sigabadur version of ‘rubbing play’, albeit on a grand scale. We were the first Saibai visitors in the New Year and had received the full treatment. It took me days to recover from the shock.

One morning as I meandered past Middle Village I spied a strange, pale-coloured individual stepping from a dinghy. He was dressed in shorts and shirt, and the sun glistened pinkly on his long anaemic limbs. Abruptly it came to me that I knew the pale individual. He was a teacher at Bamaga, and there was nothing strange or anaemic about him. He was simply a white man and I had not set eyes on another white man for five weeks. Little wonder that when Islanders saw their first white man they called him markay, or white ghost.

After six weeks it was time to go. The Melbidir called with much needed supplies for the store and took on passengers for Thursday Island — students returning to school, patients for hospital, workers with jobs in the south. I clung to the rail as the ship hoisted anchor and ran towards Dauan Island. Along the shore clumps of figures waved and whistled. Hand-mirrors winked and the grey smoke from signal fires spiralled above the trees at the different villages, a traditional farewell for departing vessels.
By 1977 Torres Strait Islanders were at last receiving unemployment benefits and other pensions. Also the Torres Strait Border Dispute had been resolved in their favour when they sided with the Queensland National Party government to force the Commonwealth into a humiliating back-down. The border remained substantially the same, much to the chagrin of PNG politicians and their counterparts in Canberra. A new scheme, paid for and promoted by the Commonwealth government, encouraged Islander high school students to travel to the Australian mainland to attend boarding school. Hundreds of students took advantage of this scheme, effectively pulling the rug from under the Thursday Island State High School and creating a yawning gap in Torres Strait society. With their teenagers gone, families found it difficult to pursue village activities such as gardening, woodcutting and hunting. So, paradoxically, while things got better, things also got worse. Some Outer Island families were lucky to see their adolescent children from one year to the next. Many parents gave up and simply moved south to Cairns or Townsville to be with their children.

I decided to leave the Torres Strait for the same reasons that many others were going. Accommodation was substandard and expensive. Fresh food was difficult to get and costly. It was impossible to have cars and outboard motors repaired or maintained. Educational standards and facilities were unsatisfactory. There was no television, nor other services which most Australians took for granted, and even on a teacher’s pay I led a frugal existence, supplementing my family’s diet with fish, venison and other wild foods.
I received a transfer to Mossman State High School, a hundred kilometres north of Cairns. Soon I was Pipe Major of the local Pipe Band, performing at venues from Atherton to Cooktown, and my second beautiful daughter, Patimah, was born at the Mossman Hospital. On weekends we walked in the rainforest, watched crocodiles along the Daintree River or climbed the forested peaks looming above the green coastal farms. I purchased a house at Port Douglas and acquired a six-metre yacht to sail out to Low Isles and the Great Barrier Reef. Yet I was not content, for I had unfinished business with the Torres Strait.

During my last year on Thursday Island I had started to collect historical information about the Torres Strait. This was a difficult task, for apart from Reports of the Cambridge University Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait by A.C. Haddon and Margaret Lawrie’s Myths and Legends of Torres Strait there was little to work with. As I gathered and organised information I gradually realised that I was writing a general history of the Torres Strait. My manuscript was duly submitted to and, to my surprise, accepted by the University of Queensland Press. In 1979 Torres Strait: People and History was published. It sold well, and its success was to link me irrevocably with the Torres Strait Islands. All that interested me lay to my north and it was inevitable that I would return. Many people, including my parents, would never understand how I could turn my back on civilisation once again.

The Queensland Department of Education transferred me to Thursday Island but refused to provide me with accommodation. Fortunately Larry James, another teacher, made his cottage on Prince of Wales Island available to me for a nominal sum. The language name for the island is Muralag and the location of Larry’s cottage was referred to as Muralag Township.

Larry’s cottage was like a scene out of Swiss Family Robinson. It stood on a steep slope screened by coconut trees and surrounded by native bush. From the verandah one could see across the channel to Thursday Island and Horn Island, the aqua sea dotted and striped with coral patches which grew right up to the beach. I swam to the nearer reefs to spear coral trout or crayfish, which we cooked over a wood fire on the sand. It seemed an idyllic spot, but there were the usual complications, for we were not alone.

Our northern neighbours consisted of Musu and Sumai, from Badu Island, who were squatting on a block of land thirty metres along the beach. Musu, though in his sixties, was sleek and wiry with the face of
a hawk. He had terraced the slope, then nailed together a corrugated-iron shed the size of a carport. Inside were rickety beds, a rickety chair and a rickety table on which sat a kerosene lamp. Musu lived in desperate poverty, yet he proved a generous, independent-minded gentleman and the best of neighbours. If ever I needed a hand pushing a grounded dinghy or carrying a gas bottle, Musu was the man. When he caught a good haul of fish he shared them with my family. Of course we helped him when we could as well. Unfortunately his relationship with Sumai was tempestuous.

Sumai was slim and well-groomed, but when she drank alcohol, which was often, she became a terror. She babbled at the top of her voice, weeping and screeching, till Musu in exasperation thumped her. Of course this led to her whining and screaming even louder causing him to thump her again, and so it went on. At times during the night I was woken by Sumai’s pathetic wail, ‘John! John! Help! He’s killing me!’ It sounds awful but I learned to sleep through her appeals and she was always there bright as a button in the morning, more or less in one piece.

Our southern neighbours were the Mooka family from Mabuiag Island. They lived in a tumbledown corrugated-iron shed with a dirt floor surrounded by half-feral chickens and half-starved dogs. Cornwall, or Connie, was mostly absent, leaving Valerie to raise her children in conditions of squalor that would shock most Australians. They had no water tanks, relying instead on a fuel drum sunk into the beach sand over a natural soak. The water flow was slow, so they might wait ten minutes for one bucket of brackish water. To make matters worse, a crayfisherman who lived nearby fell ill with typhoid. The hospital advised us that there had been other typhoid cases on our island and that the well water was most likely contaminated. A case of typhoid was reported on Yorke Island at the same time.

The last of our close neighbours was a wizened old Timorese seaman, like an amber-coloured gnome, who squatted on various blocks of land as the whim took him. I never knew his real name. We called him ‘Datu’, Timorese for ‘grandfather’. He spent his days fossicking about, appropriating material that he could use in his various constructions. People sometimes discovered their missing timber years later propping up one of Datu’s habitations. However, with us he was scrupulously fair and invariably helpful. There was no store on Prince of Wales Island and we sometimes ran out of essentials. Once I needed matches and asked Datu for a box. He handed me a whole packet saying, ‘Datu can’t
give you just a box.’ Similarly, another time I asked him for a cup of flour. He gave me a whole packet saying, ‘Datu can’t give you just a cup.’

If Datu had a fault it was that he was a pyromaniac. There were always fires burning about his hut and he was forever burning off vegetation to tidy the place up. Unfortunately the blocks he burned off were not his and on a number of occasions thousands of dollars worth of building material went up in smoke. In fact you never knew when one of Datu’s fires would explode into a major conflagration.

Scattered further south along the beach were a number of other residences, ranging from corrugated-iron shacks to respectable cottages, inhabited by a diversity of characters. Bert was an Austrian diesel mechanic. His wife Selina came from the Port Kennedy community. Joe Broom’s shed, on the hill behind Bert’s cottage, was occupied by New Guineans, illegal immigrants who lived by their wits and by avoiding the authorities. Further along near the mangroves was Maori George. The beach outside his place was strewn with dinghies and wooden fishing boats. George, a crayfish diver, welcomed Maori countrymen and other beachcombers, though the high mortality rate among them tended to keep numbers down. One Maori had recently died of a gunshot wound at George’s compound and several other residents had died of natural causes. They were keen pig hunters and we often saw George and Richard, another Maori, knives strapped at their waist, striding into the bush behind a pack of hunting dogs.

A ridge hemmed in the beach on the western side, with a bush track winding across the saddle and dropping down into the village. At the beach’s northern end the ridge fell away into the sea pushing a massive, egg-shaped rock out into the channel facing Thursday Island. The currents foamed and thrashed at this monolith, creating whirlpools and boxing seas. At times the tidal rush piled up a metre high on one side of the rock, sweeping round the rock in a miniature waterfall.

We called the rock Blue Fish Point but its traditional name was Kiwain, named after an Islander warrior who was killed at this place. The legendary hero Waubin slashed Kiwain across the head with his shark-toothed sword and Kiwain fell into the sea and turned to stone. Most people battled past the point a few times a day on the way to shop or work at Thursday Island, a test of seamanship where a wrong move might prove fatal.

Once my motor stalled while I was rounding the rock and I pulled desperately on the oars to escape the tidal rip and edge into an eddy.
in the lee of the point. One night I answered the door to find a wet castaway who had swum ashore from a speedboat that was in trouble at the Point. I took my dinghy out in the starlight and located the missing boat near the rock in the worst of the current. The vessel was in Kiwain’s shadow, a dark smudge silhouetted by the white foam raging about it. The anchor was dragging and the two occupants were heaving on the oars to keep the boat off the rocks only metres away. I inched in onto their anchor rope, reefed the anchor in, tied the rope off on a cleat at my dinghy’s stern and accelerated. Instantly the current grabbed at us, whipping both vessels sideways, but we had just enough headway to snig the vessel out from under the rock with millimetres to spare. The rescued mariners were three teachers from the school.

Not all accidents at Blue Fish Point had such a satisfactory ending. One night Richard, Maori George’s mate, failed to return from Thursday Island. Next morning his dinghy was spotted floating upside down at Blue Fish Point. A search revealed some human remains in the shallows and the authorities assumed that sharks had attacked him while he was in the water. His friends engraved his name on a silver plaque and mounted it on the peak of the rock. Whenever I pass by I look for the plaque winking in the sun, a constant reminder of the knife-edge between safety and tragedy at sea.

On another occasion Larry’s son Matthew and Norm, a visitor, assisted a trawler in trouble at night off Blue Fish Point. The trawler’s anchor was dragging and Patrick, the sole crew member, had got the anchor rope caught round his lower leg, mangling his calf and ankle. Matthew and Norm cut the rope and the vessel spun away in the current while Larry watched helplessly from the point. Fortunately See Hop’s crayfish lugger intercepted the runaway trawler in the channel and the crew sped Patrick to hospital by dinghy where his leg was amputated at the knee. The last time I saw Patrick he was camping on Friday Island at Lennie Cook’s beach hut, long hair, beard, bare chest, beer in hand, happily stumping about on an artificial limb.

A series of mysterious disappearances at sea caused serious concern. First a white man called Bungie, who lived at Long Beach on Prince of Wales Island, vanished while returning from a shopping trip to Thursday Island. An aerial search revealed no trace of him or his dinghy. Shortly afterwards another white man, who lived at Entrance Island, also vanished in his boat without trace. Then an empty dinghy belonging to a white resident of Horn Island was found floating in the channel near Horn Island. The man had last been seen on Thursday Island the
previous evening. The white population of Prince of Wales, Entrance and Horn was quite small, and the rapid loss of three members of this community led to much speculation. There were dark rumours of New Guinean pirates preying on lone white men at night. I felt there were less dramatic explanations, such as outboards breaking down or people falling overboard. It was difficult, though, when travelling alone at night in my dinghy not to peer into the darkness just in case the pirates were out there.

Our little beach cottage on Prince of Wales was constructed of homemade cement bricks. A number of galvanised water tanks hugged the rear of the building, and a thunderbox-type toilet in a moegina lag (little house/toilet) was mounted on a rocky terrace at the back. I buried the nightsoil myself using a crowbar to excavate a hole in the rock-hard ground. We learned to do without luxuries and mostly enjoyed it. We washed Island fashion, soaping first then rinsing off, and were limited to one bucket per shower. Each day I carried twenty litres of water back from Thursday Island in jerry cans. A new gas stove in the kitchen was a luxury, but the kerosene refrigerator definitely was not. It chewed up expensive kerosene, belched toxic fumes, required constant attention and, even then, was totally erratic.

Our cottage was hemmed in by woodland and stretches of tall grass through which seldom-used footpaths meandered. Jutting above the grass the tin roofs of our neighbours' huts could be seen. Once a week Mike Dorner, Bert's brother, drove his backhoe over the rugged track from Colless Beach to collect our garbage. He had the garbage contract with the Torres Shire Council for our two beaches, the only council service provided on Prince of Wales Island.

In places where people are seldom seen animals are encountered more often. Once I discovered deer bedded down in daylight fifty metres from the verandah and at night they could be heard moving about the stony hillside at the back of the cottage.

Insects and reptiles were a problem. The cottage's hollow brick walls housed creepy crawlies including cockroaches, scorpions and orange and black centipedes the length of your hand. Large green tree frogs were attracted to the flying insects fluttering about the lanterns and no windowsill was without a drowsy yellow and green frog tucked snugly into a crevice. The frogs in turn attracted the snakes which slithered out of the bush with alarming frequency. They came in under the roof and looped down the walls or simply crawled straight in the front door.
Mostly they were slim black tree snakes with yellow stomachs, but occasionally a king brown snake turned up.

One day we arrived back from Thursday Island and were dumping shopping bags on the kitchen bench when suddenly we became aware of the mess around us. Rows of glass jars had fallen from the shelves, smashing to pieces on the floor and scattering sugar, rice, flour and glass in all directions. In the sink a green tree frog oozed blood from two puncture marks on its back. As I paused, trying to take it all in, a tawny-coloured snake, as thick as my forearm, slipped from beneath the sink. Two-year old Patimah stood in the doorway as the reptile shot towards her. However, the snake had only escape on its mind. It hit the doorjamb and trailed round it in a flash. On the verandah the children's uncle, Bobby Ibuai, hurled a spear after the snake as it disappeared into a little patch of grass next to the house. I grabbed my rifle and we hunted the snake through that measly patch of grass, eventually setting the grass alight. But when the flames died away there was no trace of the snake or a hole or any other place of refuge. It was uncanny.

A few days later I discovered the same snake in our chook pen swallowing an egg while a traumatised huddle of chooks looked on from a far corner. It slithered through a gap in the back fence while I swore and scrabbled about for a weapon, but I never saw it again. Islanders from Mer to Saibai believe in snake spirits and it is easy to understand why. The *thabu augadh* (snake god) was worshipped in old times and even today wooden carvings of snakes are placed on the graves of those belonging to the snake clan.

Prince of Wales, in those days, was a wonderful place to bring up children. They led a simple, uncomplicated life catching fish from the beach and ranging the bush for wild foods. The spiky vines of *kuthay* (wild yams) clung to trees along the hillsides and we dug out the yams before they were scorched by the inevitable bushfires. There were *wongais*, the sweet, purple fruit a magnet for children and birds alike, and purple/black *guguba* and yellow, lemon-like *pitit*. And, on weekends and holidays, we had a choice of dozens of islands to visit and explore. We voyaged to Possession Island, lunched in the coconut plantation, climbed up to Captain Cook's monument, inspected the old gold mine and collected buckets of black-lipped oysters before returning home. Another time we explored Goods Island, trekking up to the lighthouse and old forts, diving an old shipwreck and catching fish by the bucketful.

Our arrival at Muralag coincided with a dramatic new development there. Jean Cox, the American who had leased the island's hinterland,
had moved on. The lease had been acquired by an Australian businessman named Reddicliffe from the Atherton Tableland, who felt that he could make his investment pay by curtailing access by local people, promoting the island as a wilderness tourist destination and harvesting the deer for sale in the south. Through his connections with the Bjelke-Petersen National Party government he secured the enthusiastic support of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI) at Thursday Island. During 1981 Reddicliffe took 150 deer off Prince of Wales, flying them out from an airstrip on the eastern side of the island. In early 1982 he brought in a helicopter and professional deer catchers from New Zealand and mates from the south keen to participate in Queensland's only wild deer muster.

The operation was based at the airstrip five kilometres by road from the Muralag settlement where we lived. The strip, a dam and a modest homestead had been constructed by Cox, overlooking a beautiful freshwater lagoon. Boughs dipped in the stream as it chuckled over little cascades and waterfalls at either end of the deep waterhole and birds darted through the shadows. It was a place of tranquillity and beauty where local people had been accustomed to coming for picnics and bathing. All that ended very quickly. Locals were forbidden to use the waterhole. In fact they were denied permission to even set foot on the cattle run, which included most of Prince of Wales Island.

Ray, a stockman from one of the big cattle stations on the mainland, was installed as manager, with instructions to keep the locals off Prince of Wales Island except for designated leases and a strip one chain wide (20 metres) from the high-water mark. Ray brought with him all the baggage of the mainland colonial situation. He believed that he could stop people using the whole island just because he, or his employer, said so. Ray harassed harmless picnic parties at Long Beach, reminding them not to stray off the beach onto the cattle lease. Port Kennedy boys out deer hunting had to be especially cautious, for freelance deer hunting was illegal and Ray patrolled looking for poachers. Ray even tried to stop the Torres Shire Council garbage service from using the road over the saddle to our settlement since it crossed his employer's land. Altercations ensued and Ray took to wearing a revolver on his hip. Mike Dorner, the garbage contractor, carried a rifle in the garbage vehicle and asked, sarcastically, if he might have a police escort.

Threats of legal action against trespassers by Ray and his employer, backed up by the Queensland government, caused resentment in the Port Kennedy community, but this resentment turned to outright rage.
as the 1982 deer harvest began. Parties of southerners arrived on Prince of Wales Island on the *Pacific*, the small vessel that serviced Prince of Wales each day. The visitors carried rifle bags and were quite open about capturing and shooting deer. I asked one of them how many deer they were taking off. He replied bluntly, 'As many as we can catch.' The Port Kennedy community had been shooting deer on Prince of Wales for generations and were accustomed to using the island as a recreation reserve. They felt they had a prior claim to the deer since their ancestors had helped to import them from Indonesia early in the twentieth century; indeed 'rusa' is the Bahasa word for deer. The Port Kennedy boys were furious as they watched the catcher helicopter at work on Prince of Wales skimming the ridges and swooping into far valleys.

Soon it became clear that while rounding up as many deer as possible the helicopter was also used for shooting trophy stags for the clients flocking to the island. In March 1982 a headless stag was reported at Long Beach after a helicopter was seen taking off and in April another headless stag was seen at Buttertin. The waste of good venison by trophy hunters incensed the Islander people who were being prevented from hunting deer to feed their families. I was offended by these so-called 'sportsmen' who could value a trophy shot from a helicopter. In July nets set for catching deer were discovered on popular beaches on the western side of the island. After capture the deer were held in pens near the airstrip on Prince of Wales while DPI staff documented the catch. These staff accompanied the catchers in helicopters and supervised the process as deer were loaded onto planes and flown to deer farms on the Queensland mainland.

It transpired that the deer catchers had extended their activities to areas far beyond Reddicliffe's lease. Ray had proudly told me of helicopter forays into Saibai to hunt deer and I witnessed this myself. Noel Warusam, Milton Ibuai and I came across a headless deer carcass at a well called Meth on Saibai. The DPI chartered helicopters to check insect traps on the island but these were now being used for trophy hunting. My companions were incensed at the waste of meat and what they saw as the theft of their community's resources. On another occasion we watched the DPI helicopter zigzagging over the swamps behind the village. The boys swore as the aircraft settled and later a headless stag was dropped off at the chairman's house. On my return from Saibai, DPI staff intercepted me at the Thursday Island wharf, confiscating two sets of deer antlers I carried. I have the confiscation notice before me.
as I write this: ‘Deer Antlers’ ... Prohibited Import — ex Saibai ex PNG’.

The importance of this dispute over the deer lay not so much with the animal in question, or the legal questions it posed, but rather in the cavalier disregard of the rights and wishes of the local Islander community. Clearly a moneyed white elite from the south was being permitted to do as it chose. However, the controversy had aroused passions in the local community not seen since the Border Dispute a decade earlier. Now local residents convened public meetings, confronted politicians and presented petitions protesting about the removal of the deer. A government official from Brisbane commented in the Courier-Mail: ‘These animals are absolutely protected. There is a fine of up to $10,000 for killing one, but I would think it unlikely an Islander would be prosecuted.’ He obviously had no idea of what was going on in the islands at the time.

Some Port Kennedy boys took matters into their own hands and assaulted Ray, causing considerable damage. He was also gored by a wild pig on Prince of Wales and received forty stitches in his leg. The attack was captured on film by the adventurer film-maker Alby Mangels and shows the boar ripping at Ray’s leg. Luckily Ray stayed on his feet, hobbling away as a dog dashed in to pull off the pig. Few on Thursday Island were inclined to feel sorry for the deer catcher.

The protagonists in the deer war entered the 1982-83 wet season in an atmosphere of unresolved crisis. Rumours circulated that the deer harvest would recommence, but nothing eventuated. Then Ray packed up his family and headed south and we realised that the battle for deer was over. Many hundreds of deer had been exported during the years of harvesting and countless others killed. Reddicliffe continued to use the homestead as a wilderness tourism destination for a few years. Despite his best efforts, he failed to prevent local families from camping and hunting on the island. In the end he gave up, leaving the homestead to fall into disrepair. Finally it was burned to the ground.

Some months after the fire I was on long service leave, enjoying the freedom of the open road on the Atherton Tableland with the green pastures rolling up to the horizon on either side. I rounded a corner and skidded to a halt by the side of the road, for there, ahead of me, a string of deer grazed behind a high fence. A rustic, bearded fellow was working away on a nearby gate. I walked over and asked ‘Are these deer from Prince of Wales Island?’ He straightened up and said that they were but he wanted to know how I had known. By chance I had
some photographs of a stag shot on Prince of Wales in my hire car, so I pulled them out. He had never been to the Torres Strait Islands and the photographs fascinated him. These deer on the Atherton Tableland were descendants of those that Reddicliffe had flown out and their numbers had increased steadily. As well as selling the deer meat, this deer farmer exported the velvet from the stags' antlers to Asia. We chatted away as one deer devotee to another while the deer stepped daintily through the grass, arching their necks and peering at us. When I drove off I felt strangely comforted by the encounter. It was like meeting old friends far from home.
One can never appreciate the true beauty and peril of the Torres Strait without spending time under the sea. For years I dived on the reefs around the Prince of Wales group and the long, parallel reefs north to Badu, getting to know each rock and coral bommie — even the fish seemed familiar. Every patch of reef had its resident cod, a huge fish mottled fawn and cream, which would glide towards me, eyes bulging, rubbery lips gaping, hanging motionless in the blue depths. Then all of a sudden the fish’s courage would fail and it would shoot behind a bommie with a thump of the tail that resounded through the water. Later I might see the cod peeking bashfully from behind a lump of coral. In my early years on Thursday Island, in our ignorance we would have competitions to spear the biggest cod we could find. Once Ronnie Crayfish killed a huge specimen two metres long. When we cut it open we found a large, whole crayfish which the cod had scooped up. We kept the crayfish but gave the fish to Arthur Ahmat who lived behind the high school. Eventually we came to welcome the dark shapes hulking warily in the shadows. A cod reminds me of a timid dog, friendly though a little unsure of itself. Now large cod are virtually extinct on any of the reefs I know.

At various places along the reef there are cleaning stations, usually rounded lumps of brain coral, where large fish queue patiently waiting to be cleaned of parasites by tiny blue and yellow cleaner fish. Often these larger fish are slaty greys though in the islands we call them *wapa* fish, or *peku*, and their dry, white flesh is delicious. *Peku* are found streaming along reef edges in dense schools and I have speared more of them than any other fish. After gutting them we would throw them onto the barbecue whole, to roast in the jacket of their own skin.
Other fish common to the area are coral trout, parrot fish and tusk fish, and trevally. The parrot and tusk fish are universally referred to as 'bluefish' and are coloured a shimmering blue-green. Schools of them fossick over the flats, scraping away live coral and leaving livid white scars on the reef. They grind up the coral, digesting the living organisms and expelling the residue through their anus. These spurts of ground-up coral drift down as a mist to join the sand on the reef floor. Coral trout vary in colour from a lovely brick orange with sky blue spots to a dusky brown. They are usually encountered near their hole, a crevice in the coral leading to underwater tunnels and caverns. They coast gently in and out of the hole, constantly alert, ready to vanish back into their hole in the blink of an eye. The trout is one of the top predators on the reef, ambushing fish from caves and wolfing them down alive. I once speared a trout containing an undigested whole fish that was almost as long as the trout itself.

Because of the currents and tides we concentrated our dives during the first and third quarters of the moon, when the water was more clear and the currents less strong. This meant that we dived at roughly two-week intervals. In a letter to my parents I attempted to convey the exhilaration I felt as I dived the wreck of an old sailing ship:

The water was the best I've seen it up here. We dived the wreck at Goods Island. I swam right down through the cargo hold into the bottom of the ship. It was a wonderful eerie feeling being down there in the bowels of the ship with just the fish for company and the light filtering down through the broken hull and rusty decking over my head. We checked the capstan (to pull the anchor up), the masts which had fallen over the side, and the bowsprit which projected out over the bow into deep water. What a buzz!

Sometimes diving was uncomfortable and hazardous, but I still loved it. I wrote:

We went diving over near Wai Weer. The water was clear with no current but it was choppy and showery with no sun. Boy was I cold. I speared two big trout and three other fish ... I saw two sharks. One zoomed past after I speared a large trout. He was a white tip about 1.5 metres long over the side of the reef. They don't like coming up onto the reef platform. The other was a wobbegong about 2-3 metres asleep in a cave. Luckily I spotted him from behind through the cave's back entrance. They are camouflaged and his mottled tail was about 30 centimetres away. I'm glad it wasn't his mouth.

Wobbegong were known to attack unwary divers.
You never knew what might turn up on a diving trip. On one occasion we were boating north past Wai Weer when we spotted a string of objects in the water ahead. My first thought was deer but as we drew nearer I was amazed to find four half-grown bush pigs, black as coal, paddling in echelon. They had apparently entered the water kilometres away at Friday Island and were paddling doggedly eastwards for Hammond Island. I followed them out of curiosity. One foundered and drowned, but the remainder scrambled up Hammond's foreshore and vanished into the scrub. My interest in the pigs derived from an historical debate which I was engaged in at the time. Most historians state that pigs arrived in Australia with, or after, Captain Cook. I disagree, for pigs have been recorded in New Guinea for thousands of years and have been present in the Torres Strait Islands for a long time — long enough for a bunum augadhi (pig god) clan to emerge on Saibai Island. The Torres Strait is less than 120 kilometres wide and Torres Strait Islanders were enthusiastic sailors and traders. It is inconceivable that they would not have transported their domesticated pigs across this gap. The revelation that pigs would swim from island to island definitely supported this theory. There has been little archaeological work in northern Cape York Peninsula, but I have no doubt that one day archaeologists will discover pig bones there which carbon dating will confirm predate Cook's arrival.

Giant trevally provided interesting diving experiences. These huge fish, 1.5 metres long, are commonly seen cruising in from the deep water onto the shallow reef flats in the balmy days in October and November before the onset of the wet season. One day I was diving from the rocks at Kiwain Point. Sliding forward in the shadow of the rock with the shallow reef to my right, I scanned the turquoise depths ahead for the dim shapes of large bluefish. These bluefish are very skittish, zooming in from the deep and turning away nervously as they reach the reef rim. Twice I baulked as bluefish retreated out of range just as I was about to pull the spear-gun trigger. Suddenly two giant trevally brushed past me from behind. I almost jumped out of my skin, but instinctively shifted my spear point to the right and, as the trevally cruised by, I pulled the trigger. Instantaneously I realised my mistake. I was afraid that the fish would tow me over the edge into deep water and there would not be a thing I could do about it. Richard, the Maori, had been eaten by sharks at this very spot and Islanders had warned me that his ghost still haunted the place. So in that split second after
hitting the giant trevally I braced myself and hung on tight to my spear-gun.

Nothing happened. The trevally stopped in mid-flight, turned slowly on its side and gently drifted onto a bed of coral in the shallow water. It was stone dead. The spear had severed its spinal chord — the luckiest shot in my life. I skull-dragged the fish across the fringing reef to Russell, my son, who helped me wrestle it onto the rocks. We manhandled the monster fish up the slope, through the boulders and dry scrub, and then paused to rest in the shade of a wongai, a native plum tree. I looked down on the large oval rock which was the body of Kiwain, the Islander warrior. The sun glinted on silver at the crest of the rock, Richard's memorial plaque. The reef glowed in the sunlight, the deep water a clear sapphire in which the silhouettes of fish moved. It was a special moment to which I often return in my dreams.

My diving partner for many years was Paul Newman, a teacher at the school. The students were convinced he was my brother — a remarkable coincidence since, with his blond hair and dark moustache, he looked like Robert, my younger brother. Paul's wife, Cindy, came from Hammond Island and as Paul and I left Thursday Island for a diving trip in the morning we would drop Cindy and the children with her family at Hammond before heading out to sea.

Experiences with sharks are routine, but some places are worse for sharks than others. The channel between Number Two and Number Three Reefs north of Hammond Island, for example, is a notorious shark spot. Black-tipped reef sharks patrol these reefs in twos and threes, ever ready to close in on a struggling or disabled fish. Paul and I dived there a lot, for the crayfish were thick in this area, but the ever present, vigilant sharks always made the diving hazardous. We either stayed close to the dinghy or else had one man circling in the dinghy while the other dived. On one occasion Paul, carrying a big crayfish on his hand spear, was chased from the water by a posse of small sharks. He clambered onto an exposed coral outcrop, while the sharks circled the rock, till I brought the dinghy over to retrieve him. At another time, in the same place, a pack of two-metre-long sharks circled us as Paul clawed a large cray from a hole in the coral. I remember how clear the water was that day — the coral walls glittering in the sunlight, the rays washing the sand a brilliant silver. The cray jiggled on the spear and the shark pack closed in. I pushed them off with my spear-gun while Paul made for the boat, but as soon as my back was turned one of them would make a dummy run at Paul, turning away at the last second. When we reached
the dinghy, I covered them while Paul climbed in, then I pitched myself aboard in one movement. We moved 200 metres up the reef and jumped back into the water. Packs of troublesome reef sharks were an everyday event, hardly worth noting.

Tiger sharks were something different, and it was at Number Two Reef that I had my first brush with a large tiger shark. We were working a reef, two divers in the water and Paul circling in the dinghy. I was suspended over a coral wall falling away to a sand bottom eight metres below and had just speared a large peku. I threw it in the boat and kept paddling. There were no fish in sight and I was humming happily under my breath, as I often do when I am in the water. All of a sudden a huge shape materialised at my right elbow, a silver-grey torso striped with dark vertical bars, a gaping mouth, triangular teeth, and a cold, black, button eye the size of a fifty-cent piece. I froze as the tiger shark cruised past at arm's length. Next instant I was perching on a lump of coral well above the water, yelling for Paul to pick me up. I still think about that shark following unseen behind me, watching my flippers churning the water into froth and bubbles. Tiger sharks can be slow, plodding predators, closing in almost lazily on their prey. On another occasion I picked up Paul as he crouched on a rock at the end of Number One Reef with a tiger shark leisurely circling him.

The most famous tiger shark attack in Torres Strait history occurred in 1937 near Mabuiag. My good friend Carolus Isaia told me the story. He was sixteen years old at the time, working on Menibu, a Saibai lugger captained by Tabuai Zaum. The dozen crew dived for pearl shell using swimming glasses. One morning the divers were alarmed by a thrashing in the water. Carolus surfaced to see Iona Asai, his father's cousin, scramble up the lugger's side streaming blood. The other divers quickly climbed aboard. Iona's injuries were horrific. He had dived round a high rock and run head on into a tiger shark. The shark had taken Iona's head into its mouth, causing massive cuts around his neck and shoulders. Towels and blankets were used to staunch the flow of blood.

There was no wind, so one rowing dinghy was sent to Mabuiag for medical supplies while the other two dinghies towed the Menibu slowly south. Carolus sat beside his injured uncle, comforting him. Fortunately as they neared Saint Paul's a wind came up and the Menibu sailed into Port Kennedy late at night. Iona was rowed ashore where Doctor Meredith stitched him up. It is recorded in medical history that Iona's injuries required over two hundred stitches but he recovered. He had been injured during a previous shark attack in 1916. Carolus witnessed
another shark attack while working on the Saibai lugger *Saisia*. They were diving for trochus near Sark, off Saibai's southern coast, when Metuselor Mau of Dauan had part of his leg taken by a shark. After treatment at Saibai provided by Charles Turner, the government teacher, Metuselor was taken to Thursday Island by sailing boat.

Only once was I actually attacked by a tiger shark. We had dropped anchor on a patch of reef near Wai Weer, a tiny island the size of a football field. Its grassy knoll and rows of coconut palms overlook a perfect little beach. In the early days many pearlers, mostly from Rotumah and Roratonga, had died and the cemetery at the back of the island had more than twenty graves, some dating back to 1880. Over the years I had brought my children to Wai Weer for picnics and swims, and had introduced them to diving on this same sheltered reef. I believed this spot to be perfectly safe as it is enclosed on three sides by coral and it is far from any deep water. *Peku* cruised in shoals along the reef's steep sides and swarms of bluefish picked at the coral. A large bommie the shape of an onion extends from the main reef on the northern side, and here were two dark crevices favoured by coral trout. I had dived this patch a hundred times over ten years and had never experienced trouble from sharks.

This day I was accompanied by a mate called Toby. I plunged in, swimming immediately to the northern side where the onion bommie lay in about six metres of water. I took a quick breath and duck-dived to the bottom, creeping cautiously around the bommie hoping to find a big trout asleep in one of the holes.

All at once I was face to face with a tiger shark. The picture is seared into my memory. It was hanging vertically in the water, with its tail near the surface and its nose a little above the white sand of the sea floor, thrashing its head from side to side, like a dog worrying a bone. A dead fish flopped in its mouth. Fragments of torn flesh swirled about its head. In that instant the shark saw me and hurtled straight at me. There was no time to feel fear as I automatically thrust the gun at its face and back-pedalled furiously. I held the spear point to the shark's nose, the gleaming silver tip against the white of the shark's snout, between the wide spaced nostrils. As the shark moved to push past the spear point I desperately jostled it back onto the snout between the nostrils and above the leering teeth. At last my heels kicked against coral and I boosted myself backwards onto the reef flat into shallower water.

Large sharks normally shy away from shallow water but not this one.
My heart sank as it just surged on over the reef, as pugnacious and unstoppable as ever, and I pushed at it with the spear again. My back slammed into the dinghy's hull and abruptly there was nowhere left to run. There I was pinned against the dinghy with the shark pressing forward and only the length of spear separating us. The shark made to dodge past the spear point. I desperately countered and it paused. I needed to do something quickly. In desperation I lunged forward with the spear. The point struck the snout. The shark recoiled, then turned down and to my left, the silver-grey stripes on its flank rippling past my eyes. Next moment I had hauled myself over the gunnel and was sprawled on the floor of the dinghy. The whole episode had taken only a minute from start to finish. My friend was still diving only metres from the dinghy and had missed the whole thing. He was surprised and a little sceptical when I told him what had happened. The tiger shark would have sensed Toby's presence only metres away, but it had set its sights on me and me alone. I still think about that sometimes.

The sequence of events was eerily reminiscent of the attack on Iona. What might have happened had my children been in the water with me does not bear thinking about. The experience convinced me that nowhere in the sea can be regarded as safe from large sharks. It also drummed home the importance of carrying some weapon to push off an aggressive shark and keep it at a distance.

There was a string of shark attacks in the 1980s, none involving tiger sharks. A white diver was savaged on the thigh by a small reef shark while spearing coral trout near Badu. Then Wrench Mills from Thursday Island was badly bitten on the side by a wobbegong while diving for crayfish on Number One Reef. Wobbegong grow to three metres in depth and are ambush hunters. Their skin is mottled brown and tassels hang from their upper lip imitating seaweed. I have often seen them lying in caves absolutely still, ready to pounce upon passing fish.

One afternoon I found myself sitting in the corridor outside the emergency section at Thursday Island hospital. A backbone spike on a peku had pierced a knuckle joint on my left hand and the finger was swollen, throbbing and turning interesting shades of yellow and purple. Seated next to me was a tall brown figure with a towel wrapped round his head. This turned out to be Francis Sabatino, the same Francis who had helped his father on the Lady Pat all those years ago. Slowly he explained what had happened to him. He had gone diving for crayfish with friends down the east coast, off Cape York. A reef shark had suddenly barreled through, striking his head, knocking off his mask.
and tearing skin. His mates pulled him into the dinghy, wrapped his head in a towel and roared off back to Thursday Island. It had taken most of the afternoon to reach the hospital. The injuries were not life threatening, but they were serious enough.

While Francis was having his wounds attended to, another of my ex-students came in. John was a New Guinean and I remembered him as cheerful and hard working. Between the thumb and little finger of his left hand white bandages covered a gaping hole where his three fingers should have been. Matter of factly he told me what had happened. His girlfriend had recently given birth to their child, a boy I think. John was at sea diving for crayfish for several weeks and when he returned he found that his girlfriend had given their child to her elder brother. In his fury John grabbed a meat cleaver and chopped off his own fingers. It still makes my eyes water to think about it.

Another New Guinean, Koro Samai, was also injured by a reef shark. A softly spoken native of Sigabadur Village, he had worked for See Hop's for many years and was widely respected. I knew him well, for he was an elder of the Uniting Church that I attended at Thursday Island. The shark torpedoed through, ripping a crayfish from Koro's hand and almost taking his fingers with it. Careful work at Thursday Island hospital saved his fingers, though one resembled a cobbled together beef sausage.

One of the great shark myths is that they never sleep but must swim continuously. Some might, but others enjoy sleeping in caves on the reef. They run their heads, ostrich-like, into some quiet spot and doze off, leaving their tails protruding. Locations that are honeycombed with tunnels might have three or four sharks slumbering contentedly, oblivious to the fish darting about and the divers picking over the reef for crayfish. I have never disliked sharks though I am wary of them. I respect them for their honesty. With a shark, what you see is what you get.

In the 1970s Torres Strait Islanders were adjusting to face masks, fins and snorkels, but the transformation was rapid, spurred on by the incredible profits that could be made in crayfishing. On a good day a diver might spear fifty crayfish, or more, and prices were sky high. The best feature of the industry was that it was entirely unregulated. Anyone who felt like it just jumped in a boat, went diving, brought craytails back and sold them. There were no fishing licences, boats were not licensed and there were no fisheries officers to police operations. Best of all, most payments were in cash and so avoided income tax. It was a far cry from the highly organised pearling industry, but it was an
industry, for the times. Suddenly men did not need to leave the islands to seek jobs on the mainland. The diving was tough, competitive work in the salt water, perfectly suited to Islanders' temperament and outlook. They were their own masters, making lots of money, and mostly working from their own homes.

New Guineans flooding into the Straits recognised the opportunities offered by crayfishing. See Hop's imported dozens of New Guineans to dive for cray. Later the divers' families arrived and the workers' quarters behind See Hop's shop grew into a crowded little village. White expatriates, such as Lenny Holland, my mate from the Western District Club, arrived from Daru to join the crayfish industry. Lenny, who settled on Horn Island, was pleased to find so many of his friends from Daru living around Thursday Island. However, for every legal immigrant there were dozens of illegals swarming to the crayfishing grounds like bees to a honey pot.

With so many crayfish moving about and so many dinghies chasing them, these were hectic times. There was no discrete divers' etiquette operating and it was quite common to be 'dived on'. Once Paul and I were working some reefs near Packe Island south of Prince of Wales Island. Just when we came across a good patch of cray a boatload of New Guineans turned up and put down two divers using hookah on top of us. They speared about thirty. Paul and I, just free diving, took fourteen.

A year later I went on another extraordinary diving trip with Paul around Horn Island. We left at 6am and by 7 had caught five large trevally. Then we started diving. We speared trout, mangrove jack, sweetlip, snapper and fifteen crayfish, filling the esky and a plastic garbage bin with more crayfish spilling onto the floor. The weather was glorious, the water on the reefs was clear and we saw only one shark all day. This was to be my last outing with Paul, as he and his family were packing up to move to a new life on the Sunshine Coast near Brisbane. As time went by, my diving became less competitive and I was happy just to drift about with the fish and the tides and catch nothing much at all.
AIRSTRIPS were constructed on the Outer Islands during the 1970s and 1980s. Soon most people travelled by plane, and the old cargo vessels, like the Melbidir, gradually disappeared, along with the pearling luggers. The romantic days of sailing from island to island and sleeping on the deck under the stars became just a memory.

The new airstrip bisected Saibai village, the northern end of the strip terminating on the beach facing Papua New Guinea. I first went to Saibai by plane in 1981. As the aircraft circled round into the wind for the landing, I looked down on Sigabadur Village on the New Guinea coast, and off to the east the distinctive knob of Mabadawan Hill rose beside the Pahoturi River. Saibai is shaped like a sweet potato, with orange claypans, green woodland, the gold of the parched grasslands and the egg-shell blue of the freshwater swamps. From the aircraft window I saw columns of white smoke drifting skyward from the grassland where fires had left ugly black smears across the landscape. Village houses were strung along the narrow coastal strip for a kilometre, from the airstrip to some new structures clustered about Western Point.

The aircraft roared down the strip, churning up clouds of red dust that rolled through houses and over the beachfront. From the dust a reception committee emerged to shake hands and throw suitcases into a wheelbarrow, then we perambulated west through the village with the usual happy greetings and cups of tea.

As we reached the last of the Saibai houses I was surprised to see a thriving New Guinean village further over at Western Point. There were a dozen traditional huts thatched with coconut and other bush

Administration block at the old high school, 1973.

Kala Waia (left) and Wagea Waia with Saibai’s famous sign, c. 1972. (State Library of Queensland)

A sailing canoe at anchor on Saibai’s foreshore, c. 1967. Western Point is in the background and the distant peak of Dau Island can just be made out in the centre distance. (State Library of Queensland)
The view west to Mag. Smoke from a grassfire is clearly visible and the peak of Dauan Island can be seen on the far left. (State Library of Queensland)

The legendary well at Mag. These wells were enormous projects, constructed long before Europeans arrived. (State Library of Queensland)

Steve Mullins and John Singe in 1973. Singe found that his .243 was not heavy enough for large game.
John Singe and Tony Knight (a fellow teacher) with a large boar they shot at the Jardine River.

Saibai Village in 1972, showing the waterfront, the swamps behind the village, and the grassy, wooded interior. (Herald and Weekly Times)

The anchorage at Mer, with the slopes of Gelam rising above the villages clustered along the foreshore. (Courier-Mail)
The Murray islands: Mer in the foreground, Waier at left and Dawar at right.

On Saibai Island in 1973. From left: Mildred May Kawiri, Barbara Dai, Kathleen Wuri, Greta Nazi Elu and Glop Elu (on lap), Anita Sam, Shirley Babia, and Sheila Gibba and David Kawiri (on lap). (Courier-Mail)

Mebai Warusam, a hard-working traditionalist. (Courier-Mail)

Tanu Nona, from Badu, represented the Western Islands during the Torres Strait Border Dispute in the early 1970s. (*Courier-Mail*)

Saibai men. From left: Noel Warusam, Francis Abai and Meba Warusam. (*Courier-Mail*)
The old QGV Melbod in 1973. (Courier-Mail)

Daughter Patimah with her pet pig Pippa.

The view from Badune rock painting site, east along the foreshore of Hammond Island.

Looking across to Horn Island from the front verandah of the author's house at Muralag.
Dugong Story waterhole.

Jwain (Bluefish Point) on a calm day. Thursday Island in the background. Richard Thompson was slain by sharks here in 1986.
Ketu Vicki Singe (left), Patimah Singe (right) and their cousin with a 3-metre crocodile shot by neighbours at Prince of Wales Island.

Larry James, a teacher on Thursday Island since 1976, is a promoter of Islander music and helped establish the Kasuw Meta boarding college.

Bob Topping, principal of Thursday Island State High School and an outstanding educator.
The crowd outside the Quetta Memorial Cathedral on Thursday Island, on the occasion of the consecration of Assistant Bishop Kiwami Dai, 1 July 1986. (Bishop Anthony Hall-Matthews, Anglican Church of Australia)

Costumed Saibai women at the consecration. From left: Raudie Akiba, Susan Akiba, Rosepa Inosa, unknown woman with her back turned. (Bishop Anthony Hall-Matthews, Anglican Church of Australia)

Keramu Waigana celebrates the consecration. Traditionally these warrior dances conditioned men for battle. They emphasised weapons training and cohesion — crucial elements in the brutal face-to-face encounters of tribal warfare.
Bishop Kiwami Dai on his return to Saibai after the consecration. The PNG coast is in the background.

A bowman from Sigabadur (Cairns Post)

The Thursday Island State High School Drum and Bugle Corps, 1988. Front row (left to right): Paul Billy, David Nawie, Georgina Tabua, Seni Anau, Eileen Babia, Tina Dotoi, Gaimau Anau, Annie Whap, Marianne Muri, Manga Warria, Olive Bob, Jeannen Bara. Back row: Moses Warria, Bill Warusam, Frederick Pearson, Larry James, James Larry, John Bowte, Thowa Whap. The band had originally been raised from students at the Cathedral College, but this ended when the institution ceased its association with the Anglican Church of Australia and became Kavieng Meta (Emmanuel Angelicas, AIATSIS)
Cook Island dancers open the 1993 Torres Strait Cultural Festival. Behind the flags are a huge dali, the Murray Island roundhouse, and the buildings of the new Thursday Island State High School. (Cairns Post)

John Singe and Derek Nugent with a Prince of Wales stag they shot at Dugong Story.

A picnic party on Prince of Wales Island. From left: Patimah, Russell, Sharon (Russell’s partner), Ken McKenzie, a diver friend (with back to camera), John Singe and Steve Pollain.
Carolus Isua at the 1993 Cultural Festival.

Barbara Singe fishing at Wai Weer.

Barbara and John preparing an anay (cooking with hot stones) at Muralag, Thursday Island in the background.
Saibai dancer (Moses Akiba) wearing the distinctive ‘dhibal’ headdress. (Cairns Post)

School captains and vice-captains at the new Thursday Island State High School, 1992. On the left are the vice-captains, Fred Gela and Lilly Nona, and on the right the captains, Kevin Levi and Keru Singe.

Pedro Stephen (left) and Philip Mills (right) help John Singe celebrate his 25th year of teaching, 1995.
John Peet (representing the Scott family), Ron Day, Chairman of Men, and John Singe at the opening of the Scott Collection at the Karu Meta in 1993.

The Thursday Island State High School Drum Corps prepare to lead the march past at the school sports at Yorke Island in 1992. Drum Major Andrew Sampson is at left.

John Singe with part of a catch of coral trout and crayfish taken from Number Two Reef, north of Hammond Island.

The marriage of John and Barbara Singe in Cairns in 2000, a combination of Saibai bow and arrow dancers and Scottish kilts.
materials and children and dogs were everywhere. A patchwork of gardens, sprouting banana trees, hedges of cassava and mounds of sweet potato, ran from these houses down to the well at Butthu. Five years earlier there had been half a dozen New Guineans from a single family at Western Point; now there appeared to be hundreds of them. I asked Mebai about this. 'They are countrymen and we are helping them,' was his response. The traditional clan groupings did not stop at the white man's border represented by a line on a map. The shark, crocodile, cassowary and other clans extended over the salt water to village people on the Papua New Guinea coast. I understood this well. I had been the master-of-ceremonies for a tombstone unveiling at which the Saibai crocodile clan and the crocodile clan from Kibul, a village located far up the Pahoturi River, danced together. The Kibul people presented the Saibai clan with a carved wooden crocodile during the ceremony. So these new settlers at Western Point were 'countrymen', clan members from villages in Papua New Guinea. They were also illegal immigrants. They did not receive any Australian social security benefits and survived as best they could. Indeed Saibai villagers employed them as servants for as little as $10 a week — in my opinion this was slave labour but I kept my views to myself.

I was keen to begin deer hunting but the scope on my rifle needed adjusting, so Philemon Isua offered to take me out to the back of the village the next morning to test it. That night the garden land round Butthu erupted in shouts and shotgun blasts. Torch lights darted this way and that. 'Those Dhawdhalgal (New Guineans) chasing deer from their garden,' said Philemon. Right on cue hoofs thudded in the dark as deer stampeded behind our house. Torch beams worked the area round Bhuttu for most of the night as our New Guinean neighbours patrolled in an effort to protect their food crops.

In the morning Philemon called for me. He was short, with a compact, finely muscled physique. All he wore was a pair of khaki shorts. Philemon had returned to Saibai after working for years in forestry on the Atherton Tablelands. He spoke excellent English and we often enjoyed a joke and a yarn. He chuckled in his quiet way, asking if I were ready. Next to him loomed his brother Joshua, one of these giants that one encounters regularly round the islands. Joshua's nickname was King Kong and he looked the part: massive chocolate-coloured arms and torso, an enormous stomach bulging tautly over his short trousers, gnarled legs knotted with muscle, feet like slabs of rough granite and a head like a wrinkled cannon ball. This fearsome effect was spoiled by his open
smile and hearty laugh. Philemon led the way along a well-beaten path through the back of the village into dense scrub. A crowd of small shouting boys dashed beside us while the village dogs barked and nipped at the children's heels.

We had not gone more than a hundred metres when, from the bush at our feet, a large stag jumped up and was immediately accosted by the more alert dogs. He turned to face them, dropping his antler points to fend them off, while we stood gaping. A dog circled to take the stag from behind and the stag shifted ground. At any second he might break away into the scrub and be gone. I ripped a bullet from my pocket, slipped it into the rifle, pushed forward the bolt and the cartridge jammed. I wrenched at the bolt and tore at the cartridge with my fingers while the stag sparred with the dogs.

At that moment there was an almighty roar as King Kong charged forward, scattering boys like nine pins, and launched himself in a rugby tackle straight at the stag. He hit the deer broadside, knocking it down into the knee-high grass. Dogs barked and snapped at the stag as Joshua avoided the kicking hoofs and hooking antlers and bellowed for help. The little boys danced in excitement. I swore and pulled at the bolt but the cartridge was stuck fast. Philemon pulled a rope from somewhere and scrambled into the melee to tie the stag's feet. When it was done I pitied the stag. He lay snorting dust from his nostrils, flanks heaving, eyes rolling. The little boys ran back and returned pushing a wheelbarrow. Joshua, chortling happily, threw the deer into the wheelbarrow and trundled it along the track to enter the village in triumph.

I got to know a number of the New Guinean settlers. They were ambitious individuals with their own agenda and clearly saw Saibai as simply a stepping stone to better things. A young Saibai man, whom I shall call Tod, and Noysa, his New Guinean mate, took me hunting to Aith one day. Noysa was well spoken, cheerful and full of fun. He was slim and muscular, with the hooked nose common among coastal New Guineans. His hair was arranged in dreadlocks falling to his shoulders. At Aith we walked on the wrong side of a swamp, starting up two deer from the tree line on the opposite side. They melted away into the chest-high grass. After a couple of hours of fruitless stalking we shot two magpie geese and picked up a set of antlers that Tod had left in a tree on a previous hunt. Some Saibai visitors from Bamaga had asked for antlers to take home. Then we collapsed in the shade of a tree on a little island in the swamp and talked for a while about hunting and the comings and goings about the village.
There had been a rumour passed down the coast recently that rascals from Port Moresby were coming to raid Saibai. Tod and the others had sat up all night with their rifles but nothing had eventuated. Noysa spoke of moving to live with relatives who had settled on Badu Island fifty kilometres south. It was hot under the trees, the sun baking the dry red claypans around the swamps and wilting the leaves.

When it was time to go we picked up our rifles, the dead geese, our water bottles and other gear and I asked automatically, as I always do, ‘Anybody left anything?’ Noysa peered back under the trees, then exclaimed with delight, ‘Hey, someone’s balls there!’

Tod started giggling. Noysa grabbed the deer antlers, put them on his head and zigzagged back and forward like a duck in a shooting gallery, all the time braying like a constipated stag. Tod shouldered his rifle and pretended, between bouts of hysterical laughter, to blaze away. We laughed till our sides hurt.

When we arrived back at Tod’s home we found three New Guineans waiting. I was introduced to the leader who wore a mauve tracksuit, striped football socks with joggers and Playboy sunglasses. He said he came from Lae. Tod was helping him with transport through to Mabuiag Island further south. At that moment Keri Akiba, the Saibai chairman, roared up driving the council tractor. It was the only vehicle on the island, a prerogative of office.

Keri addressed the leader in the Playboy sunglasses: ‘What are you doing here? I told you to get out yesterday.’

The New Guinean shrugged. ‘We’re having trouble with our dinghy.’

Keri glared at him. ‘I don’t care. You go by tonight or else.’

‘Okay,’ the New Guinean responded, his face an impassive mask behind the sunglasses.

Keri glowered at him for a moment, then turned to Tod, who seemed to wither under Keri’s gaze. ‘Get rid of them,’ he ordered. He pushed the tractor into gear and careened off towards Western Point. Being chairman of Saibai Island was a full-time job.

The Australian border in the Torres Strait was wide open and New Guineans and other illegals were pouring in. No one appeared to care. Keri tried his best but the situation was out of control. I never blamed the New Guineans though, as it was the Australian authorities that had left open the door.

These New Guineans needed cunning and innovation to get by. On one occasion Paul Newman and I supervised Torres Strait high school students on a chartered vessel travelling to Mabuiag, Dauan and Saibai.
Islands. The Commonwealth government paid all expenses for Islander students to attend school and then provided transport home — in this case the Ronald Shipway. New Guinean high school students living on the same islands received nothing, as they were not considered indigenous and most were illegals anyway. Paul and I were on the Ronald Shipway at dawn when some New Guinean students who lived on Saibai boarded the ship and secreted themselves about it. Half an hour later two Commonwealth public servants arrived at the wharf to check names as the Torres Strait students embarked. During the remainder of the voyage the New Guineans lurked furtively in the background but eventually arrived home safely.

The proximity of New Guinea to Saibai posed interesting legal dilemmas for the authorities. Arthur Walit was an old friend and hunting companion who was with me the day I shot my first two stags on Saibai. He had patronised my taxi when he returned to Thursday Island, flush with cash, after working in Western Australia, but had mysteriously disappeared during a drinking party on a dinghy in Papua New Guinean waters near Saibai. It was the habit of boys returning from Papua New Guinea with alcohol to anchor in the channel between Saibai and Papua New Guinea and drink most of it before landing, for once on shore relatives and friends would come for their share. Arthur and two men from Dauan Island had been drinking in a dinghy when something occurred. It was later claimed that Arthur had been thrown overboard and clubbed with an oar. Islander police recovered his belt from a reef but his body was never found. One of the two survivors provided information incriminating the other, but when the case came to court in Brisbane the judge threw it out. Queensland law had no jurisdiction over crimes committed in Papua New Guinean waters. As Papua New Guinea had no interest in pursuing the matter, nothing happened there either.

I attended Arthur’s memorial service at Saibai. To the mournful tunes of Islander hymns his family cast wreaths on the waters — white frangipani, scarlet hibiscus and purple bougainvillea drifting on the tide towards the channel. Afterwards when, by Islander custom, Arthur’s possessions were given away, I received the long-sleeved dress shirt he had brought back from Western Australia.

Other people disappeared under similar circumstances along the border, where drug-running, gun-running and people smuggling were emerging as growth industries.

Nevertheless, despite the aeroplanes, Arthur’s death and the New
Guineans, life at Saibai continued much as it had always done. We sat about babuk on mats and yarne, laughed and drank tea. Islanders are gifted storytellers with marvellous senses of humour.

The funniest story I remember was told by a village elder against himself. One morning he had woken very early and spotted a ripe yellow mekay (almond fruit) at the top of a tree. He tried to knock it loose with a bamboo spear but the shaft was not quite long enough. In exasperation he climbed into the fork of the tree and was stretching upwards for the fruit when his lava-lava slipped from his waist and fluttered to the ground, leaving him naked.

He was in a quandary. The village was slowly stirring, with the odd person visiting the outhouse or stoking up a fire. While he remained in the tree, shielded by foliage, he was safe, but if he ventured down to retrieve his lava-lava he would be seen. Women straggled out to sit in front of a nearby house and he shrank back into his perch in despair. Just then a small boy emerged, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The man hissed, waved surreptitiously and even threw twigs at the child to attract his attention without alerting the women. His performance as he described his antics had the audience rolling about in stitches.

Finally the child looked up to behold the honoured head of the family stark naked in the fork of the mekay tree. He must have wondered if he were dreaming. The man gestured for the boy to come closer, but the child gaped stupidly, failing to connect the fallen lava-lava with the apparition in the tree. The man was near to tearing his hair out with frustration when the boy finally understood. He passed the cloth up to the man who hastily wrapped it around himself, descended and sauntered on his way as though nothing had happened.

Another time I watched an elder making a speech when a large mango fell from a tree and smacked him right between the shoulders. He got a shock, of course, but as everyone else laughed he began to chuckle too, joining in without self-consciousness or pretension. Traditional leaders on the islands were real characters respected by their families for their sagacity and good nature, but with so much change taking place there were naturally tensions.

The new preoccupation with deer hunting had created its own problems. The deer hunters were composed mostly of younger men, though energetic elders like Mebai had also taken to the field. Hunting parties ranged across clan boundaries and hunted deer where they found them. This in itself caused few difficulties, as the only people who bothered to walk out to the old village sites scattered about the far
reaches of the swamps were the hunters. These sites were marked by clusters of coconut and almond trees, and clumps of bamboo. They were landmarks, but more than that they were links with Saibai's agrarian past and the lore that went with it. However, deer hunters had learned that if dry grass was burned fresh green shoots appeared within days and deer flocked to browse on these newly burned sections. As well, the burning deprived deer of cover and made walking easier for the hunters. I followed boys who flicked lighted matches into the grassland every hundred metres or so, which resulted in massive blazes that burned for days. We could see the rosy glow over the swamps at night from the village. Older people, particularly the women, scolded the boyish hunters for their carelessness. Traditionally any burning was strictly controlled. In the olden times, when people relied on their garden crops, a runaway fire meant starvation. Also the fires seared young trees and ringbarked mature trees at the base. Old village sites like Kaninab, Tuin and Mag were scorched and blackened, with fallen coconut trunks smouldering on the ground. The elders attempted to enforce a ban on these wild fires, but in the long term it had little effect.

When I went with the boys I realised how much they had learned about deer hunting. They used cover well and were natural stalkers. Many had joined Charlie Company of the Army Reserve, based at Thursday Island, and wore camouflage clothing, high-laced combat boots and long knives at their waist. At times the village resembled an armed camp, but this was not unexpected for these boys were, quite literally, Australia's first line of defence and our eyes and ears along the border. The Saibai men had incorporated elements of their fierce warrior tradition into deer hunting. When a deer was shot, the killer cut off the head and hung it in a convenient tree. So, as we stalked about the bush, whitening deer skulls grinned down on us. A hundred years earlier Saibai warriors had done the same to their human enemies; indeed Torres Strait head-hunters had acquired a fearsome reputation during the nineteenth century.

It was bad luck to carry money and each hunt commenced in the pre-dawn darkness with the hunt leaders, Dunwoodie Kabai and myself, commanding everyone to turn out their pockets to check for cash. Just as bad luck could be brought about, so good luck might result from paranormal intervention. On one occasion I wounded a large doe which got into a maze of relic garden mounds. The mounds were several metres high with deep ditches in between and the grass grew chest high. I stumbled up and over the mounds in the stifling heat, the doe's
head popping up and down every so often without giving me a clear shot. Milton Ibuai, carrying a shotgun loaded with birdshot, closed on the doe’s flank, freezing in mid-stride each time the deer ducked its head up. I ploughed on, near exhaustion, till finally I heard the dull thud of the shotgun. When I reached the scene the doe lay sprawled amid crushed grass in the harsh sunlight. Milton knelt by the deer, his head bowed, as he prayed aloud to his dead father. I stood in silence while he spoke in language, ‘Bab (Father), thank you for giving us this deer. You have gone away from us but your spirit is still here to help us. Koey esso (big thanks).’

Nothing could equal the big deer hunt, Saibai fashion. One morning a dozen of us assembled in the dark on the airstrip carrying a variety of weapons including lever-action Winchesters and shotguns, but the most popular by far were the SKS semi-automatic Chinese assault rifles. These featured a banana magazine and a folding bayonet below the muzzle. The magazine held thirty cartridges firing the short .308 rounds as fast as you could pull the trigger. SKS rifles were available without a licence from stores in Queensland for as little as $400 and were being smuggled into Papua New Guinea by the dozen in exchange for gunja (marijuana). I had replaced my .243 rifle as it was not heavy enough for these big Saibai deer. I gave the rifle to my son Russell, then 13, and bought myself an Interarms .308, a magnificent weapon ideally suited for the task at hand.

We stepped off the airstrip in single file, passing banana gardens and cassava mounds. As the eastern horizon turned grey we shook out into a line and swept forward into the wind. It was not long before our skirmish line started up a pair of four-pointer stags in an open, burned patch. They were completely exposed, their coats pale against the blackened landscape, and the gun line opened up with a deafening roar. Ahead the stags danced amidst little geysers of dust kicked up by bullets. A small tree toppled, cut down by gunfire, chunks flew from an adjacent anthill and the stags dashed through the firestorm into the safety of the unburnt grassland. The boys had fired off probably fifty rounds, damaging a few trees and giving the ant-hill a hell of a caning. They just shrugged and trudged off.

An hour later as we glided into a tree line we all felt it: deer were near, we could smell them! Skin tingling, I stepped gently, careful not to disturb even a leaf. To my left Bobby Ibuai signalled with his hand: two deer moving towards you. I shifted my feet, bringing the rifle up to my shoulder just as a six-pointer stag strolled into view no more
than ten metres away. I fired instantly and the stag cartwheeled before dropping dead at the base of a small tree.

The day was still young so it was decided to go on. Having slung the dead stag in the fork of a tree, we formed up in line again and moved forward. This time there was no warning. The grass here was thick and green and the nearest trees a hundred metres away when suddenly deer leaped up all about us. Chaos ensued. The crack of the SKS and the boom of heavier firearms were interspersed with oaths and shouts. Deer dashed about like rabbits between us, in front of us and behind us. Lead flew in all directions. An enormous set of antlers emerged from the grass to my left as a huge stag rolled to his feet. I spun round, put a shot into his shoulder, then lunged over and fired another into his head. Then it was just a matter of ducking down next to my victim and waiting for the shooting to stop.

Gradually the firing died down and I stood up gingerly to survey the scene. The deer had dispersed all over the landscape. Away in the distance some fanatics were still running to and fro, banging off shots. Nearer to me groups of camouflaged figures laughed and shouted. It seemed that there were no human casualties, though how no one was killed I will never understand. Apart from my stag there were no deer casualties either. Which was probably just as well, for my stag proved to be a gigantic nine-pointer, definitely the largest I ever shot. The antlers were soft and velvety, like prickly rubber in your hands.

It was five kilometres to the village. We cut up the nine-pointer stag into manageable portions and staggered off home with it. We left the mighty head in a tree, staring out across the savanna with glazed eyes. After dumping the venison at the village I guided a party back to where our six-pointer hung in the tree. Philemon, King Kong and half a dozen others came along, pushing a wheelbarrow through kilometres of bush. We found thousands of green ants crawling over the corpse and seared them off with torches of burning grass before dismembering the carcass. It was mid-afternoon when we finally wheeled the six-pointer into the village.

Occasionally there were reminders of the older spirits lurking about the place. Although Saibai people were Christians their new beliefs co-existed with the old. One evening a duck hunter stumbled home with some startling news. He had been creeping about the trees near a swamp when he became aware of another presence. The hairs rose on the back of his neck as he turned to behold a dhogay leering down
on him and he fled in terror. His news was greeted with consternation and mutterings of ‘Augadh aw porun!’ (Oh my God!).

Dhogay are predatory female spirits which often harass and terrorise humans. Ugly, cackling, wrinkled crones, they fart and gabble in crude dhogay fashion. They are tall and thin, with ears so long that they lie on one and use the other as a cover. Dhogay live in caves or underground, emerging to steal food and attack humans who, in return, generally hunted them down mercilessly. Saibai and all the neighbouring islands, Gebar, Boigu and Dauan, have legends in which dhogay kidnap humans, murder them and, sometimes, cannibalise them. Sometimes dhogay seek handsome young men, using magic to impersonate wives and sweethearts.

The news that a dhogay skulked nearby, apparently on the lookout for males, made the young men decidedly nervous. Hunting was suspended and they travelled at night in groups with torches and lanterns. A few evenings later King Kong went down to check his family dinghy in front of the village where the low tide had exposed vast mudflats. As he checked the ropes and fastenings in the dusk he suddenly felt the cold presence of the spirit woman and glanced to his side. There, spread-eagled in the mud, the dhogay slithered towards him, and he turned and scampered up the beach to safety. I was there and heard King Kong’s story from his lips with the wind fluttering the coconut leaves and the kerosene lamps spluttering. Which may account for what happened to me the following night.

I was sleeping in a front room of a house near the seafront where the dinghies were moored. In my dreams I heard a voice calling my name, ‘John ... John’. Then I was awake, the house and village silent in the wee hours of the morning, just the murmur of the sea on the rocks and a strange, sibilant whisper calling my name. It drew me to the window facing down to the sea. A half-moon shone down casting wild shadows stretching towards the beach where it seemed to me something moved. As I watched, a pale, ghosdy figure floated into view. I heard the voice calling again and I realised instinctively that it was the phantom. Curiously I felt no fear. The whole episode had a dream-like quality. I remember persuading myself that it really was just a dream, and making myself get back into bed, inviting the sleep in again to block the dream out. It might not make much sense but that is what I remembered in the morning. And that was it, my only paranormal experience. Or was it just a bad dream? Islanders, of course, had no doubt at all, but after that the dhogay was not seen again. Perhaps I had scared her off.
Steve Mullins and I witnessed this clash of new and old, Christianity and culture, in the classic Saibai puri puri outbreak of 1982. I had lost track of Steve for a few years when I went to Papua New Guinea. He had settled in Rockhampton where he completed his Bachelor of Arts. Research for his master's thesis on Frank Jardine, the colonial magistrate from Somerset on Cape York, brought Steve back to Thursday Island. He was the same irreverent rascal as ever and we talked Torres Strait history over beers till the early hours. I had heard alarming rumours from Saibai and persuaded Steve to join me on a voyage to the island on the Anglican mission vessel Josepha Tauki. The Anglican Church had dispatched Bishop Hamish Jamieson, head of the Diocese of Carpentaria which had its offices on Thursday Island, to look into the problem. Hamish explained the problem over cups of tea as we ploughed north. Basically people from the western end of Saibai village had accused those living in the eastern end of using maydh. While the eastern end people staunchly maintained their innocence, the western end had withdrawn from any contact with them.

On our arrival Steve and I were housed at the western village, and the Bishop's party occupied a neutral house next to the church. The fear was palpable as night approached. In the evening everyone gathered on mats in the open, well lit by lanterns. Children huddled in the middle surrounded by a protective ring of adults, while armed men patrolled the village perimeter. We were told that sorcerers on the other side were using animals to carry magic. Several stray dogs had been shot and as we spoke shotguns occasionally blasted away in settlements around us. Men were shooting sapual (flying foxes), we were told. Flying foxes carried magic too. Then someone called out, pointing to a nearby tree where an owl had alighted and was peering about. A man with a shotgun stepped cautiously out of the light, while everyone else held their breath and watched the owl apprehensively. The man re-emerged resting his barrel along a coconut trunk. Bang! The poor owl dissolved in a puff of feathers. Owls carried magic too, apparently. We talked on for a while but the constant vigilance and the thud of shotguns were a distraction and I soon went to bed.

The Bishop went about the reconciliation process in a low-key manner, visiting clan heads at east and west, listening to them and urging them to attend communion at the church. Many Saibai people felt that things had gone too far and were happy to help. When the service went ahead, communion was served by the Bishop himself to clan elders from east and west. Later Steve and I enjoyed a cup of tea with Hamish.
and his assistant. It seemed very pukka and very British: under the coconut trees, outrigger canoes rocking at anchor, the Papua New Guinea coast green across the water, white men with English accents sipping tea, snowy shirts with silver crosses on the collars, Islanders padding softly in the background waiting on our table. It struck me how colonial we must appear and how colonial, in fact, we were. Sometimes I had to pinch myself and ask, ‘What am I doing here?’ Then the moment would pass and it all seemed perfectly normal.

Hamish expressed quiet satisfaction at the success of his mission, though it would take years for resentment about the affair to fade. Indeed Saibai people still talk about it twenty years on.

The following morning Steve tramped out with a group of us to Mebai’s gardens at the end of the airstrip with Mebai tapping a stout bamboo rod in front to scare off snakes. The gardens were mounded in the traditional way with cut sheafs of grass laid over the bare earth. Barbed wire enclosed the garden perimeter to deter deer. Mebai had travelled fifty kilometres by dinghy to Daru to buy the wire, but even then the deer stretched under and between the strands with their long necks, nipping at any green shoots within reach. We climbed about the mound cutting sugar cane sticks as thick as your arm for the children to chew on and lopping down bunches of fat yellow bananas. Finally we bundled them all into a wheelbarrow with some sweet potatoes and trundled off home.

In the afternoon we borrowed a single-barrel shotgun from somewhere for Steve to use but Saibai was chronically short of ammunition. When there was plenty the boys blew it away with abandon, then spent the next month hoarding two or three bullets. Only two cartridges were available for Steve, one duck shot and one SG, a heavier shot suitable for deer. We were patrolling a dried swamp, with a hedge of grass to our left, when a stag leaped directly in front of me. He was a handsome sight as he threw back his antlers and cantered away, a mature young stag in its prime, and I just stood there. Steve gave me a quizzical look before asking in exasperation, ‘Why didn’t you shoot?’ — a reasonable enough question and I am not sure what I told him. The truth was, I had not wanted to shoot. It was almost as if the stag had offered himself to me and it was too easy. Better to let him go. Later on I recognised my reluctance to shoot as a sign of maturity — I had lost the killer instinct at last. From now on I hunted to feed my family rather than to satisfy some atavistic urge — I left that to the younger fellows. The following day Steve shot a plump doe with his single SG
cartridge — not a bad effort. He completed his thesis, *The Pioneer Legend of Frank Jardine*, and was appointed Lecturer in History at the Central Queensland University at Rockhampton.

Steve was not the only academic prowling Saibai's wild places. One day, far south of the village, I spotted dark figures among the relic gardens at Tuin. I waded across the swamp to meet a pack of small boys followed by a swarm of barking, tail-wagging dogs. Behind them marched a couple of larger boys carrying a dead stag tied to a pole. At the rear came a bearded Islander, lugging a rifle, and a young white man. I recognised the bearded fellow immediately and we rushed to shake hands. It was Dana Ober who had been school captain at Thursday Island State High School in 1970 and was presently studying at the Australian National University in Canberra.

We trailed along behind the boys who were toting the stag, Dana saying that he was back visiting his family and his traditional land. He introduced me to his white companion, Rodney Mitchell, who rattled away in the Saibai language Kalaw Kawaw Ya or KKY as if he was born to it. Rodney explained that his father had managed the old Torres Strait College on Thursday Island and Bamaga, and he and Dana were boyhood friends. They invited me to join them on an expedition to the ancient village site at Augar in the eastern swamps and I jumped at the chance. They were searching for the skull of the famous crocodile clan leader named Maigi, or Moegi.

The three of us arrived at a landing, deep in the mangroves, called Danimud. The last time I had visited Danimud, with Mebai, a huge crocodile had slid lazily into the silty brown water while I watched. Saibai people do not usually shoot crocodiles, partly because so many of them are associated with the crocodile clan, so there are always a few around. Dana led us through mangroves with the roots catching at our legs, but after slogging along for some time he decided we were lost. The path was so overgrown that we had missed it. However, Rodney climbed a tree, gazed about and pointed south. A little later we broke out into open freshwater swamps where, to the west, the bright red flowers of a Christmas tree marked the vacant site of old Aith village. Ahead, over a kilometre or so of swamp, lay Augar. The luke-warm water stung the scratches on my legs as we plodded across the swamp under a broiling tropical sun.

Augar itself was a small grassy island littered with fallen coconut trunks and surrounded by drying swamps. We soon located Maigi's skull at the base of a coconut stump. Large bu, or trumpet shells, had
been placed on either side of the skull, which was fragile and badly damaged. Few people ventured there and deer trails wound through the scrub and across the clay pans. We took photos of the site and later Dana helped me with my report to the Archaeological Branch of the Department of Aboriginal and Islanders’ Advancement. Archaeology had been an interest of mine for some time and I had submitted reports on more than twenty-five previously unrecorded archaeological sites in the Torres Strait Islands. I also assisted Tony Barham of the University of London School of Archaeology during a series of visits he made to the Torres Strait. Oral histories that I recorded on Saibai, to supplement the archaeological work, were included with Tony’s final report.

Dana graduated from the ANU with a degree in linguistics and anthropology in 1985 — the first Torres Strait Islander to do so. The following year, as leader of the *samu augadh* (cassowary god) clan, he officiated at the ordination of Kiwand Dai, the first Torres Strait Islander bishop to be appointed by the Anglican Church. On 1 July 1986 thousands of participants and spectators gathered from all over Australia at the Quetta Memorial Cathedral on Thursday Island. In a scene of barbaric splendour, a solid phalanx of Saibai warriors and their supporters advanced down the road towards the cathedral, stepping to the hypnotic booming of dozens of island drums. Tall black cassowary-plume headdresses nodded in time. Saffron-coloured fibre skirts rustled and swayed. In their midst, adorned in the costume of a traditional chief and leader, was Kiwand Dai. By his side strode Dana, in cassowary headdress, warrior pendants and black beard.

The Saibai Islanders escorted their chief to the cathedral door. There Kiwand carefully put aside his traditional adornments for the mitre, cope, staff and ring of a bishop of the Anglican Church of Australia. It was a time of supreme achievement shared by all the Saibai community. A tribute, published in the *Torres News* by the *sui bayelham augadh* (swamp bird/shark god) clan of which Kiwani was chief, recalls the glory of the moment:

**WAKEMAB, Koey Maba, Malu Garkaz.**

Koey Maba,

You alone bear the greatest HONOUR,

The FIRST among us to wear the mitre and hold the staff,

The light of the Lord shone upon you that day,

As you purposefully strode down the aisle,

resplendent in your ancient samu, zazi, gabagab and gagai thaiak.
Wakemab, proud and fearless.
The Warrior became a Prince in the ancient
Church of a greater realm.
Torres Strait rejoiced and embraced you,
holiest leader.

Wakemab was a cunning head-hunter of legend who turned into a
rock in the sea off the eastern end of Saibai. He headed the sui baydham
awgadh. Koey Maba (Big Man) and Malu Garkaz (Man of the Sea) are
praise names used for Wakemab or the chief of the sui baydham awgadh.
Samu, zazi, gabagab, gagai and thaiak are cassowary (feathers), skirt,
stone-headed club, bow and arrow respectively.

The poetic manner in which the fierce authority of the warrior
leader has been woven into, and imbued with, the spiritual integrity of
one called to service by the Christian god reflects Saibai's outlook on
the world. There is no incongruity in the two traditions existing side
by side — a man can be a Christian bishop and a tribal chief, or a
graduate of the ANU and leader of the samu augadh. In 1988 Kiwami
returned to Saibai to preside over celebrations marking the fiftieth
anniversary of the completion of the community's church. Saibai's
population (normally 300) jumped to 4,000 during the celebrations.
Two thousand people came from New Guinea and the foreshore was
crowded with sailing canoes and dinghies. The dancing and feasting
went on all night.

If life for the people of Saibai seemed good and fulfilling, then mine
also was full of promise for finally I would make good the vow I had
made to Bill on the trimaran's deck off Yam Island. At last I was ready
to build my own house at Muralag Beach on Prince of Wales Island.
Finding land to buy on Prince of Wales Island was not as easy as you might think. The Queensland government had been steadily revoking leases on the island for some time, so the number of available blocks of land scattered around the island’s fringe was constantly decreasing. Finally I found a student at high school whose aunt, Aziku Paiwan, leased a block at Muralag but who was settled in Townsville. She obtained the lot at auction in 1973, paying $90 per annum for a thirty-year lease. At these auctions many Torres Strait Islanders had bid successfully for leasehold blocks on Horn and Prince of Wales Islands, but a decade later the state government was pressuring leaseholders to build on them. This was difficult and expensive, as the Torres Shire Council insisted that new buildings meet a strict new building code. Most Islanders simply sold out and moved into the new government housing that was springing up at Thursday Island, Bamaga and the Outer Islands. One of these was Larry James’ neighbour Connie Mooka.

Connie sold his block to a Chinese businessman from Thursday Island and moved to Bamaga. One evening in June 1987 Larry and I met Connie by chance at the Federal Hotel on Thursday Island. We talked for a while about his old place on Prince of Wales. He talked about how he liked Bamaga where he lived in government housing among his friends and relatives. The following morning Connie returned to Bamaga and that night was attacked and eaten by a large crocodile while fishing on the beach near Cowal Creek.

It was not just the cost and the new building codes which forced Islander landowners off Prince of Wales Island. The main reason that
Islanders sold their leases rests in their gregarious natures. Their communities operate through interaction and teamwork. Living in an isolated spot like Prince of Wales Island, remote from friends and relatives, was unnatural and a genuine hardship. Those adventurous few who remained, like Musu, were independent-minded eccentrics, much the same as anybody else who took the trouble to live on Prince of Wales Island.

I paid Aziku $15,000 in 1988 for the block and was thrilled with my purchase. The block sloped down to the beach, where a little freshwater stream crossed obliquely from south to north before entering the sea. The view was stunning and included Thursday Island, Horn Island and six other islands. Down the channel to the south, beyond Prince of Wales's high forested headlands, the hills of Cape York crowded the horizon. We cleared the screw pines and wattles that dotted the block by hand, leaving selected trees and even digging a few fan palms out of the bush to ornament the place. I spaced coconut plants across the front. We carried 20 litre jerry cans every weekend to water our trees as the tank water on site was needed for building. As well as six coconut trees, we had two cashew trees, a mango and other odds and ends. Horses left manure all over the landscape which we collected and stock-piled for our garden.

I contracted an excellent local builder, Des Murfet, to construct the house. An outgoing, bearded Tasmanian, he had lived in the islands for over twenty years with his partner, Selin David, a delightful, smiling woman from Yam Island. The council scrutinised the house plans, ensuring that they conformed to the highest cyclone rating before approving them. The old free and easy days of just throwing up a shed anywhere were over. Or were they?

One day a dinghy full of people moored at the beach in front of Larry's cottage. Two figures climbed out laden with plastic shopping bags and cordial bottles full of water. The taller of the newcomers was a lanky white man in shorts and t-shirt named Les. His companion was Dulcie, a middle-aged Saibai woman. With Musu's help they hammered away at old sheets of iron and derelict timber and by nightfall a new squatters' shed sat under the casuarina trees on the beachfront. Musu, apparently, had met Dulcie and Les at the hotel and generously offered them a place on his beach, where they camped for months without water, bathroom or toilet. Larry complained to the council but, with land rights an emerging issue in the islands, both local and state governments prevaricated when it came to Islander squatters.
In response, we adopted a scorched-earth policy at Muralag: as soon as squatters moved out their residence was destroyed. Connie had not been squatting, but when he moved to Bamaga his residence had been demolished to prevent anyone moving into it. When Datu, the most infamous of our squatters, passed away, he was buried at Thursday Island by friends from the small Timorese community there. Within a week I watched as his home was burned to the ground by the landowner and neighbours. The walls and roof collapsed inwards with a shower of sparks, while the group stood about in the shade drinking beer, ready to prevent the blaze spreading into the bush.

However, events brought Les and Dulcie’s squatting to an end. One afternoon as Larry left Back Beach on Thursday Island he encountered Les lolling in the salt water gulping wine from a flagon. That night Les was washed up dead on the beach. A short time later Dulcie passed away from natural causes. Larry and I took our axes and crowbars to their dwelling, reducing it to a pile of bent tin and broken timber. Though people were shocked at our action, it seemed to us that since the government refused to act we would have to.

Squatters notwithstanding, the building of our family house went ahead. It is impossible to adequately describe the happy chaos of those long months. First my mates and I built a generator shed on a cement slab among the bush at the rear. Then we brought over water tanks in dinghies from Thursday Island. By December 1988 the house was finished. It was highset to take full advantage of the view, with verandahs at back and front. The bathroom was all white and blue marble, the kitchen had built-in benches and pine cupboards, and there was a gas wall oven and five-burner hot-plate. This was the house of my dreams.

Council workers had constructed roads through Muralag township and conventional housing increased as the tin sheds disappeared. Larry replaced his brick cottage with a two-storey beach house. Theo Petrou, a Greek Cypriot crayfish diver, built a low-set brick home near the creek. His wife, Elfreda, came from the Levi family at St Paul’s on Moa Island. Yennie Loban, an outboard mechanic from Port Kennedy had Des Murfet build him a two-storey brick home next door to Theo. Yennie’s wife, Alice, came from the Baira family at Badu.

As the permanent buildings and population grew so did the traffic. Four-wheel drives rattled along the roads carrying families to waterholes and picnic places previously accessible only by foot or dinghy. Deer and pigs retreated further back into the hills away from all this activity, though the odd snake still appeared. In February 1989 I surprised a
two-metre-long king brown snake under the house. Fortunately I speared it with an unusually accurate throw. Ironically the biggest animal pests turned out to be some horses owned by Ronnie Laifoo. They clumped about under the house knocking things down and ransacked the garden. Whenever we were away the horses sneaked in to munch the leaves off bananas, passionfruit, cassava, sweet potato vines and anything else in sight. As my dinghy pulled into the beach I could see them sauntering up the hill, snickering contentedly. The children loved these four-legged larrikins, feeding them and even riding them bareback, but I had to do something. In desperation I ordered a solar-powered electric fence to string around our boundary, but before it arrived a neighbour found a more permanent solution. He came home to catch the horses demolishing his banana trees down by the creek, so he shot them dead. The children on the beach were crushed and Ronnie was outraged, but that was it. Never again would we watch the horses ambling under the coconut trees or skulking in the scrub planning mischief. Although they had been rogues, we all missed them.

The good thing about Prince of Wales was that there were always plenty of potential pets about. As I went for my evening jog out towards the homestead, I often spotted wild pigs and black jungle fowl. One evening a sow and seven piglets straggled across the road in front of me and I snatched up the last little fellow, a black boar with a white patch on his nose. He squealed all the way home, but my nine-year-old daughter, Patimah, soon pacified him. She called him Pippa and they became inseparable. Patimah even took him fishing in the dinghy, giving up in disgust after he bolted down the bait. In fact Pippa would eat anything — table scraps, meat, fish and wild foods. He grew sleek and fat, his coal black hair shining in the sunlight as he dug his snout into the stony soil and waddled along, ploughing up the ground in long furrows while grunting absent-mindedly. However, dried dog food remained his chief delight and he would go to any lengths to get it.

Finally, when Pippa grew too big and bellicose, I persuaded Patimah that we would have to let him go. He had taken to chasing dogs and head-butting the generator shed to get at the dog food, and it was all I could do to carry him, let alone restrain him. We loaded Pippa into the dinghy and took him down the channel to Entrance Island where shooting was banned. The three white beachcombers on this beautiful little island protected their deer herd from hunters and there were natural springs and plenty of wild food for a growing pig. Patimah
never had a chance to miss him, as there followed a succession of other pets — another pig, ducks, several dogs, a bat and budgerigars.

Russell and I ranged the wild hills and valleys looking for game. I carried the .308, while Russell hunted with the old .243. We saw plenty of pigs, mostly jet black, with the odd white and black spotted one, though we rarely shot them unless we planned an amay (earth oven). Once, a friend of mine, a teacher turned crayfish dinghy driver named Steve Pollain, was having a party, so we were on the lookout for pigs. Steve lived in a tumbledown beach shack under a high, rocky bluff about two kilometres south of my place. Russell and I trekked out to the valley near the homestead, then spread out fifty metres apart to stalk back into the wind, peering ahead and listening to the bush sounds. A red-footed scrub hen scratched at her egg mound and a huge grey goanna, clinging to a tree trunk, hissed as I passed.

Suddenly I heard the bang of the .243 off to the left and instinctively propped with the rifle at my shoulder. I scanned the bush but nothing moved. There followed a second shot, and another, then two more followed by a shaky, 'Dad'. Russell was out of ammunition. He called out again and I rushed over. He had wounded a boar which then turned and charged. He killed it with his last bullet from behind a very small tree when it was just metres away.

I gutted the boar, pulled it across my shoulders and we trudged up the long hill leading to the bluff behind Steve's house. It is good walking country, open woodland where you can pick your way round thickets and patches of scrub. At last we paused on the crest looking down to where Steve's dinghy bobbed, like a child's toy boat, in a tiny cove sheltered by grey rocks on either side. Coconut trees hemmed in the house's flat, square roof shining silver in the sun near the white crescent of beach. We descended the steep slope, slipping and stumbling, more on our arses than our feet, and by noon had a fire blazing in a hole packed with stones on the beach in front of Steve's house. When the fire died down we placed the pork legs wrapped in coconut and banana leaves and alfoil among the super-heated stones. A layer of green almond leaves covered the stones and meat, then island mats and wet hessian sacks covered the almond leaves. We spent some time carefully shovelling sand round the edges and over the mats and hessian to prevent the steam escaping, then settled back for a couple of well-deserved beers. After three hours we pushed aside the hot sand and peeled back the mats and hessian. Clouds of mouth-watering steam rolled out to engulf the crowd while we lifted out the succulent, tender meat. Maori George
and his mates cooked up some deer steaks on the barbecue and we drank, told stories and sang island songs as the shadows lengthened and the sky dimmed from the bright, hot blue of day to the soft mauve of dusk.

Among the party guests was a muscular, copper-skinned Kiwi nicknamed Static who lived on the other side of the headland, where his shack perched on the side of the hill hidden by trees and rocks. Static had built his residence illegally on crown land and had chosen its location to avoid detection. Eventually the Queensland Lands Department had granted him a permit to reside, recognising that he lived there but without giving him any legal rights to the land. Static’s partner, Damu came from Mabodawan Village in Papua New Guinea and their children attended school on Thursday Island. Static had a wicked sense of humour, accentuated by the pronounced stutter that had earned him his nickname. When Static told a joke the audience was left in delicious anticipation, breathlessly awaiting the punchline, while Static, eyes bulging in concentration, struggled to master his stutter. And it was always worth the wait, for Static was one of the best joke-tellers I’ve ever heard.

Damu had a sunny disposition, happily chattering away in Broken to all and sundry. When Static was absent for weeks at a time on his boat diving for crayfish, Damu and the children fended for themselves, though they were seldom alone as wantoks from Mabodawan were forever coming and going. The wave of New Guinean migrants, which rolled south into the Torres Strait Islands during the 1970s and 1980s, consisted largely of families from Mabodawan village near Saibai. As they became established and purchased dinghies, they became highly mobile, speeding across the sea to visit other Mabodawan settlements among the islands. We always got on well with them.

Once, Russell picked up a young Mabodawan fellow from Static’s place and walked up into the hills hunting deer. Deer are always alert and usually the hunter sees just a dark blur flashing into cover, or hears a rattle of stones as the deer circle around him along the ridgeline. On this occasion Russell was lucky. He and his friend peered down into a fold of ground behind the crest and spotted two four-pointer stags, downing both with a bullet each. That was the easy part. Russell arrived home at 9 am to report that he’d shot two stags in the mountains about three kilometres away. I was the only one to ‘volunteer’ to help. We walked through scrub and rocks and climbed rainforested ridges, then repeated the process carrying 60 kilograms of deer each on the way down.
A few weeks later Russell attempted to repeat this feat. He and Richard Takai from Thursday Island anchored their dinghy at the end of Countrywoman Beach, with dark mangroves on one side and open beach on the other. Mangroves and tidal swamps clog the coastline for several kilometres south of this point. As the tide was falling they left their dinghy in deep water, wading ashore in the dark with their rifles and shoes held above their heads. Several hours later they trudged back to find their dinghy still afloat and a dead three-metre crocodile awash on the sand next to it. A nearby resident had spotted the crocodile lurking next to the dinghy and killed it with a bullet between the eyes. The shooter had four children and was not taking any chances. I brought my daughters down to have a look and they clowned with the dead reptile while I took photographs. I was amazed at the slick, satiny texture of the animal’s hide. The belly skin, coloured a rich buttercup yellow, was as smooth as silk.

We spent half our lives in the water and often saw crocodiles. Usually we tried to shoot them, for they are cunning, persistent predators that would not hesitate to attack us. On Albany Island a large crocodile kept stalking one of our friends every time he went near the jetty. It kept disappearing and sneaking up on his blind side or behind him. Once it got to within two metres of him before he turned and saw it. He ended up shooting the crocodile which was three metres long. Whenever the sea was smooth, large crocodiles roamed about and might be found cruising in open water, kilometres from land. Occasionally large crocodiles moved onto the rubbish dump at Thursday Island, foraging through the garbage and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The council erected ‘Beware of Crocodiles’ signs there.

The most celebrated case of crocodiles invading the human domain occurred at the Thursday Island State High School. One May residents at Tamwoy became alarmed at the noises emanating from the creek running through the school grounds at the end of the football oval. Then someone claimed to have seen a large crocodile exploring the touchline round the goal posts. Police advised the school that crocodiles had taken up residence on the school grounds and that we should take appropriate precautions.

The creek meandered through lush, chest-high grass and spindly pandanus trees, past the goal posts, then beneath a culvert which supported Thursday Island’s main circuit road, before flowing through a shaggy line of mangroves to the sea. The school’s principal, Steve Garret, kept the students off the oval, sent a letter home to parents
notifying them of the crocodiles’ presence and contacted the wildlife authorities. I was in the school office with Steve when he spoke with the wildlife authorities on the phone. The conversation went something like this:

Steve: ‘There are crocodiles in the creek near our goal posts on the school football oval.’
Wildlife: ‘Yes’ ...
Steve: ‘Well, we can’t use the oval and students have to walk long distances round the area to get to and from school.’
Wildlife: ‘The crocodiles are in the creek?’
Steve: ‘Yes.’
Wildlife: ‘Mmmmm …’
Steve (tentatively): ‘Perhaps you could send someone up here to remove them or relocate them.’
Wildlife (horrified): ‘No, no. The crocodiles are in their natural environment.’
Steve (dead pan): ‘It’s a football oval.’
Wildlife (doubtfully): ‘Nevertheless … What we can do is send you a “Beware of Crocodiles” sign to mount on your oval.’
Steve (ironically): ‘Thank you very much.’

And that is how the famous ‘Beware of Crocodiles’ sign came to be mounted on the fence of the high school oval.

It’s hard to know how long the reptiles were actually there. After four or five days Tamwoy residents agreed that Bamaga Kerry, a New Guinean, should go over the fence for a look. Bamaga, a short, wiry fellow, rummaged around in the long grass along the creek bank for a bit with only his head and shoulders visible and finally declared that the animals were nowhere to be found. We left our crocodile sign where it was.

However, on Prince of Wales Island there were non-terrestrial menaces as well. The beaches and coves of the islands surrounding Thursday Island are sprinkled with headstones and tiny cemeteries. Whites and South Sea Islanders, pioneers in the pearling industry, died like flies from dysentery, beri-beri, misadventure and alcoholism. There was a cemetery reserve at Steve Pollain’s place containing a high marble headstone for Marama, a Rorotongan who died in 1880, and in the little valley winding back behind Burt and Selina Dorner’s cottage lay an old grave. There was no headstone, just rocks lining the burial site. It was rumoured to be the resting-place of a tragic young white woman who had come to the islands with her man and died here. She was said to roam the valley and the creek-crossing near Burt’s place seeking her
lost love. Various residents of Maori George’s place had encountered her. Rocky, walking home drunk from a party one night, met the woman as he crossed the bridge over the creek. She was dressed in white, long hair falling over her shoulders, and Rocky was talking with her before he suddenly realised his mistake and fled home. Another time Jimmy Yorkston, tramping home in the dark with his groceries in cardboard boxes, encountered the spectral woman at the bridge and hurried off leaving his boxes and shopping strewn across the road. Other residents such as Steve and Larry were sceptical of these stories, though some nights when the wind sighed in the branches and the moon shone silver over the sea casting fantastic shadows under the trees, I was reminded of the dhogay episode at Saibai.

I was rapidly becoming aware of a general unease spreading through the Torres Strait community. There was discontent in the air, the optimism of earlier years having been displaced by a sense of anxiety about the future. Independence was being discussed and even on remote Prince of Wales Island the political currents stirring through the islands came to dominate our actions and thoughts. In late 1988 we were startled by press reports that the Torres United Party (TUP) proposed to convert Prince of Wales Island into an international tourist destination and city. Jim Akee, the TUP spokesman and self-styled prime minister of the Torres Strait, was a very large man with thinning hair and a thick, black moustache. He was articulate and persuasive and attracted the media’s attention when he elaborated on the plan. The 16,000 Torres Strait Islanders living on the Australian mainland would return and settle on Prince of Wales Island where the profits from tourist resorts would finance infrastructure. Akee, from Mer, and his henchmen lived in Townsville, but they originated from the Eastern Islands, 200 kilometres east of Prince of Wales Island. The TUP had not negotiated with the Kauraregs (the traditional owners), nor the Port Kennedy community who frequented Muralag, nor the landowners on the island like myself. Naturally it aroused a hornet’s nest of opposition and the TUP were forced to scrap the proposal.

One result of the furore was that the traditional owners were motivated to consider their position. The Kauraregs were an Islander people who spoke Kala Lagau Ya (KLY) and who had sailed large double-outrigger canoes, trading and hunting, about the Prince of Wales Island group. They were implicated in two well-documented massacres of seamen in 1859 and 1869, in which twenty-five foreigners died, and had subsequently been deported from Hammond Island to live with
their friends and relatives on Moa Island forty kilometres north. However, after World War II many had come drifting back, mostly to Horn Island. The TUP proposal served as a catalyst for them to form the Muralag Tribal Corporation in an effort to retrieve their lands and heritage. Despite the corporation’s name, the Kauraregs appeared mostly concerned with Horn Island and Thursday Island, though I did receive a phone call from Ronny Wasaga, the Kaurareg leader, advising that I should not go hunting on his traditional lands as it was dangerous. I told him that the way I hunted was not dangerous and, in any case, I had never seen him or any of his people on Prince of Wales Island.

However, Wasaga and the Kauraregs had bigger fish to fry than me, for when they seceded from the Island Coordinating Council, which had its office on Thursday Island, and joined the Aboriginal Coordinating Council based in Cairns, they radically altered the political balance in the Torres Strait forever. In one fell swoop all the islands from Cape York to almost halfway across the Torres Strait became subject to possible Aboriginal native title claims. If the Kauraregs’ friends on Moa are included, it can be seen that a wedge had effectively been pushed through the heart of the Torres Strait, dividing east from west. Scores of islands, including Thursday Island, Horn and Prince of Wales, became technically Aboriginal land. The discomfort of the Port Kennedy people, and other Islander residents round Thursday Island, was apparent. They were caught in a bind, for how might they expect their claims to land (e.g. Mabo on Mer) to be respected if they were not prepared to respect Kaurareg claims in the Prince of Wales Islands? Jim Akee continued to turn up from time to time in the Torres Strait, till he was convicted of defrauding a Community Development Employment Program of a very large sum of money and gaol ed for three years. Ironically the money was stolen from Wasaga and the Kauraregs.

While political storms gathered on the horizon, our lives at Muralag were transformed by the arrival of a 4WD Suzuki belonging to Derek Nugent, a teaching colleague. Derek was a dapper, enthusiastic type of fellow who loved the bush. He left the Suzuki at my place for me to use and maintain, so long as it was there for him when he wanted it. In the afternoons I took the children out to swim at waterholes and on the way back detoured to the mangroves to collect *akul* (bivalve mussels) and *bedhabu* (conical-shaped shells) to throw on the fire at home. On weekends Derek and one or two other keen outdoorsmen would arrive by dinghy and we would rattle off into the hills seeking adventure. The hinterland was virtually unknown, and as we discovered
waterfalls and valleys we assigned our own names to them, such as Twin Falls and Pig Valley.

Burt Dorner told us about Bald Hills, a valley with permanent springs and grassed slopes rising to Mount Scott, the highest mountain on the island. We left the car where the rough track petered out and started walking at dawn. I was teamed up with a new arrival from Brisbane, so I explained to him that we would be alert for deer moving upwards out of the grassland towards the heights where they lay and rested during the day.

We crept along the tree line and through thickets, watching the open glades and grassy slopes. One deer leaped up from the grass and vanished into the trees before I had time to take breath. A bit further on I spotted an object moving in the leaf clutter near a large screw pine. I realised it was a deer's tail twitching gently, but in that instant the deer moved on, disappearing behind the tree. I stalked to the left, flanking the screw pine — it was the work of only a few seconds — and peered behind the tree on its open side ... at empty bush. The deer had sensed our presence, and rather than speeding off had probably squatted down and crawled away. I have seen this happen a number of times. The animal simply drops down into the grass and becomes invisible. Stags lay their antlers back along their spines before worming their way to cover. It has to be seen to be appreciated.

We followed a well-used animal trail, climbing all the time, till finally we broke free of the scrub into a magnificent pass. On our right the green, grassed slopes rose steeply to a distant tree line. To our left the ground dropped away to a black gorge. The steep forested slope above the gorge lay silent and impenetrable. Ahead the trail crossed a grassy saddle. So as we walked along the trail we looked forward and up the open slopes to our right.

Just then, far up on the slope, at the distant tree line, I spotted a dun-coloured blob, which shifted even as I watched. Through the scope I saw that it was a fat young stag browsing at the very edge of the trees. I snapped off one shot, at extreme range uphill, and was surprised when the blob jerked and fell. We pulled ourselves up through the grass and eventually came upon the stag, a four-pointer, sprawled among the first saplings on the tree line, green shoots still clamped between his teeth. The bullet had caught him behind the shoulder, dropping him between one mouthful of grass and the next. My new hunting companion was most impressed. He was not to know that the shot was a fluke and probably thought I shot like this all the time.
We collapsed with the stag at our feet and our backs against the trees. The view from this height was glorious. It was one of those days in which the bright sunlight illuminates everything with extraordinary clarity. Away to the north-east the harbour of Thursday Island nestled at the foot of Millman Hill. Each little vessel shone as a point of light in the pearly blue basin of the sea. It was still early but we could see tiny motor vehicles crawling ant-like between the tiny houses, which were arranged in little rows along the beach and up the hills. A windscreen flashed suddenly as it caught the sun. Over there people were getting out of bed, turning on the television and pulling a milk carton from the refrigerator, while here we sat in an absolute wilderness untouched by human hand. Even the stag at our feet was an interloper, for deer had been on the island for no more than seventy years.

We gazed down over the saddle below us. The sea swept away to the horizon, glinting and shimmering in the early morning sunlight. Islands studded the sea all the way to Cape York: Horn, Entrance, Cheripoo, Little Woody, Big Woody, Possession, Dayman; islands big and small and all shapes. Beautiful little Cheripoo Island was a chunk of red rock with the seabirds hovering like a mist above it. Beyond, in the middle distance, Little Woody and Big Woody Islands were shaggy clumps of emerald rainforest. Their fringing reefs, and the shallow platform reef joining them, spread an opal sheen around the two islands.

It was a view to take the breath away, and over the years I returned to this place often. I had a favourite tree where I would lounge in the shade, leaning on a rock, while the dry grasses murmured about me. Small black and yellow sunbirds constructed their nest there, a grey bag of twigs and leaves hanging from a branch over my head. They fussed about the nest poking and pulling things into place, appearing not to notice the lone human, reclining below, watching them absently. I enjoyed these solitary musings. It is not often we get the time and space to reflect, in an unhurried way, on the beauty and completeness of nature and our small role in it all. But always the world of humans called me back and I would wander down the valley to the 4WD vehicle beside the creek and return, with some regret, to that other world.

West of Bald Hills is Bat Falls, one of the natural wonders of the Torres Strait. I learned of the falls’ location from one of the few people who had been there. We approached along a rocky stream where the monsoonal forest arches overhead to blot out the sun. It was cool and dark, moss grew on trunks, and half-decayed trees lay crumpled amid
the boulders. Finally, in a narrow defile deep in the monsoonal forest, we were confronted by a jumble of boulders. On the right a fig tree had sprouted atop a huge rock, the roots draping down the smooth stone surface like so many ropes. To the left water gushed from a v-shaped chute of grey, polished granite. From beyond the chute an echoing roar drew us onwards. Using the roots we abseiled up the rock, edged across the cliff face beyond and finally emerged into a perfect, symmetrical basin carved from the bedrock by the stream. The water spilt from the plateau above in a clear drop to a deep, crystal pool. Wavelets lapped at a small beach of coarse sand the colour of raw sugar. Droplets of moisture rose in a mist, buffeted by the continuous draught of cold air pushed out from the base of the falls. Shafts of sunlight, penetrating the forest canopy, twinkled and sparkled in the cloud of water vapour overhead. On the right, opposite the beach, there was an overhang reaching back into a shallow cave. Here in a world of constant damp and thundering noise was the colony of delicate, insect-eating bats from which the falls took their name.

Bat Falls was the most stunningly beautiful place I had ever seen and we had plenty to choose from for during the wet season waterfalls spurted from cliffs and valleys all over the island. However, the normally rugged roads became treacherous in rain. One Easter expedition ended in disaster. Two 4WDs, a Land-Rover and a Landcruiser, became immersed in a sea of mud. The Suzuki powered through, but some water must have penetrated the electrics, because it would not start on Sunday morning when we wanted to return. After abandoning the vehicles we were picked up by dinghies from Big Buttertin Creek. As we idled out the creek mouth, a crocodile surfaced next to the dinghy within arm’s reach of where Patimah sat. We finally drove the Suzuki out Easter Tuesday through bogs and roads covered by water. The Landcruiser was recovered after a fortnight but the Land-Rover was still there four weeks later.

Gradually as the years passed more vehicles arrived on the island and more hunters took to spotlighting from the back of trucks at night. Animals were particularly vulnerable to spotlighting, for they often stood and glanced mildly at a motor vehicle passing nearby, whereas a traveller on foot would send them scattering to the hills. Deer, in particular, are dazzled by lights, posing motionless in the light beam, their eyes electric blue/green points in the darkness. Using spotlights, teams of hunters shot truckloads of deer with ease and were back the following weekend for more. As the slaughter continued the surviving
deer retreated into the hills where real skill was necessary to stalk them. Spotligheters on the flat country still found deer but not in the numbers we had seen in the early days. As the deer herds retreated into the hills we followed them. We drove up rocky trails into the ranges around Dugong Story which I had first seen in 1970. On my first visit there was no walking track, much less roads. Now the orchids were gone, to suburban gardens in Cairns or backyards on Thursday Island, and the area was littered with the familiar detritus of human contact: broken glass, empty beer cans, tyre tracks from trail bikes and vast burnt areas where deer hunters had set the bush alight.

The bushfires often burned for weeks, driven by strong south-easterly winds right across the island's mountainous backbone till they emerged onto beaches on the western and northern coastlines. Several homes were lost in bushfires and others suffered damage to water tanks, pipes, sheds and fencing. There was no fire brigade; neighbours just banded together to help each other. In November 1991 I wrote to my parents: 'We haven't had any rain since April and it's as dry as I've ever seen it. There have been bushfires everywhere. As you can see in the paper, a house was burned down last week. Larry and I are driving over to check on a fire that began this afternoon at Colless Beach (1 km NW of us). It's a bit of a worry as we are all at work on TI during the day. We have 900 gallons of water left to see us through and are hopefully examining each passing cloud for signs of rain.' Two years later it was just as bad: 'The last couple of days we had terrific bushfires. Patimah and I went down to Pollain's place on Tuesday to give him a hand, but he lost a fibreglass water tank. The last two nights it was round our beach. At night all the hills were on fire — most spectacular ... But today it's all quiet — nothing left to burn. At Colless's they were smoked out for a few days and lost some hoses, water tanks, etc.' For those of us struggling to survive on Prince of Wales the destruction of water tanks, hoses and generator sheds had an impact not understood by town dwellers on Thursday Island. Indeed we lived on a knife's edge much of the time — just getting to work and home again could be dangerous.

Late one evening a shaken Larry James phoned me. His voice sounded strained, quite unlike his normal casual rumble. He had just arrived home and wanted to talk. Half an hour earlier he had been leaving Back Beach in his dinghy, after a school function, when he spotted two large vessels approaching on his starboard. It was a clear night with light winds, the gentle swells rolling westward in the starlight, and as the vessels passed Larry accelerated to go between them. Larry's dinghy
displayed no lights, the normal practice for TI dinghies, so the crews on the larger vessels probably did not even know he was there.

Unfortunately the first vessel was towing the second and Larry's outboard leg kicked up as it struck the submerged towline. The propeller screamed in the air while Larry looked up at the hundred-tonne dumb barge bearing down on him. If his outboard had stalled, or snagged on the towline, he would have vanished without trace, just another mysterious disappearance at sea. In desperation he pushed the outboard back down and sneaked out from beneath the barge's bow by the skin of his teeth, the two vessels ploughing on completely unaware of the little drama they had left in their wake. We both realised how close Larry had come to a horrible death and for some time afterwards we looked out for towlines and dumb barges in the night.

The risks we encountered daily, and the frequency of death and injury, hardened us to misfortune and tragedy. However, occasionally an event occurred that shook even the toughest and most cynical among us. In November 1992 the 10-year-old daughter of a local crayfish diver was accidentally shot dead by her 13-year-old brother while the parents were away. The boy was incoherent. They buried her on the hill above Maori George's place. It is a high lonely spot seldom visited, but it is a quiet place, enclosed by native bush, looking out over the Prince of Wales Channel towards the sunrise.

With no clinic or doctor on our island we handled medical emergencies as best we could. Expectant mothers often had close calls. In one incident a woman commenced contractions the day before Christmas. Her husband, Bill, sent her over to Thursday Island in a neighbour's dinghy. She went into labour while at sea and the baby was delivered in the dinghy at Back Beach. Bill's laconic comment was, 'Well, if it had been her first there could have been problems, but she's used to it now'.

One might wonder why people chose to live such a demanding and hazardous lifestyle on Prince of Wales Island. The answer is simple. Our lifestyle was unique and we were free to do as we pleased without interference from the police or government.

For example, New Year on Muralag was unforgettable. Each village along the beach built its own bonfire to be lit at midnight. For days beforehand children dragged driftwood from the headlands and vehicles crawled in from the bush loaded down with firewood. It was a time for visiting. Neighbours had a drink together and caught up on the gossip. And here information was vital. Someone had seen a big croc
near Static's place. New Guinean squatters were camped at Butcher Beach and had a house frame up. The three houses at Port Lihou were all vacant so there was no use going to see anyone there.

I met Steve Pollain and Pommie as they threw gear onto the tray of Pommie's truck, a cut-down Toyota which he had rebuilt using scavenged materials. Steve greeted me with his cheeky grin and Pom raised his cider bottle in salute. Pom rarely wore anything more than a pair of torn short pants and he was burned brown as a berry. His calloused feet had not worn shoes for as long as anyone could remember.

'Going somewhere?' I asked.

'Yeah. Over to Long Beach for the New Year,' Pom replied as he leaned on the tray considering the equipment there. I stepped over and looked in. On the tray at the back of the vehicle were a rifle, some bullets and two cartons of cider.

'How long are you going for?' I inquired thoughtfully.

'A couple of days, I guess.'

There was a slight pause.

'Is that all you're taking?' Though Steve and Pom were known for their Spartan lifestyles, I felt they might have usefully included things like clothes, bedding, water and food.

Pom frowned and examined the gear on the tray once again. He looked up. 'Yeah. You're right. We'd better get another carton of cider.'

The tides at New Year are very high and the night sea shimmers with reflected lights from across the channel at Thursday Island. At midnight the bonfires were lit, flaming red and gold upon the sand. Larry tooted on his trumpet, while I played a rousing march on the bagpipes. Gunfire rippled along the bay as rifles were fired into the night sky. The police had long ago stopped people on Thursday Island from discharging firearms in public and we took conscious pride in our own independence and freedom. Thinking back, it seems to me we directed our exuberance towards Thursday Island quite deliberately, a quixotic gesture, for deep in our hearts we knew that it could not last.

The political turmoil, the calls for independence and the increasing lawlessness throughout the Torres Strait placed added strains on our small community at Muralag. Raiders sometimes infiltrated from the hills behind to carry things off. I remember one raid in which rifles, eskies, a generator and other essentials simply walked over the hill. At night raiders pillaged outboards, hookahs, diving gear and other equip-
ment from dinghies. Sometimes they stole the dinghy or simply vandalised it. In one raid on Muralag some boys came in stealing gear from boats along the beach at 4am. A deckhand woke us by whistling loudly from his crayboat in the anchorage. He was helpless as the boys had untied his dinghy and let it drift away. Keru had a friend, Sarada from Horn Island, staying over and the three of us watched developments from our verandah. It was a full moon and we could see the thieves through our binoculars as they went from boat to boat rifling through the contents of each. I went down to the beach with a torch but failed to catch anyone.

Security became a constant concern. Neighbours looked after each other, checking their residences and keeping track of strange dinghies, particularly at night. Many nights I sat on the sand watching the dinghies anchored in front of my house. If a strange dinghy idled in too close a flash of my torch was enough to send it roaring off. Using our vehicles we patrolled the roads and tracks, alert for intruders or new squatter camps.

The last of our squatters on Muralag Beach were Musu and Sumai. When Sumai passed away, querulous and entertaining to the end, the fire seemed to go out of Musu. He still enjoyed his pool games in the front bar at the Federal Hotel and he was just as independent and uncomplaining as ever, but it was not like it had been. I am sure he missed Sumai, for he did not survive her by very long. Following Musu’s death, the owner of the land demolished Musu’s shack to prevent its occupation by other squatters. When Musu died I lost a friend who, despite his own poverty, had helped my young family whenever he could in the harsh old days on Prince of Wales. With Musu’s death the last link with those rough, hard-scrabble, earthy times when we had Datu, Connie Mooka and the others as our neighbours was lost. They were all gone now. At Muralag we had created a new middle-class community living in cyclone-rated, council-approved, conventional houses with televisions and washing machines. But we had lost something too. Those early neighbours of mine may have been poor but they displayed an unforgettable resilience and independence of spirit.

Just as Muralag had grown and changed, I became aware of changes in myself. I had possessed a stubborn streak for as long as I could remember, but now I could feel how harsh and insensitive I was becoming. I recognised a ruthless streak in my make-up which I had not seen before. It was in the way I shrugged when told of another tragedy, the grim pleasure I took in death-defying escapes, the clinical
manner in which I was now executing deer. I was not cynical — I was far beyond cynical. If someone had told me ten years earlier that I would be demolishing squatters’ homes, policing immigrants and defying traditional landowners I would have laughed at them, yet here I was, rifle in hand, doing as I chose. But there seemed no alternative at the time. I felt like I was in a trap, with events moving in on me remorselessly.

Our deer-poaching expeditions had developed into cat and mouse games with the security forces. At night smugglers in boats and aircraft were moving guns north through the islands and others were moving drugs and people south. Queensland and federal law enforcement agencies were stretched to the limit trying to control these illegal activities, so in desperation they called in the Australian Defence Forces, including the elite Special Air Service, to perform reconnaissance and surveillance. Although the army had a much publicised presence throughout the islands, the shadowy presence of the SAS went largely unreported. I knew that the SAS was operating on Prince of Wales Island and had heard that the unmanned airstrip located five kilometres inland from my house was of particular concern. In July 1992 Peter Jones, a sports teacher from school, and I surprised an SAS patrol there. Peter was tall and as lean as a whippet. It came as no surprise when I learned that he was a highly ranked state long-distance runner.

I remember it was an unusually cold night for the islands as we camped in the dark on the deserted strip. Without warning a blacked-out helicopter dropped from the sky, landing in the open fifty metres south of our bivouac. While I gaped, Peter ran to the 4WD, started it up and turned the headlights onto the helicopter. Camouflaged troops tumbled from the doors and scrambled for the tree line. When a second helicopter landed we gave them the same treatment. I was advised informally later that the SAS detachment had moved south-west over the mountains and been extracted by sea.

Within months the army paid us back in kind. Two companions and myself had just completed a successful hunt at the southern end of Prince of Wales. I had quickly shot two stags, though they took a lot of lead as I recall (six shots in all). One of my mates strolled back to get the Suzuki while I gutted the carcasses. We were in flat, open country so Terry drove the vehicle right up to where I worked. Catching the legs we threw the two bodies onto the roof rack, securing them with ropes. Then we heard it! The unmistakable throb of a helicopter’s rotor. Suddenly the aircraft skimmed in over the hill east of us, passed over, then turned. Naturally we ducked under some bushes as the helicopter
steadied then commenced a spiralling descent, aimed directly at our white vehicle with the two, very dead, deer draped across the roof. This looked like the end. We were caught red-handed poaching deer, without a hope of escape. We huddled under our pathetic bushes as the aircraft dropped lower. Mentally I composed myself. They would take the car, of course, and my rifle. And what would the Education Department say? Was a convicted deer poacher a suitable person to teach children? These thoughts flashed through my mind.

Then abruptly the helicopter levelled off, hovering directly above the Suzuki. Gradually it began ascending. Then it suddenly pitched over, veering away towards the west at tree-top level. We piled aboard the car and rushed home in record time to dispose of the evidence. The following Monday an Army friend told me that they had been on a dawn surveillance flight in a Blackhawk when he had spotted our white car. They had dropped down for a friendly look but had not seen anyone. I was greatly relieved.

The upshot of all this activity though was to make us wonder just what was happening on Prince of Wales Island. We didn’t know if and when we were being observed. Apart from deer, we were doubly alert now for signs of the military, more particularly the SAS. But there was more to it than that. In 1970 Long Beach, with its grassy flats and timbered glades, was renowned for its deer herds. Twenty years later it was a settled community of nine houses occupied mostly by itinerant whites — artists, retirees and the like — though Arthur Ahmat’s children had retained the coconut grove at the end of the beach. On weekends dinghies bobbed at every little cove and sandspit around the island. Prince of Wales had become the playground for newly affluent Thursday Islanders and any southern visitors who penetrated the region. There was no telling who we might meet on bush trails. As well as the usual hunting parties, there were New Guineans searching in the mangroves for mudcrabs and akuls to sell on Thursday Island, and white public servants and their families on picnics, in sunscreen and floppy hats and insect repellent, struggling through the bush with eskies and folding chairs asking directions to Dugong Story or Bamfield Falls or another of the island’s attractions. As likely as not we were dusty and unshaven, dressed in faded camouflage, loaded down with rifles, gun belts and hunting knives. We sensed their disapproval even as we helped them. That feeling of the world closing in on me returned. When I was twenty I had walked an unpeopled wilderness on Prince of Wales Island and tasted absolute freedom. Those days were gone.
The last truly wild area remaining on Prince of Wales Island was in the south where dense mangrove swamps protected a flat, coastal plain several kilometres wide. Access by dinghy was very difficult, but a gap in the ranges, around the foothills of Mount Scott, provided access for vehicles via a rugged bush track from the island's east coast. Between the high, forested mountains to the north and the mangroves on the south stretched a vast woodland teeming with game. In the cool hush of dawn wild horses grazed contentedly as deer gambolled among them. Parties of pigs shuffled about in the marshes, snorting and squealing as they ploughed the soft earth. On the hills flocks of white goats picked their way along the slopes, pulling at shrubs and bushes as they passed. Further away large tan and black shapes shifted warily among the trees. These were wild cattle. The Queensland DPI, for some obscure reason, had spent huge sums of money shooting the cattle from helicopters. Though scores were killed, and the meat left to rot, some beasts had survived to become the nucleus of the present herd — wild scrubbers that skulked in shelter and fled at the first hint of trouble.

We often found deer and horses running together. I guess they just liked each other, but the arrangement definitely worked to the deer's disadvantage, for the horses wandered wherever they wished without a thought of hunters such as Derek, Peter Jones and myself who were on the lookout for venison for a very special party.

It was a bright morning, warm sunshine washing the grassland between the hills on our left and the mangrove swamps on our right. Derek stalked inside the swamp, Peter inside the tree line at the base of the hill and myself in the middle on the flat grassland. I paused in a patch of bush to examine the plain ahead. It climbed to a low rise about a hundred metres away but was as bare as a billiard table. I heard a slip of rock from the forested slope along which Peter moved. On the right I glimpsed Derek creeping amid the trees and I was just about to step out into the open when a brown smudge appeared on the crest of the rise ahead. As I watched, the smudge evolved into a herd of horses plodding towards me. Between them and all about them were deer, perhaps thirty animals in all. Through the scope I saw that many of the deer were young stags. There was nothing I could do now except wait while either Derek or Peter made a move.

Suddenly the deer jumped, turning towards the hillside where Peter was located. The horses continued their sedate grazing, but a tentative milling developed with first the deer then the horses drifting away from the hill towards the mangroves where Derek, crouched double, was
inching forward. Abruptly all the heads, the horses’ included, swung towards the hill again where Peter had dislodged a rock. Derek used this diversion to emerge from the mangroves, positioning himself behind a sapling on the herd’s left flank. In that instant the deer broke, spinning about and bounding away from the hill, carrying the horses with them. Dust billowed outwards obscuring the scene as the herd tumbled downhill directly towards Derek’s tiny kneeling figure. In a moment the dust cloud had enveloped him but, above the rumble of hoofs, I heard several sharp cracks.

Peter and I sprinted into the open, converging on Derek’s position. The dust slowly settled revealing Derek behind his little sapling looking quite stunned. The herd had literally overrun his position. A powdery film of dust covered the shattered scrub and trampled grasses. Piled in front of his sapling, almost on top of one another, were two stags. Further up the rise was another Derek had fired five shots and we had the venison we needed.

I wrote to my sister Kathy about the big event:

We had a big amay (huangi) at our place. About 100 people turned up. We had cooked underground three legs of wild boar, two legs of venison, one leg of wild goat and one leg of lamb. They were all labelled on the table, the idea being to compare the taste. The meat was good and all of it went — there was just bone left for Bullet [my dog]. We had bagpipes and guitars for entertainment. The last guest left by boat at 10.15 pm. It had been a long day.

More of the venison was stewed and barbecued.

This amay proved to be memorable for a number reasons. It was a farewell party for Derek who was leaving the islands to move to Toowoomba in southern Queensland. He had been a congenial hunting companion and a good mate. Also, a television crew turned up along with the guests to record our island lifestyle. By coincidence, the army had chosen that afternoon to perform parachute jumps for Torres Strait reserve soldiers from caribou aircraft into the channel directly in front of my house. The jump-masters misjudged the wind strength for the first jump, so the parachutes drifted northwards across the foreshore on Thursday Island. Six soldiers crashed down into the main shopping area. One, Lieutenant Tim Kerlin, fell onto the roof of his own house and was rescued by neighbours with a ladder. He is still trying to live it down.

On a personal level this occasion represented a turning point in my
life and was the last amay that I held at my house on Prince of Wales Island. My wife had left me and gone to the Northern Territory. The breakdown of our marriage with its abuse and vilification was the most painful episode of my life — I wonder that I got through it at all. Our two daughters, Keru Vicki and Patimah, were in my care, though one was heading south for university in the near future and the other for boarding school in Brisbane. Our son, Russell, was completing his RAAF apprenticeship in Wagga, New South Wales. Shortly the house would be sold as part of a property settlement. It was the end of a dream.
CHAPTER 11

Homeland Bilong Islanders

O Lord to you we pledge
Ourselves and our Motherland
Time now for change
Torres Strait Islands
Homeland bilong Islanders
Time now for change.*

The ten years from 1986 during which I taught at Thursday Island State High School were the most exciting, frustrating, difficult and rewarding years of service in my teaching career. My professional life seemed to mirror the dramatic parabola of my private life — rising optimism, exhilaration and achievement, a gradual waning, then the slide into disillusionment. Everything since has seemed tame by comparison.

The high school's principal, Bob Topping, was a visionary and inspiring leader and the greatest educator I have known. He had been on Thursday Island since 1982 and was committed to providing a demanding, culturally appropriate curriculum for Torres Strait students. In 1982 the high school was still located in a motley collection of rooms perched on the rocky knoll overlooking Port Kennedy. Bob helped in the campaign to secure funding for a new high school which would, for the first time, accept students up to Year 12. In 1986 the new school was opened near Tamwoy on the north side of the island.

Bob wanted the school to reflect the Melanesian culture of its students. It was the only Melanesian high school in Australia and we worked

* Last verse of the Torres Strait Anthem, composed by George Mye at the commencement of agitation for independence and sung at Masig on 23 August 1987.
hard to define its unique character through our programs. As a former art teacher Bob was especially keen to revive traditional art forms. The knowledge of these arts was largely forgotten in the Torres Strait but they had been safeguarded in faraway museums and libraries for a century. Using the six Haddon volumes as a foundation, Bob encouraged the students to rediscover designs, artefacts, styles and methods which had been lost for generations. Artisans attended the school as ‘artists in residence’, demonstrating carving and weaving for students in the traditional way, sitting on a mat in the shade. Hesitantly at first, then with growing enthusiasm, young Islanders copied and elaborated on these rediscovered art forms. Soon students’ plaques, murals and paintings adorned the school buildings and a school gallery opened to display and sell the eclectic artwork for which the school was becoming famous. Students’ enthusiasm grew as they realised the value of their work on the open market.

I had the privilege of teaching Torres Strait Studies with Bob. The classes were huge. I think Bob had forty-four students and I had thirty-seven. When I protested at the class sizes, Bob, typically, said, ‘I didn’t want to turn anyone away.’ He was right, of course, for the students’ response was overwhelming. Many of today’s leading Torres Strait artists emerged from those classes. Among them was Alick Tipoti from Badu Island. I remember Alick poring over the old art forms in class and sketching his own designs. Today he is a national figure who has exhibited throughout Australia and has written and illustrated several books based on Torres Strait culture.

Bob began a Torres Strait Collection, a collection of written, photographic and film resources relating to the Torres Strait. I was entrusted with this important task and, over the decade, we developed the finest collection of Torres Strait resources that exist anywhere. As time went by, researchers and academics from all over Australia and the world visited the high school to peruse the collection. It was quite normal to see Bob or myself chatting over coffee with a curator from Cambridge, a film producer from Germany, researchers from Norway or a television crew from Japan. Islanders dropped in to have a look too. Some, like Ephraim Bani from Mabuiag, knew exactly what they were looking for. Ephraim is an authority on tradition and language in the Western Islands and had undertaken tertiary studies in these fields.

Larry James fostered Islander music and Islander musicians played an integral role in the school’s program. The school released its own anthologies of Islander music, both traditional and contemporary, on
audio-cassettes. Indeed the promotion of Islander heritage to a receptive public became a major aim of the school as a whole. We published a series of celebrated books beginning with *Pearling in the Torres Strait* (1986) by Alan Butler, followed by *Torres Strait at War* by Bob Topping and my book, *Culture in Change: Torres Strait History in Photographs* (1988).

I also coordinated the high school’s traditional language program aimed at language maintenance among adolescents. Although there remained substantial speaker populations for traditional languages, these speakers consisted primarily of older people and the pool of speakers was shrinking as the elderly speakers passed away. Colonial authorities, teachers, government policy and even the churches have been blamed for the loss of traditional languages, but the real causes are more complex.

As coordinator I employed Marina Babia from Saibai Island, a Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) speaker, as our language teacher. Marina studied at the University of Queensland and Batchelor College in the Northern Territory and worked with teachers of foreign languages in Cairns high schools. We concentrated on Kala Lagau Ya (KLY), to the chagrin of Meriam Mir speakers, but we did so for sound reasons. The speaker populations of the languages were four thousand for KLY against several hundred for Meriam. We undertook a survey of our high school students which, to my knowledge, had never been done before and has not been done since. Our aim in conducting the survey was to ascertain which language each student in our school really spoke. To do this, Marina or I interviewed every student individually. Of our four hundred students, every single student spoke Torres Strait Broken. Even relatively new arrivals quickly adopted it as the school’s *lingua franca*. Indeed the only people in the school not using Broken were the white teachers. However, between 20 and 30 per cent of Broken words used on Thursday Island are, in fact, from KLY. This meant that speakers of Broken had a substantial KLY vocabulary often without knowing it. One New Guinean lad we interviewed boasted that he knew no Torres Strait language, yet Marina and I had both heard him rattling away in a Broken that was more KLY than anything else. Students frequently had no idea which languages they were speaking.

Our findings were interesting. One-quarter of our students were fluent in KLY and virtually all the rest had exposure to KLY, chiefly nouns, through Broken. Thirty students claimed fluency in Meriam. There were a dozen Kiwai speakers and a handful who spoke other New Guinean languages. What was really striking was the number of languages that students required to survive in Torres Strait society. New
Guinean students from Saibai spoke four languages: a New Guinean language at home, Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) among the Saibai community, Broken when at Thursday Island and English with the teachers. Of all four languages, their English was the poorest and the least used.

The incidence of fluency in a traditional language was higher among female students. Marina speculated that this might result from them being more at home, where the older language speakers were found, while boys were out and about using Broken. Indeed some boys who spoke fluent KKY denied any knowledge of the language. When Marina admonished a Biogu boy for not taking more pride in his language, he protested, 'I no laik. Language no gat trim.' (I don't like it. Language has no style/status.)

The language classes went ahead despite complaints from a minority of boys. We produced our own KKY books and resources and ran KKY classes at night for adults, mostly teachers. It was time-consuming but we were convinced that our work was vitally important.

The single most impressive of Bob's achievements at the high school was the Kuru Meta. Kuru is KKY for 'keeping place' and meta means 'house' in Meriam. This was the first museum built to display Torres Strait culture in the Torres Strait. Bob commissioned and purchased items for the Kuru Meta from recognised craftspeople of high regard. Other items were donated but the emphasis was on quality. Anything appearing in the cultural centre had to be the best. From inception to completion Bob was the driving force behind the Kuru Meta. It became a cultural icon, recognised nationally and internationally. Today the collection is of even greater importance, for many of the artisans who contributed artefacts have passed on. It was the most far-sighted of all Bob's gifts to the people of the Torres Strait, and when in 1988 I was invited to become curator of the Kuru Meta I accepted with trepidation, fully aware of the responsibilities associated with the job.

When Bob Topping departed that year he left behind him at Thursday Island the thriving Melanesian school he had envisioned. He went on to teach in the Solomon Islands and southern Queensland.

The increasing interest in Islander culture and custom throughout the Torres Strait Islands was matched by a fiery political climate. In July 1987 the Island Coordinating Council on Thursday Island presented a Statement of Principle and a list of demands, including 'sovereign independence'. The preamble reveals that those who drafted the docu-
ment saw Islanders as a colonised people and white Australians as the colonisers:

The system of laws, politics and economy introduced and imposed upon us by the British colonial forces has never been accepted by our people. We expressly reject the legitimacy of the control exercised by the successors of the British, that is to say the Government of Queensland and the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The long list of demands included a guarantee that all social welfare payments continue, that infrastructure be developed and that $5 billion compensation be paid. A public meeting was convened at Thursday Island in January 1988 and was attended by hundreds of Islanders from all parts of Australia. During this week of intense debate a number of delegates, including Steve Mann and George Dewis, visited the school to speak with the students. Port Kennedy people were keen to be identified as Torres Strait Islanders, though they stressed that they were a separate community with their own heritage. One said to the students, 'I'm a Torres Strait Islander too, it's just my hair is straight instead of curly.' What struck me most about all the speakers was their certainty that the future was theirs. I think the meeting had demonstrated to them that they had the numbers to determine their own future in the Torres Strait. A motion that Torres Strait Islanders secede from the Commonwealth of Australia received overwhelming support from the meeting. Suddenly the Torres Strait was in a state of crisis. Exuberant students at school informed us that independence was coming. Groups of Islanders noisily debated the prospect of approaching independence. In the highly charged atmosphere, incidents of theft and harassment took on an ominously political overtone.

White residents were in a state of sustained shock. After my decolonisation experiences in Papua New Guinea I was less traumatised than most and I adopted a cavalier approach which I tried out on Steve and Larry one day at the Torres Hotel. All three of us could be categorised as 'white settlers', since we all owned land on Prince of Wales Island. My view was that if Torres Strait Islanders wanted independence badly enough then nothing would stop them, for they were the overwhelming majority in the Torres Strait and would attract widespread support from Third World countries. Steve took offence at this, interpreting my stand as pro-independence. As the discussion progressed, I came out with the provocative statement that 'Australia would pull out after the first car bomb in Douglas Street'. Steve and Larry looked at me as if I was
deranged. I had clearly overstated my case and thankfully it never came
to that. The media had a field day though. Torres Strait independence
was front-page news all over Australia. One enthusiastic television
interviewer asked Bob Hawke, the Australian prime minister, directly
whether the Torres Strait would receive its independence. Hawke
responded with a curt ‘No’ and whites in the Torres Strait breathed
easier.

As it happened, the Islanders and their leaders were having second
thoughts. Many resented the noisy intrusion of mainland Islanders,
mostly from Townsville, into Torres Strait politics and gradually the
debate polarised Islander participants into three groups. Mainland Is­
landers continued to support independence for the Torres Strait, which
was something of an irony since they did not live there. Meanwhile
leaders based in the islands, such as George Mye and Getano Lui Jnr,
were pulling back from their previous position on independence. In
negotiations with the government they accepted vastly increased gov­
ernment funding for infrastructure development instead. In 1987–88
the Queensland and Commonwealth governments spent $50 million
in the Torres Strait Islands and the Commonwealth undertook to
increase this by $23 million over three years. Some cynics maintained
that increased funding and recognition were all that Islander leaders
had wanted in the first place.

The third group was the Port Kennedy community. Under the
colonial regime they had occupied a privileged position and were not
subject to the Torres Strait Islanders Act. However, the independence
debate had revealed their political vulnerability. As a group the Port
Kennedy community urged loyalty to the Commonwealth of Australia.
Ted Loban, a Port Kennedy leader, said to me, ‘We would be like PNG
or Indonesia, where people work from the day they’re born with no
old-age pension, and I don’t want to see people in the Torres Strait
suffer like that.’

Islanders’ grievances were legitimate, for living conditions were ap­
palling. A letter I wrote home described conditions on Thursday Island
at the time: ‘... the council turned off the water between 9 and 5. At
school we had to take our own drinking water (and still do!) ... the
council says that they will not turn the water on during the day unless
we get more rain. So we have the spectacle of water jerry cans being
unloaded at the school in the pouring rain.’

As if that were not enough, electricity functioned spasmodically or
not at all: ‘The power has also been pretty erratic. We’ve had blackouts
Thursday, Friday and Saturday. On New Year’s Eve the power was blacked out from 9 pm till 9 am New Year’s morning … Wouldn’t you think the government which wastes money on so many other things could spend a bit on water and power up here? It was not just Torres Strait Islanders who were becoming exasperated with the government.

By March 1988 the fuss appeared to be over. I wrote to my father: ‘The independence movement has collapsed. Too bad. A lot of people round here were having heart attacks at the idea but it didn’t bother me. Many people do not like the idea of Islanders dictating what will happen round the islands, but Muralag (POW township) is a quiet enclave out of the way of Torres Strait politics. I owned land at Muralag and obviously did not look forward to anyone telling me what to do. As the promised government money poured in, the calls for direct independence became muted, although greater autonomy remained a goal. A new powerhouse was built on Thursday Island and a huge dam was constructed on Horn Island to supply Thursday Island through an undersea pipeline. On the Outer Islands telephone services were extended, reticulated water was provided and mains electricity was promised within a few years.

However, my belief that the independence movement had collapsed was a misreading of the situation. Although leaders such as Mye and Lui no longer spoke in terms of independence, this did not necessarily reflect what was happening on the streets. Young Islanders maintained a pro-independence stance which manifested itself in acts of civil disobedience and disorder. Break-ins and car thefts became routine. Whites were assaulted in the main street, so excursions at night needed to be planned with care. At night hundreds of young Islanders sat on the roads in the town area drinking, smoking gunja and listening to loud reggae music. Europeans were often attacked at these sit-ins and several of my friends suffered injuries, and damage to their vehicles. When the police attempted to make an arrest at one such roadblock outside the Torres Hotel, a riot resulted in which the police were assaulted and a police vehicle damaged. Shots were fired as the police retired to the station, leaving Douglas Street to the rioters. It was daylight before order was restored. Shop windows had been smashed and houses stoned.

The deterioration of law and order reached a climax in mid-1990. In June I wrote to my parents: ‘Larry’s car was stolen three weeks ago. We found it in the bush with a broken window. Last weekend two cars were stolen and one wrecked. The police will have to do something
very soon.' Almost as soon as I had written these words my own car was stolen and driven into a tree by joy-riders. It was a total write-off.

In July I wrote: 'I suppose you have heard press reports about riots on TI. They are true. The last couple of weeks have been outrageous. The police have been too frightened to do anything — two were bashed last week.' That month I attended a meeting for concerned citizens at the Thursday Island Bowls Club. Senior police officials from the mainland listened while residents outlined case after case of break and enter, theft, assault, wilful damage, the list went on and on. The gangs were well organised, moving in packs at night and communicating by coded whistles. They wore t-shirts over their heads to conceal their identity. The gangs consisted of Islander males of all ages, and even slightly built children who were passed through small windows and other gaps to gain entry to homes. Stolen goods were immediately dispersed by dinghy to the Outer Islands where detection was unlikely.

The senior officer waited till everyone had spoken then he soberly outlined his proposal. He would bring in a group of specially selected policemen who would ‘pro-actively’ reassert control on the streets. I wrote: ‘... last weekend a police taskforce arrived — nine police and a dog. They were magnificent. There was no trouble all weekend. The cowardly swine who were causing the trouble backed down, of course. But the taskforce left today, so we’ll see what happens now. The criminals unfortunately are still on the loose — the task force defused rather than arresting’. My frustration and anger is apparent from the language I used in the letter. We were all feeling rather brittle. Over on Prince of Wales we were suffering nuisance raids during the day and night and burning squatters’ humpies. We were acutely aware that we could be driven from Muralag if raiders broke our water tanks and trashed our residences while we were absent.

The break-ins and thefts continued, displaying more discrimination and higher levels of organisation. The high school became a favourite target. In letter after letter I described the destruction. In January 1991: ‘We went over to the high school yesterday — it looks like it’s been bombed. There are windows broken and doors ripped off, thousands of dollars worth of gear stolen. The police caught boys walking off with garbage bags full of stolen things in daylight.’

Then again in February: ‘The high school was vandalised again over the weekend — windows smashed, videos, money and tape recorders stolen. It’s becoming farcical. The police keep catching kids and the courts keep releasing them but none of the stolen property is ever
recovered ($6000 worth so far this year). It's organised and it's a racket — a sign of the times.' We were certain that the stolen property went to New Guinea to exchange for drugs.

In spite of the violence, we teachers continued our mission at school. The Islander community had given us the task of producing the teachers, police, nurses, doctors, lawyers, marine biologists and engineers necessary for self-determination. We ran a mainstream academic program teaching highly motivated, hard-working students — the best students I had seen since teaching in Papua New Guinea. As at Malabunga, high expectations at a special time produced exciting results. However, not all students could cope with a high-level academic program. A majority of our students, Broken speakers, experienced difficulties, so we designed programs to extend these students as well. I wrote: 'The kids love the new history course which I coordinate ... I have three excellent young teachers working with me and we are sure of what we are doing by the kids' positive responses. We use charts, videos, pictures and stories to entertain and teach them at the same time, and it really works. We have no behaviour problems in our classes.' History was second nature to Islanders whose culture derives from oral histories.

A popular annual history excursion consisted of a trip by boat over to the rock-painting site on Hammond Island, only a kilometre from the school. Tony Barham, my English archaeologist friend, and I had thoroughly recorded the site with tracings of the pictographs and accurate site sketches. The site was associated with burials, and portions of human remains and shell ornaments littered the area. The paintings themselves were extraordinary — sailing canoes, hammerhead sharks, turtle and dugong, spirit figures and stick-like human figures dwarfed by the animals they hunted. Mostly these were fine line drawings in red ochre, totally dissimilar from Aboriginal rock art. With a sure hand the artists painted a stylised outline of the subject with a confidence which impressed the viewer with its economy. Rock paintings existed on many Torres Strait Islands, including Dauan, Mabuiag, Booby, Yam, Moa, Hammond and Muralag. Between us Tony and I had officially recorded most of these rock-painting sites for the first time but none of them were protected. In fact, with native title considerations looming, some Islander communities, such as Hammond and St Paul's, were not keen to be reminded of the traditional inhabitants on whose land they were living. There was little interest in Torres Strait archaeology and eventually Tony went to work at the Australian National University in Canberra.
Teachers often flew to the Outer Islands to provide parents with feedback on their children's progress. By now the skies over the Torres Strait Islands were abuzz with light aircraft and helicopters shuttling from island to island. A vehicle always met us at the airport, though we never knew what it would be. On Mer once it was a tractor and as Steve Pollain, who was still teaching at this stage, and I trundled down the hill on the tractor's tray we were enveloped in clouds of fine, red, volcanic dust. Steve and I were severely embarrassed as we arrived at the public reception caked from head to toe in a layer of rust-coloured dust, to meet the parents who, of course, were immaculately dressed in their Sunday best. On another occasion at Badu a Toyota Landcruiser picked us up. The driver, a cigarette clamped in her mouth, clashed through the gears and craned over the top of the dashboard to see the road. As we dashed through Badu township dodging pedestrians, dogs and other vehicles, I suddenly recognised her. She was a Year 9 student who we had not seen for a month or two, and was all of thirteen.

I returned to Mer for a combined primary schools sports meeting. With me were Larry James and our Drum and Bugle Corps, the only Melanesian marching band in Australia. I had trained the drum corps at the high school on Thursday Island, playing my bagpipes while the boys rattled away on the drums and student spectators crowded the doors and windows as the building shook to the thunder of drums and the skirl of pipes. The march-past on Mer took place on the airstrip and was an unforgettable sight. The runway is laid across the top of Mer's volcanic rim, with splendid views over coconut-studded hillsides and secluded beaches to the waves breaking in a line of white along the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef. Students from Darnley and Yorke, along with dozens of adults, were there for the competition and we were all feasted three times daily during our three-day stay. Not a lot seemed to change on Mer. There appeared to be fewer modern houses and more of the picturesque, traditional-style homes using woven coconut matting for walls. A striking feature on this visit, however, was the mountains of black plastic garbage bags looming everywhere round the village. Some dwarfed houses. Apparently the council had difficulty arranging for a rubbish collection and it had not been done for months. The stench was daunting and it is a wonder that there wasn't a major epidemic of some sort, but Meriams were philosophical about it, knowing that one day it would be collected.

The following year I took my drum corps out to Yorke Island for the combined sports. Larry did not attend as he had run out of buglers.
I had nine drummers, excellent Port Kennedy boys such as Charles Loban and Anthony Nakata, and a first-rate drum major, a fine young New Guinean lad named Andrew Sampson. I ordered military drum flashes for the boys’ shirtsleeves and gilt-edged red stripes for Andrew and the drum sergeants. They were one of the best-disciplined groups of youngsters I have ever worked with and it filled me with pride to see them in action with sticks quivering at the ready and Andrew at the front, mace poised above his head, as he roared, ‘Three rolls ... QUICK march!’

On Yorke we stayed in rooms at the school, sleeping on the floor. The island was crowded with people from many different islands. The band played at the feast on Wednesday night, for the street march and the march-past on Thursday and the feast on Thursday night.

The status of the New Guineans living in the Torres Strait was a problem which grew exponentially as New Guinean children were born and raised in the Torres Strait Islands. They attended the high school in ever-increasing numbers. An incident in 1992 shocked us all.

A boarding college had been established adjacent to the oval at the new high school at Tamwoy. This college was an independent incorporated body which used government funding to finance its operations. Larry James and Father Gordon Barnier of the Anglican Church had guided the college from its humble beginnings, in 1978, till in 1992 it comprised modern, two-storey, motel-type accommodation for one hundred secondary students. Originally associated with the Anglican Church, it had been named Cathedral College, but when this association was formally dissolved the name Kaziw Meta (Children’s House) was adopted. Each of the college buildings was given an Islander name: Kuknam Meta (Hibiscus House), Urabal Lag (Coconut House), Waiwi Meta (Mango House) and Mekay Mudh (Almond House). It worked closely with the high school and the Islander communities, and Islanders formed a majority on the college’s board of management. Torres Strait Islanders, New Guineans and a few white boarders lived, studied and played together quite happily. Then in mid-1992 the axe fell.

Some Islanders on the board noticed that Gordon, the college’s principal and administrator, was subsidising New Guinean boarders from the college’s operating surplus, but as the college budget was always carefully audited and was always in surplus this had not been a concern. The problem was that Torres Strait Islander students received roughly twice the boarding allowance that was awarded to other
Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students entitled to Abstudy received $7000 annually. Other Australians, New Guineans, whites and others received $3000, increasing to $5500 for those over sixteen years of age. For years Gordon had quietly pooled college funds to provide equal treatment for all students. Urged on by recalcitrants among the Torres Strait community, the Department of Education and Employment Training in May 1992 withheld $168,000 in grant money pending a solution to the ‘problem’ of the New Guinean students.

The solution forced on the college was cruel and terrible. All fourteen New Guinean students would have to go. The Brisbane Courier-Mail described what happened:

It was a sacrifice nobody wanted to make — but this month Father Gordon Barnier of Thursday Island’s Cathedral College found the courage to tell 14 students from outlying Torres Strait islands of Saibai, Yam, Badu and Darnley they would have to go ... For many students it was the first inkling that they were somehow different to other Melanesian kids. There were tears as Fr Barnier broke the news. Next day, students rudely ejected from hope of higher education began drifting back to island homes.

The paper quoted Larry, the college president:

Putting my hand up to vote for something which would preclude the poorest citizens of the Torres Strait from an education was one of the hardest things I’ve had to do in 18 years in education. People don’t realise what these kids have been through to get this far. To them, home is likely to be a corrugated iron shanty on a swamp or a thatch hut on mangrove poles.

Everyone was incredibly upset. The senior boys in particular took it very hard. These kids were Australians. In the previous year there had been three white students at the college. If they had still been there, they would also have been expelled. The injustice inflicted on these children cut me to the heart and still does today. That Torres Strait Islanders were responsible was something I found incomprehensible. When I argued with an Islander board member, she said, ‘We fought for that money. It’s ours.’

Gordon, Larry and I tried to stimulate a media campaign and journalists were sympathetic, placing articles in major publications such as the Courier-Mail, which described the expelled children as, ‘descendants of a slave class established two or three generations ago to perform menial tasks for the more affluent Torres Strait Islanders’. Such emotive language failed to attract interest and journalists conceded that the story
was going nowhere. They had tried but no one cared and so the issue faded away. People accepted that there really were two classes in Torres Strait society and there was no doubt which group was at the bottom.

All we could do was help the expelled students as best we could. Several students were boarded with sympathetic teachers and other white residents. Some were not so lucky. From my Year 8 class I lost a shy, 13-year-old girl from Saibai. This was the end of her secondary education and she never came back. My major concern was for Manuel Guligo, a senior boy from an immigrant family on Badu Island who was steady, hard-working and affable. His fellow students, consisting of Port Kennedy, Torres Strait Islander and European youngsters, were incredibly supportive and if there was a silver lining to the whole tragic episode it was the way these young people responded to help their friend. It was an example their elders might well have followed.

Manuel moved to Static and Damn's place on the headland above Countrywoman Beach, commuting to school each day by dinghy. During the holidays he worked on Static's crayfish boat to pay his way, but his ambition to complete Year 12 never faltered. Then one night we almost lost him when he disappeared while returning by dinghy to Countrywoman Beach after a Graduation Night rehearsal. Fortunately he was rescued near Goods Island at the entrance to the Arafura Sea.

Manuel wanted to join the Queensland Police. This was by no means easy, for although the police were crying out for Islander applicants there was little enthusiasm for New Guinean Australians. However, sympathetic officers finally arranged Manuel's entry into the Police Academy in Brisbane and supported him as he struggled to cope with the curriculum and the big city. On the evening of his graduation from the Police Academy Manuel phoned me from Brisbane to thank me for my help, a gesture that meant the world to me.

Meanwhile, the Kasiw Meta administrators worked away quietly, writing submissions for funding that was not tied to Torres Strait Islander students. Two years later a brand new wing of the college was opened. It was spacious, well furnished and correct in every respect. The administrators named it Puwa Motit (Kiwai language for 'Frangipani House') and took considerable pleasure in pointing out that as the building had not been funded by Torres Strait Islander money it would be used only by non-Islander students. Once again the New Guinean students had a home at Kasiw Meta. The Torres Strait New Guinean community was delighted.

The high point of the parabola in my personal and professional affairs...
was 1993. My new book was published and the biggest and best Torres Strait Cultural Festival ever was staged. The festival was an annual affair, with traditional shelters called zurasars, stalls, Islander dancing competitions, Islander food and music, and a host of related activities. Zurasars encircled the high-school oval leaving an open plaza in the centre. A huge traditional roundhouse, constructed by Meriam craftsmen, dominated the oval’s eastern end, while the steep forested slopes of Green Hill provided a dramatic backdrop. Torres Strait flags flew proudly above the grass-thatched roofs and the central plaza teemed with people. There were Murray Islanders in red lava-lavas and white feather daris on their head; Saibai men in grass skirts and black cassowary feather headdresses; long-nosed Kiwais in blue lava-lavas and white singlets; short Sigabadur men in grass skirts, their bare bodies smeared with clay, and bush knives at their waist; junoesque Islander women in brightly coloured patal sors, their hair shining with coconut oil, and red hibiscus flowers stuck behind their ears; demure women from the Indonesian community wearing dark, ankle-length sarongs and the close-fitting gold tunics of their culture; and Maoris, Cook Islanders and Europeans.

The beautiful blue, green and white Torres Strait flag had been officially adopted in the previous year and it could be seen everywhere on shirts, caps, signs, posters, and even painted on faces. The flag’s designer, Bernard Namok, had been my student twenty years earlier, a likeable, unassuming lad with a fondness for drawing. Whenever I saw the flag I thought of that quiet boy drawing in my classroom in the old high school on the hill with the views down the channel, the green islands and the white caps in the blue sea sweeping south to Cape York. Tragically Bernard died just four months later and was buried on Thursday Island.

Getano Lui Jnr, chairman of Yam Island and chairman of the Island Coordinating Council, received groups representing the Cook Islands and the Maori people. Forty well-drilled Kiwai dancers performed in white daris while their leader explained how the dance had been brought to them by Torres Strait Islanders. The Sigabadurs, in their skirts and clay, mimed sharpening a bush knife with a file in their dance. The dancing continued for days.

I was busy promoting and launching my new book, Among Islands, and copies sold like hotcakes. My son, Russell, was home on leave from the airforce and a television crew asked him to explain how some wooden drums at a nearby stall were made. Russell didn’t know, but a quick chat with elderly Carolus Isua, who ran the stall, gave him enough
to go on with. It looked good coming from Russell with his big shoulders, his earring and his tattoos, though Carolus appeared miffed at being left out of the interview.

During the Cultural Festival there were important developments at the Kuru Meta. Late the previous year we had entertained Stephen Peet, a retired film producer from the United Kingdom, and his wife Olive. Stephen’s grandparents, Harry and Mary Scott, had been missionaries on Mer and his mother was born there. Harry’s letters home during 1883-86 were kept by the family and, even better, they also had artefacts, photographs, the gospels in various Torres Strait dialects and the first hand-written Meriam Mir/English dictionary. The Scott/Peet family decided to return these valuable relics to the people of the Torres Strait by donating them to the Kuru Meta.

Stephen and Olive’s son, John, arrived from London with the documents and artefacts during the festival and Ron Day, the chairman of Mer, officially opened the Scott Collection. Ron thanked John Peet and his family for their care of these cultural items and for their generosity in returning them. The centrepiece of the collection was a rare dog-tooth necklace, the finest example of its type in existence and the only one in the Torres Strait. Forty ivory-coloured fangs were deftly fastened with plaited fibre in a continuous loop two metres long. We arranged the other items around it. The display attracted hundreds of visitors over the three days of the festival. The greenstone Maori axe presented to Getano Lui by the Maori delegation and gifts from the Cook Islands were also placed in the Kuru Meta for safe-keeping.

At the conclusion of the festival the Meriam craftsmen re-erected their roundhouse in the space between the Kuru Meta and the high school library, being paid $6000 for their work. The roundhouse made a perfect venue for our artists-in-residence program and other cultural events.

Four months later this magnificent roundhouse exploded in flames. The grass-thatched roofing burned like a furnace and only the arrival of the town fire brigade saved the two-storey library block nearby. A student from Mer was convicted of charges related to the fire.

A month later Callam Morrison, a teacher from the school, was attacked at his home. The police could not guarantee his safety, so, after a night in hiding, Callam and his wife, Laura, were flown to Cairns. A parent was convicted of charges arising from the incident. Callam and Laura were good friends of mine and I took their untimely departure very badly.
As Christmas approached, the bad news continued. A nurse and a pilot were evacuated from Saibai Island after mob violence. The Cairns Post reported: ‘The pilot was attacked in the street, before he fled to his house. The mob pursued him, kicking in his door, smashing windows and hurling beer cans and rocks at the house ... They then attacked the young nurse, also smashing her windows and breaking down her door.’

The following year began with absolute disaster. In late January I wrote to my parents: ‘The cleaner took me up to the Kuru Meta. The monkeys broke in the other night and stole everything of value — hundred-year-old necklaces, wood carvings, Maori greenstone axe, pearls, etc. Of course they left the place in a mess too. The remains of the Murray Island roundhouse which the kids burned down four months ago is just next to the Kuru Meta. So much for Torres Strait culture.’

I think that was the point at which I gave up. I would try to get the artefacts back, but I was through with the Torres Strait cultural renaissance. It would have to get along without me from now on.

The same issue of the Torres News that reported the Kuru Meta theft contained a plea from the agricultural teacher at Bamaga State High School for community support and respect for school property. A breeding pig, a seven-month-old heifer and twenty hens had been slaughtered by intruders at the school farm and in some cases carried off. The newspaper also contained a letter from Larry with a long list of items stolen from his music department at Thursday Island school. Then in late February the unthinkable happened. The Thursday Island police station was bombed.

I knew the culprits, two brothers from Dauan Island who lived at Tamwoy. They had been in a bit of trouble with the law and believed that the police were harassing them. After the police intercepted one of the men, then released him, on the morning of 27 February, the two had made petrol bombs. They struck at 1.30 am on 28 February when most of the officers were asleep. One bomb struck a police vehicle, setting alight the roof and cage. A second bomb was thrown through the station’s open door, exploding in the day room. Off-duty officers rushed from the nearby barracks to assist and both fires were extinguished. The bombers were arrested and flown to Cairns.

The break-ins at the school continued unabated. In March I wrote: ‘The school is being broken into a couple of nights a week and they are slowly stealing everything. But last Thursday there was a novel twist. The burglars had stolen heaps of rum and Coolibah cask wine from
the Royal Hotel, and broke into the high school to have a party. However, they forgot to go home. At 9.15 am they were still wandering into classrooms, Coolibah in hand, annoying us. The police drove up in two paddy wagons and took them away.

In late March the police arrested a man and recovered much of the property stolen from the Kuru Meta. Thankfully most of the irreplaceable, older artefacts were returned intact. Dozens of wood carvings, pearls and other articles had been sold for drinking money. The man charged, from Darnley Island, lived just over the school's fence barely one hundred metres from the Kuru Meta. We could not leave important cultural objects in the vulnerable Kuru Meta, so we placed the most valuable in the school's safe inside the secure room in the school office till we could work out what to do with them.

A month later we arrived at school to find the office a shambles. Thieves had used a grinder to cut their way though the doors of our secure areas. They had then ground their way through the top of the school safe. It made an impressive trail of destruction — papers, files and furniture thrown about, chunks hacked from metal door frames and finally the safe with that obscene hole in the top. I peered into the safe door. The dog-tooth necklace and other cultural objects were still there, but the thieves had taken $1000 from the safe, students' photograph money as it turned out. Some of the men convicted for the safe job lived just next door to the school.

In December 1994 I was flown to Cairns with other witnesses for the case against the Darnley man charged over the Kuru Meta break-in. We were not needed in court as he pleaded guilty and was gaol ed for fifteen months. Within twelve weeks he was back in the Torres Hotel drinking with his mates.

Meanwhile support for independence appeared to be spreading and deepening in Torres Strait society. It was in the newspapers, on the radio, in the streets and in the classroom. Its presence had become so pervasive that most people just came to accept that independence was coming.

One night I was accosted by a drunken friend, a qualified Islander teacher.

'What are you white people doing here?'
'I live here,' I replied.
'But you weren't born here,' was the retort.

In March 1994 the first elections were held for the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA). This was an umbrella organisation designed to act as a conduit for Commonwealth government funding and policy.
Inevitably the TSRA was seen by many as a form of de facto government for the Torres Strait Islands. It was at this point that the absence of any clear government policy on the Torres Strait’s future almost led to disaster. The Queensland and Commonwealth governments seemed to be fumbling on the independence issue. Simultaneously they had no counter plan either. No one seemed to know what the future was for the Torres Strait. No one we asked seemed to have the faintest idea. As tax-paying Australians resident in Queensland, and rate-paying land owners of the Torres Shire, Larry, myself and others wanted reassurance that we would not wake up one day and find ourselves in a suddenly independent nation. We wanted to know whether the Torres Strait would remain as it was, administered by Queensland with injections of Commonwealth funding, or whether the idea of sovereign independence was being entertained in official circles. Our inquiries met with hesitation, evasion and prevarication.

Pro-independence supporters became more strident. Many Torres Strait residents, in the absence of any definite government statements to the contrary, assumed that some sort of fast track to independence would be put in motion. I had been in Papua New Guinea and knew how quickly it could be done. Some people still moped around complaining that it was not possible, that Torres Strait was not ready for independence. That argument was irrelevant. The truth is that no country has ever been ‘ready’ for independence; they just have to make the best of it when it comes. So through late 1994 and early 1995 we drifted along in a seething, roiling current of political opportunism towards some ill-defined goal.

People who know me commented that I became extremely negative at this time. And I was. There seemed little point in much of what I was doing. The victimisation and transfer of the Morrisons had upset me, as had the diabolical treatment of the New Guinean students at Kasiw Meta. The Kuri Meta debacle was the last straw. I felt I was hanging on by the fingertips and on top of everything else my marriage was disintegrating in a very nasty way. Yet there was febrile energy in the roller-coaster ride of those years that I would not have missed for the world. You never knew what the next day might bring. Frequently the absurdity of it all struck home. As had happened during the puri puri outbreak at Saibai, I sometimes seemed to be able to step outside the picture and see myself acting in some odd, unscripted farce. When I did this the whole process seemed to slow down and I would see Larry and myself and my white mates in a sea of brown faces. They
milled around us in all directions. We moved with them and among them and yet never really became part of them. Then I would step back inside the picture and things would speed up and race along at breakneck speed once again.

When someone asked what Muralag residents would do if independence came, we said, quite seriously, that we would secede. With independence we expected a collapse of law and order similar to Papua New Guinea. We were armed to the teeth and resolved to defend ourselves, and if this sounds far-fetched today, all I can say is that you needed to have been there at the time. Looking back, I think I was suffering from nervous exhaustion. I needed a rest from everything.

By September 1995 I had bowed to the inevitable. I was involved in teacher training with the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) at the old high school site on Thursday Island. The Education Department had embarked on a crash localisation program such as I had experienced before independence in Papua New Guinea. At various campuses scores of Torres Strait Islander teachers were being pushed through, without particular regard to standards. Most afternoons I worked with a group of delightful women from Yorke, Yam, Moa and Horn Islands who were undertaking RATEP. They worked extremely hard and what they lacked in academic ability they made up for in dedication. At the high school two Torres Strait Islander Heads of Department had been appointed under the Executive Management Development Program. One was Lillian Passi. It had been a long time since I had seen her and Azzie. Azzie was, in fact, enrolled at the RATEP centre, though I was not assisting his group.

Lillian told me an amusing story. She had been teaching at an Outer Island school when she picked up an interesting-looking book on Torres Strait history. As she read, her eyes widened, for what she was reading sounded suspiciously familiar. She looked again at the cover, saw my name and abruptly realised why she recognised so much of the text. Of course, she had been one of my informants on Islander custom, though I had deliberately not identified her in print. I could not decide if she was thrilled or disconcerted, though she did say, jokingly I trust, that she would be careful what she told me in future.

It was the Education Department's commitment to localisation which finally persuaded me that independence was imminent. Then in September 1995 Paul Keating, the Australian prime minister, flew to Thursday Island, and it was assumed that he was coming to announce a timetable for independence. The actual announcement was to take
place on Tuesday at the public reception in the Anzac Park opposite the Torres Hotel.

An enormous crowd gathered under bright, clear skies in the little park. The crowd was in a buoyant mood, laughing and milling about beneath the trees. The mood of excited expectation was palpable. On the raised stage at the front, local dignitaries chatted amiably. At the park’s entrance stood a guard of honour composed of Islander servicemen, some dressed in camouflage uniform and bearing the automatic rifle of the modern soldier. Others wore skirts and cassowary headdresses, brandishing the bows and arrows of traditional warriors. Above us the Australian and Torres Strait flags snapped in the breeze. The high school students were there for this momentous occasion and Larry and I stood nearby, glumly resigned to some form of independence and wondering what it would mean for us.

Keating arrived with his daughters and walked between the lines formed by the guard of honour on each side. He wore his habitual, somewhat guarded, smile and poker face. The crowd pressed forward as Keating mounted the stage to be formally welcomed by the reception committee, composed of Islander elders and selected young people, who extended their hospitality to the prime minister and his children. Then it was Keating’s turn to speak. As he rose a hush fell over the assembly. This was the moment they had been waiting for. You could have heard a pin drop.

The prime minister began with thanks for the warm welcome. Then he reflected that many people were talking of independence for the Torres Strait. Well, he said, there would be no independence because the Torres Strait did not have an economic base. He said it all in one sentence. The audience listened in stunned silence. This was not what they had come to hear. Larry and I glanced at each other suddenly grinning. At last someone had made a decision. The crowd stirred uneasily, but, as Keating spoke on, it composed itself and seemed to settle into an attitude of quiet relief. Independence was a big step fraught with peril. Keating offered talks with Torres Strait leaders to discuss the development of an economic base and more autonomy — an altogether safer and more lucrative option.

When the reception ended, the crowd dispersed in an oddly self-congratulatory mood. The remainder of Keating’s visit was a tour de force in Islander hospitality: feasts, dancing and rhetoric. At the visit’s end, everyone parted on the best of terms, all talk of independence
temporarily forgotten. Once again, as in 1988, Islander leaders had pulled back from the brink.

In retrospect I realise that the leaders had negotiated from a position of weakness which made independence unlikely. When the Kauraregs defected to the ACC they took with them a score of islands, including Thursday Island (the Torres Strait's administrative, financial and population centre) and Horn Island (the transport hub for the Outer Islands). This single action eviscerated any proposed independent Torres Strait, leaving a rump of a dozen Outer Islands inhabited by a few thousand people mainly dependent on welfare payments. And the more access the Outer Islanders had to government funding, the more enmeshed they became in the Australian system.
CHAPTER 12

Yawo (Goodbye)

At the beginning of 1996 I was living on Thursday Island. I was divorced and had sold my house on Prince of Wales Island. My youngest daughter, Patimah, was at boarding school in Brisbane and I worked long hours at RATEP to help pay her school fees.

Thursday Island had changed dramatically from when I had first arrived. The Torres Shire's population was 3000, more than one-third of the Torres Strait’s total population of about 8000. Fleets of shiny, late model cars streamed round the five-kilometre ring road constructed and maintained by the Queensland Department of Main Roads. They cruised past new shops, supermarkets, motels and hotels and offices in the main street, and lined up in front of the video stores, the drive-through liquor barns and the fast-food outlets (‘Kai Kai Paradise’ and ‘Island Chicken’, no less). Newly built medium-density accommodation crowded the flat ground along the shoreline and crept up the hills, cutting into what rainforest remained on Green Hill.

Islanders were affluent and enjoying it. Most were employed in government jobs or by government-funded organisations, or were on pensions. The federal and Queensland governments continued to pour money into the region. The annual budget for the Torres Strait Regional Authority alone was $50 million. Islanders, sponsored by the government, travelled widely all over Australia and overseas. Their destinations included London, Geneva, Beijing, Nairobi, Guam, Western Samoa, the United States, Fiji, Cook Islands, Vanuatu and New Zealand. Ironically there were more Europeans on Thursday Island than ever, making up one-quarter of the island’s population. Hundreds of outsiders were needed to provide training and services. Indeed training was a multi-
million-dollar business and a TAFE campus costing $6 million had been opened on a rise next to the high school.

However, affluence brought its own problems and the greatest challenge emerging for Torres Strait Islanders was their health. Torres Strait Islanders had always admired a robust, corpulent physique, for this was synonymous with prosperity and high status. Obese people in traditional society were those with access to rich foods, particularly dugong and turtle meat. As leaders they led a sedentary lifestyle, a lifestyle denied the lower classes who had to work and struggle to survive. A lean physique was associated with poverty and low status. By 1996 obesity and a sedentary lifestyle were within the reach of all. Health studies reported that most Torres Strait Islanders were overweight and many were obese (40 per cent more than for the entire Australian population). Women were affected more than men. Freed of the drudgery of chores such as chopping wood and gardening, they had put on weight at an alarming rate. A survey on one Outer Island in 1993 reported that 25 per cent of women were overweight and a staggering 50 per cent were obese (compared with 41 per cent and 33 per cent respectively for men). The life expectancy of Torres Strait Islander women had actually declined and Torres Strait Islanders experienced a far higher death rate than other Queenslanders. However the ailments they suffered were diseases of affluence, principally diabetes and heart disease.

The challenges faced by the people of Thursday Island in 1996 were totally different from those of twenty-five years earlier. In 1970 our goals seemed so clear-cut and easily defined: education, employment, housing and equality. Good will and optimism prevailed. We sensed that we were on a mission, fighting the good fight. By 1996 everything was obscurity and confusion. Though good will remained, it was difficult to see how and where it might be readily applied.

And the sea continued to take its toll. One evening Lenny Holland, my old friend from Daru, vanished in the channel while returning home to Horn Island. The last one to see him alive was Pom, Larry’s neighbour at Muralag. Lenny’s outboard was playing up but he rejected Pom’s offer of assistance. When Lenny failed to arrive home, other crayfishermen combed the channel and recovered his dinghy, but no trace of Lenny was ever found.

We nearly lost Static also. Each year a hookah ban was imposed on Torres Strait crayfish divers during October and November and many professional divers moved south onto the east coast. Caution was needed though, for the water on the east coast is deeper and not as well known.
by divers as their home reefs. Torres Strait diving is in relatively shallow water, twelve to twenty-five metres. Some divers were used to spending virtually all day underwater searching for crayfish, and many Islander and New Guinean divers had never heard of staging tables. It was not surprising that there were occasional cases of the bends, and one of these was our friend Static. While working from his boat on the Great Barrier Reef off Lockhart, he was evacuated by helicopter, with a severe case of the bends, and taken to the decompression chamber in Townsville. It was touch and go for a while, but as the days passed we were relieved to hear he was improving. When Steve spoke with him by phone, connected to the chamber, Static even managed a few of his witticisms, and following several more weeks of treatment he returned home. Though just as cheerful and irreverent as ever, he suffered from a lack of coordination which was most obvious when he walked. Doctors warned him off diving again, so he took New Guinean friends out to dive from his vessel and caught mackerel when it suited him.

At school Lillian had decided that high school teaching did not suit her and returned to primary school teaching. Marina Babia had left our KKY program to undertake further studies in the Northern Territory, but she was eventually replaced by Taum Nona, a qualified teacher from Badu Island. In Taum's very capable hands the language program prospered.

Older teachers such as Larry and myself had become aware of changes in the composition of our classes over the years. The number of mixed-race students had increased markedly. In some classes the full-blood Islanders were a small minority. Today many people find such terms as 'full-blood' and 'mixed race' insulting, but public perceptions of race have changed. In 1970 anyone with a mixture of European blood was regarded by Outer Islanders as 'white’. By 1996 anyone with a mixture of Islander blood was recognised as a Torres Strait Islander. We had Torres Strait Islander students with blond hair, freckles and blue eyes. Sitting next to them were Australian New Guinean students, born on the Torres Strait Islands, who were not Torres Strait Islanders. It was a bewildering situation. Little wonder students were confused. One New Guinean student wrote, 'I am a Torres Strait Islander. I was born in Port Moresby.’

With more than 10 per cent of the high school's enrolment consisting of New Guinean students, some teachers were beginning to question the validity of pressing Torres Strait culture on high school students when a proportion of those students were not legally permitted to
identify as Torres Strait Islanders. Thursday Island State High School was no longer a mono-cultural institution, if it ever was. I was happy to leave the conundrum of how to deal with this issue for a new generation of teachers to address.

Through all of the turmoil of the independence decade I continued to enjoy the company of wonderful Torres Strait Islander people. In November 1995 at a ceremony at the high school I was presented with a certificate celebrating my twenty-five years of teaching service, most of it at Thursday Island. In the audience were scores of Torres Strait Islander people I had taught, who were now parents themselves, and even grandparents. Among my ex-students were teachers, nurses, mechanics, academics, public servants, marine biologists, at least one Olympic athlete (Danny Morseu), radio broadcasters, authors, artists, dancers, shop owners, council chairpersons, air pilots, soldiers, ships’ captains, flight attendants, archaeologists, builders, carpenters, managers—jobs, careers and accomplishments of every description—and many of these people were present at the ceremony. They will never know how proud I am to have made a contribution to their education, however modest that may have been.

After the presentation Pedro Stephen and Phillip Mills insisted on having their photo taken with me. Both had received their secondary education to Year 10 at Thursday Island State High School. Pedro was now Coordinator for Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area for the Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy and Mayor of Torres Shire. Phillip was District Manager of the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area Health Services District for Queensland Health. Torres Strait Islanders take to politics like ducks to water and both Pedro and Phillip were astute, practising politicians. Pedro affected a folksy, understated style that made him enormously popular. His wife was a teacher from Thursday Island’s Asian community and right through the political upheavals of the last decade Pedro had stolidly espoused the benefits of a multicultural society in the Torres Strait. Phillip was smooth and competent, as one would expect of someone who had spent five years working in Canberra as Director of the Office of Torres Strait Affairs for ATSIC. However, he also utilised the colourful imagery of Islander rhetoric when he chose to. Once, at a meeting that I attended, Phillip said, ‘Uncle Wega Waaia used to say “A man without his culture is like a seagull without a rock to sit upon”.’ This was not the Canberra professional speaking; this was a man born and bred in the islands. As
we shook hands and had our photos taken, I was struck by the thoughtfulness and generosity of the pair’s gesture.

Meanwhile Steve Pollain had tired of dinghy driving and landed a job with the Queensland public service. He married a Zimbabwean woman, sold his house on Prince of Wales and moved to Brisbane.

As so many segments of my life were ending, a new adventure was beginning. My new partner, Barbara Dai was the daughter of Bishop Kiwami Dai. She came from the sui baydham awgadh on Saibai so we spoke the same language and talked of similar things. Barbara had worked for the Anglican Church in Papua New Guinea for six years, then as a teacher aide at Thursday Island and Bamaga, then finally as a housekeeper at the Sheraton Mirage at Port Douglas. She came to stay with me at Thursday Island and together we planned a new future.

At the end of the year my RATEP students, dressed in the mortarboards and gowns of James Cook University, graduated in a ceremony at the Thursday Island stadium. I had not always agreed with the aims and conduct of RATEP but these women had worked hard and done all that was requested of them with good humour and dedication. I wished them well as they returned to their home islands to take up their teaching duties.

Christmas 1996 would be my last in the Torres Strait. As was our custom, I went hunting to get venison for the festive season and was accompanied by Patimah in what was to be my last deer hunt. In the late afternoon we drove the Suzuki south, bumping through the bleached white sand outside Steve Pollain's old place and scrambling up the headland behind Static’s household, waving to Damu and the kids as we passed, then along the ten-kilometre trail through native bush as we traversed the gap in the ranges down to Port Lihou. We left the car near the twin hills on the sweeping coastal plain near Green Hills. The legendary waterhole, Dugong Story, was only half an hour's walk away north over the hills, but I led off on an animal trail heading south with Patimah five metres behind.

On a sunny ridge, with the dry grass and leaves crackling under foot, I sensed two pigs moving in from the bush on our right. We squatted down in the pathway as the first pig, a black one, fussed by within metres of us. The second, a white and black spotted sow, appeared so comically preoccupied, bustling along with her snout bulldozing the leaves, that Patimah was shaking with suppressed laughter. It snuffled and grunted as it passed by. The last we saw of it was the creamy tassel.
on its tail swiping back and forth as it blundered into the scrub. Neither animal had detected our presence.

We paused among the rocks overlooking a glade in the open woodland. Even as we watched, two young stags and a doe ambled out in single file under the trees. The setting sun illuminated the space with a golden glow as the deer strolled along, hesitating occasionally to nip grass shoots from the ground. I was already seated so I simply propped my elbows on my knees and sighted on the first stag a hundred metres away.

The rifle kicked against my shoulder and the first stag went down. As if in slow motion, I moved the scope onto the second stag, which appeared rooted to the spot. My shoulder jolted again and the second stag dropped. The doe spun about and in two bounds disappeared. The first stag staggered to its feet. A third shot and I saw that stag collapse.

Patimah stayed with the downed stags while I jogged back to the vehicle. I drove back through the scrub making my own road. We tossed the deer onto the roof rack and, with Patimah driving, we roared off home in the dusk. It was a twenty-kilometre drive back to Larry’s place at Muralag where our boat was anchored. By the time we cut up the meat, boated back to Thursday Island and cleaned up it would be midnight.

That was the most memorable Christmas of my life. We had venison baked, grilled, stewed, curried and satayed, with reef fish and crayfish I had speared. Friends from Saibai and Thursday Island, Riley Gibia, Dorothy Elu, David Kawiri and Janet Waia, Richard Hoodcamp and his wife Dieuwke, celebrated with us. My children were there. Patimah was back from boarding school, Russell had just returned to the island after six years in the air force and Keru Vicki was there with her baby daughter Lorraine. We went boating and fishing and had picnics on the beach. We visited Larry on Prince of Wales Island and drank home brew on his verandah under the coconut trees and swam in the clear water.

After the New Year Barbara, Daniel (Barbara’s son), Patimah and I packed up and flew out of Horn Island bound for my new teaching position on Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria near the Northern Territory border. I felt no regret. I had done all that I had wanted to in the Torres Strait and more. In any case, Torres Strait people are travellers and you will find us in every part of Australia. My little family has become just a tiny fragment of the Torres Strait diaspora.
Postscript

Our life on Mornington Island and afterwards does not concern us here. However, the mixed fortunes of my friends as time progressed is important, not least to me.

Four months after we left, Static, the gregarious, fun-loving Kiwi, propped his steel-hulled crayfish vessel on the sand below his home, and as he worked the supports gave way and he was crushed to death. Walter Tabuai, my host at Mabuiag during the adventurous voyage across the Torres Strait, died of heart failure while supervising a traditional dancing performance at a school in Cairns. Joshua (aka King Kong), the genial giant from Saibai, was stabbed to death at Aurukun, an Aboriginal community on west Cape York Peninsula. Tod (not his real name), my hunting companion at Saibai, was convicted of child sexual abuse and gaoled. He now lives in Cairns. Russell took up crayfishing and went missing at sea with two mates when their outboard broke down. Queensland police refused to search for them, but three days later they were located, drifting towards Indonesia, by their mates who had organised a private air search. Manuel Guligo married his high school sweetheart, a white fellow student, and is a policeman in Cairns. Dana Ober taught linguistics at Batchelor College in the Northern Territory and has recently returned to Thursday Island. Steve Mullins is Head of the Faculty of Humanities at The Central Queensland University. His book *Torres Strait: A History of Colonial Occupation and Culture Contact 1864–1897* (1995) is a brilliant analysis of the crucial thirty years during which Torres Strait Islanders fell under colonial rule.

Larry James continues to live at Muralag Beach with Pom as his neighbour, commuting to Thursday Island each day by dinghy. When I visited Muralag recently, Larry said to me, ‘There are too many ghosts’,
and I know exactly what he means. I cannot walk the beaches or the
hills on Prince of Wales Island without seeing those others, some dead
and some very much alive, with whom I shared my life there — Musu,
Sumai, Datu, Derek, Richard, Static, Steve, my children — the bush
seems curiously empty except for the memories.

In 1998 Barbara and I travelled to England to enjoy Stephen and
Olive Peet's wonderful hospitality in London. We caught the train to
Cambridge and walked to the University of Cambridge Museum of
Archaeology and Anthropology. The centenary of Haddon's Cambridge
Expedition to the Torres Strait was being commemorated by a magni-
ficent exhibition showcasing Torres Strait culture. It was a privilege
for us to be there, seeing Torres Strait heritage honoured in this way
by an ancient university town half a world away from home.

In July 2000 Barbara and I were married in Cairns. Our wedding
was a blend of Celtic and Saibai cultures. The groom's party wore Black
Watch kilts and Prince Charlie jackets and we had a piper and Scottish
sword dances. However, we were also entertained by hymns in Islander
language, booming Island drums and Saibai bow and arrow dancers.
The two traditions complimented each other, as we knew they would,
for they are warrior cultures with brave music and spirited dancing.
Afterwards Barbara had the bird and shark motif of her sui baydham
clan tattooed over her heart. When it was my turn I chose a stag head,
of course, to be tattooed on my shoulder.

Today Barbara and I live in Cooktown, north of Cairns, where I still
Teach high school. Russell and his partner bought a house at Machans
Beach where they live with their two children. Russell works for
Seaswift Shipping, which services the Torres Strait, and is a dive master
in his spare time. Keru was a radio broadcaster but is now a full-time
mother in Gordonvale with four children. Patimah is a field officer for
the ATSIC office in Cairns but is planning to travel abroad. Daniel is
signed up on an AFL sports scholarship at a Cairns boarding school.
We are organising the ‘shaving’, a boy's traditional coming-of-age
ceremony, for him next year.

As for me, I think about the Torres Strait every day. Growing up in
the islands, hunting, fishing and boating, has left me unsuited in many
respects for life here on the mainland. I don't play golf or cricket or
follow the football and I often find small talk tedious. I feel suspended
between my life in the Torres Strait and mainstream Australia, and I still
seek a place where I can feel truly content. When Christine Anu
(Barbara's cousin) sings 'my island home is waiting for me' it touches a chord in all of us who have known these extraordinary islands.
Glossary

The following words are in Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) except where their origin is indicated in brackets [ ].

Aith: an old village near Saibai's eastern end
akul: a bivalve mussel found in the mangroves
amay: an earth oven
awgadh: god
bab: father
babuk: sitting cross-legged [Torres Strait Broken]
bayham: shark
bedhabu: a long, conical shell found in the mangroves
bisi: cassava
Broken: see Torres Strait Broken
burum: pig
burubur: hourglass-shaped wooden drum with handle
dari: white feather headdress [Meriam Mir]
dhawdhay: mainland
dhoeybaw: leaf (as in dhoeybaw awgadh)
dhogay: female spirit
gabagab: war club
gogai: see gagay
gagay: bow
garkaz: male
guguba: a small, edible purple fruit
kai kai: food [Torres Strait Broken/Maori]
Kala Lagau Ya (KLY): Western Island Language
Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY): Top Western Island Language
kayar: crayfish/lobster
kayn: new
kaziw: children's
Kiwaín: a warrior killed by Waubin who became Blue Fish Point on Prince of Wales Island
koedhal: crocodile
koey: big
Koey Dhaadhay: Australia
Koranga: a Saibai koedhal auyadh canoe named after the sea eagle
Kriol: see Broken/Torres Strait Broken
kuki: north–west wind (wet season)
kukuvann: hibiscus
kum: keeping corner
kuthay: wild yam
lag: place/home
lak: again
lak manin: take it again
lamar: white ghost/white man [Meriam Mir]
Malo: powerful god on Mer who united the tribes and codified their laws [Meriam Mir]
malu: sea
manin: take it
markay: white ghost/white man
Masig: Yorke Island
maydh: sorcery/magic
maydhalayg: sorcerer/magic man
mekay: beach almond
Mer: Murray Island
Meriam Mir: Eastern Island Language
meta: house [Meriam Mir]
moegina: little/small
Moegina Dhaadhay: New Guinea
mota: house [Kiwai]
mudhi: house/shelter
Muralag: Prince of Wales Island, but also a settlement/township on the north–east corner of the island
ngaw: my (male)
ngaygay: north–east wind
ngoeymun: our
patal sord: colourful style of dress worn by Islander women
Glossary

**peku:** slaty bream

**puri puri:** sorcery/magic [Torres Strait Broken]

**puiti:** tart, yellow fruit

**piama:** frangipani [Kiwai]

**sager:** south-east wind (dry season)

**saimu:** cassowary/cassowary feather headdress

**sapur:** flying fox

**sarap:** shipwrecked and helpless

**sai:** black and white swamp bird

**thaku:** snake

**thaidak:** see thayak

**thayak:** arrow

**thonar:** time

**Torres Strait Broken:** A Torres Strait creole descended from Pacific English brought to the Torres Strait during the nineteenth century by South Sea Islanders

**trim:** style, proper fashion [Torres Strait Broken]

**tumb:** coconut

**Wakemab:** a cunning head hunter, legendary hero of the sui baydham augadh on Saibai

**waku:** woven mat/canoe sail

**wantok:** tribesman/clansman [PNG Pidgin]

**wap:** harpoon

**wapa:** slaty bream [Torres Strait Broken]

**wamp:** traditional, wide-mouthed, hourglass-shaped drum

**woeyui:** mango

**wongai:** a purple/black plum

**wongay:** see wongai

**yawo:** good bye

**zazi:** traditional fibre skirt

**ziirazar:** a square-built, roofed shelter
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One of the last frontiers on earth, the Torres Strait is a vast waterway dotted with tiny islands and peopled by fiercely proud communities with a rich cultural heritage.

*My Island Home* is one man's story of his adventurous life on this frontier — not in the nineteenth century but in the last decades of the twentieth. Aged 19 and fresh out of teachers college, John Singe first arrived at Thursday Island in 1970 and soon began exploring Torres Strait for himself.

Peopled by many wild and wonderful characters, this tropical paradise proved to be no place for the faint-hearted. As a diver, John Singe survived shark attack and frequently faced the Strait's unpredictable moods when sailing the waters from Cape York to Papua New Guinea. Driving taxis on TI, and taking on the rigorous challenges of hunting and fishing expeditions, provided the eager newcomer with an unexpected education.

As well as charting one man's Indiana Jones-like adventures, this entertaining book voyages across contemporary Islander cultures and lifestyles. Much more than a travel saga, *My Island Home* traces the long, rewarding journey of its author — drawn irresistibly to the gregarious people and unlimited horizons of Torres Strait.