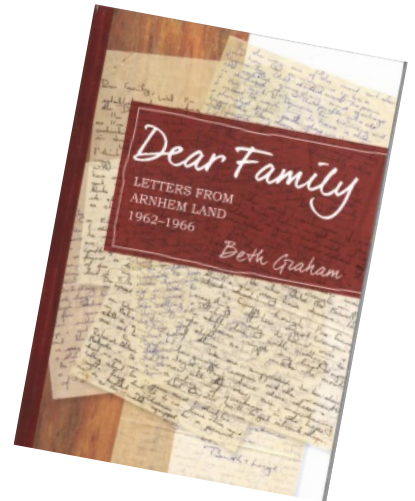


## Book Launch

### Dear Family by Beth Graham

I acknowledge, as John states, that I am on land first treated by Batman but never acknowledged and stolen from the eastern clans of the Kulin nation, the Woiwarrung and Bunwiring people who met on the banks of the Yarra. This is land owned by descent groups whom I do not know.

When Beth first told me about the book she was writing, drawn from her letters home from Arnhem Land written in the early 1960s, it struck me that yet again women's letters from a mission field would provide a perspective that is almost always missing from the substantial literature of mission, the journals prepared for publication, the reports etc, etc. So I looked forward to Beth's letters. I was not prepared for her vivid lively and deeply political missives home to her family from the top end, where she lived for 3 years, first for language school at Millingimbi, then for over 2 years at Yirrkala and finally for 6 months on Croker Island. These were sites of Methodist missions from the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yirrkala mission was established in 1935. The missions were in the front line during WW2. Millingimbi was bombed and Croker Island was the home for a number of stolen Aboriginal children. The exodus of these children and their Methodist carers during WW2 is a famous story of how the war came to Australia.



The mission to Arnhem Land was re-established in 1951. Beth and Leigh volunteered to spend time there from 1962-66. This is a story of a young couple, a time, a place and a people that was crucial to the history of mission, the history of mining and the history of land-rights. Therefore, while Yirrkala was 500 miles from Darwin, it was, in many respects the centre of many important aspects of Australian life in the 1960s. This is a past that continues to play out in our present.

First, it was the time when mission took most seriously the recognition of culture. It was happening all over the Pacific as well and it happened here in Yirrkala. Beth and Leigh were the first of those who went to the mission who began their time by immersing themselves in Yolngu language. While Yolngu is just one of the many hundreds of Aboriginal languages in Australia, it punches far above its weight. Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu sings in the Gumatj dialect of Yolngu Matha, as did the Aboriginal rock group Yothu Yindi. Their song *Treaty* should have ignited a nationwide demand for action.

As a young Christian activist couple from Victoria, it was perhaps not unexpected that Beth and Leigh might seek to turn their church experiences and their desire for adventure to a time on a mission. Those years, from 1962 - 66 would change and shape their lives and those of the nation. It was a heady period and these letters take you there. You are alongside Beth as she struggles her way through hours and hours on language learning, swotting up before the exams and prodding Leigh to the task. Those who stayed were expected to do 24 exams over either 3 or 6 years. This was no small job.

You are also there as Beth turns her formidable talents and skills to the teaching of the children trying out new methods. As a school child of the 60s I recognised a few of them. I too learnt maths with Cuisenaire rods. But I didn't have to learn in a language that was not spoken at home. I didn't have half days at school because there were too many children to fit into one class room with one teacher. In the early days of Beth's teaching of Grade 1A and 1B, she taught 28 in the morning and 36 in the afternoon. Each class got about 2 hours in the classroom. 'Goodness knows how we will get on', wrote Beth in trepidation before starting 'my Yolngu maths is as limited as their English'.

One of the great joys of the letters is that we get to meet Leigh who was clearly a man of great integrity and very strong principles. As the daughter of a farmer myself, and one who likes to try a little hands on renovation, I can appreciate Leigh's combination of practical and intellectual skills. Many of these letters made me laugh with a warm

appreciation of his sensibilities. It appeared that Leigh disapproved of the practice of expecting that your 'house girl' would come to dinner with you for a dinner party and there wipe up the dishes. Leigh was having none of it. He would excuse himself from the table and go to the kitchen to do the dishes all the while entertaining the children of the 'house girl' leaving Beth with the mission staff, as Beth so vividly recalled.

'Nothing was ever said around the table though the atmosphere was often stiff. However, in Australia particularly, the world of the missionary had to change and that time had come'.

Leigh and Beth were determined to face the world of mission in the spirit of partnership with the Yolngu people and with a deep respect for their culture. Beth's knowledge of kinship and the social organisation of the people is testimony to her recognition of other pathways. But it was not a one way street, there was great interest in what they might offer as well. The letters tell of evenings when young men would come into their house to play records and talk.

Beth's description of trying to explain Australia Day to those who were yet to be citizens but whose ancestors had been on the continent for 40,000 years is a typical example of her active mind at work. While deeply aware of the incongruity of the situation, she none-the-less attempted the task and perhaps provoked the same puzzled confusion in her listeners as she was feeling. Through the letters, we trace this young woman's efforts to understand her strange place in this foreign world, the politics of being white in Aboriginal Australia, the issues of mission and the problems of paternalism.

One of the themes and great issues running through the letters is the bauxite mine that was established on Yolngu and mission land. The mission lease was 200 square miles but it would be cut to  $\frac{1}{2}$  a mile radius, the rest would go to the mine. The first suggestion was  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile but the superintendent of the mission fought hard for an increase. The description of the explanation to the old people that they would lose most of their access to their land, their ceremonial rights and to other areas for hunting conveyed both Beth's concern - and hope that this might bring jobs - and the horror of the people. Eventually, there was a select committee at Yirrkala. Labor and Liberal MPs came to assess the situation. Beth was in the middle of it watching and reporting back to her family and hoping she wouldn't be called. In her brisk and no-nonsense style she describes why:

- a. Because fundamentally it's not what the mission wants, it's what the Aboriginals want and this is their opportunity to stand up and speak out without us speaking for them.
- b. Because apart from the land tenure issue, which is definitely below the belt, it is hard to know what is right. If the mine remains and the government, mine and mission plan ways that this could really help the people, it could be beneficial, if they don't, it could be dreadful.

The decision to establish the mine was the impetus for the famous bark petitions from the Yolngu people to the federal government to claim their land and to insist that their rights be recognised. It was the beginning of the modern land rights movement that would finally be resolved by the Mabo case in 1992. These years and this mine have been pored over by historians and lawyers and others for whom this was the basis of the Australian land rights movement. Beth's letters, and Leigh's report of the Special Committee are another important source.

It is really pointless and against the spirit of a launch for me to go on and on when the lively and vivid nature of the letters give so much more. What I particularly like is Beth's clear eyed view. She never shies away from a paradox or a problem and lays it out in sharp and lucid prose with a strong nose for hypocrisy.

Here she describes her fury at some of the problems in the mission quoting from a health report:

Yirrkala has an expensive looking church, an up-to-date store, a canteen but not one single shower is available to its 500 odd Aboriginal inhabitants. There are ten toilets in the bush camp and only four toilets and no laundry facilities at all in the beach camp which accommodates 250 people.

Some things that go on here and are done by the church in this place just makes one feel ashamed. The mission is outspoken and openly criticizes the mining company about all the bad things they MAY do and many of our misdoings are just sticking out here like a granny's tooth for all to see. As Colin Williams *theologian* puts it, 'We are too busy looking at the flood outside the church to smell the stink that is inside'.

It is at times very easy to understand why native peoples in Africa and other places revolted against the Christian church as we know it. The people here on the whole are really quite placid. When and if they get a bit cheesed off, they just go bush for a while.

Now to a lighter and more pleasant side. Twenty men have gone into Darwin this week, they are to stay there for two weeks to practice under the guidance of two Welfare Officers, then with ten others from Bathurst Island will do a dancing tour to Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. This is quite an experience for them as you can imagine as many of them have not even been to Darwin before.

Or this, on Beth helping to clothe a couple heading for teaching training in Darwin:

Tomorrow Wulanybama and Wawujmarra are going to a teacher training course in Darwin. I've been preparing their wardrobe and it's quite a job. The trouble is they have few clothes and little money and a list of required clothing that would set anyone back eg 5 singlets, 5 underpants, 6 shorts, 7 shirts etc.

It's a problem. Leigh could go to Darwin and wear thongs, shirts and shorts and that's OK 'cause he's a white man – but an Aboriginal must be well dressed or he's riff-raff.

Other firsts were more sinister. Beth also described the petrol sniffing or the stealing of meths, but her tone is never parsimonious. She is always up for the mix of activities that framed the community and was deeply interested in Yolngu culture. Another first was the Women's Club formed on the beach in February 1964. At least it was supposed to be for women but the men drew closer so they too could listen.

The letters also tell of the books read by an intelligent couple in the early 1960s, interested in world affairs and in race relations and the changes to the churches as a result of decolonisation. Any student of mission will be delighted by Beth both listing the books she is reading and by her response to them.

These letters are vividly interesting. The cooking alone was enough to make me feel like a pampered faint-hearted wuss as I turn on the gas and put my few skills to the task. Beth was always rustling up meals on her wood fired stove for many or Turkish delight and creamy caramels for Leigh, when it appeared his birthday would be missed. The letters list the failed and successful fruit cakes, the pasties, the biscuits, the full roasts cooked from tinned chicken and the electricity on for 2 hours in the morning and 4 hours at night. Beth is also always sewing, dozens of uniforms and teaching Aboriginal women to cut out from patterns.

The day to day intimacy of the letters is one of their real charms. These letters are always interesting. There is not a flat spot. The descriptions of the boats and planes coming in with mail or with longed for food items or cloth gives a lively glimpse into life on a mission station.

There is also child rearing and the birth of their first child Julie, so welcomed and loved but who did not thrive. The letters convey the sense of uncertainty about Julie's health which was sadly confirmed when they finally returned home.

I have been thinking a lot about how we consider the embodiment of place in our shared histories. It seems to me that missions are sites of place and of space. These are Aboriginal places with all the implications of spirituality and knowing connected and embodied in Aboriginal sites. Is it here, on missions, that we can find the continuation of Aboriginal epistemologies, ontologies and theologies of place? Missions were specifically sited in Aboriginal places, usually in some form of partnership with Aboriginal people. I heard a fascinating paper by my colleague Janna Cruickshank on 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian mission reports to the colonial government, insisting that missions be sited here, or there to reflect the country of Aboriginal people and at their behest. Mission sites, Janna noted, have been neglected in Land Rights claims but shouldn't be. That the Yirrkala mission was carefully situated on Yolngu land from which people could not be 'lost' is crucial to this history. But missions were also sites of space where colonialism clashed or conspired with missionary aims. Where Aboriginal people were introduced to global Methodism through Fijian teachers and where the demands of the nation - such as the Bauxite mine - were met, responded to and rejected. It was a space where peoples spoke a mix of languages and learned the cultures of each other. You get this very strong sense of the mission as a profoundly intercultural space in Beth's letters but deeply embedded in place. It is perhaps no surprise that this most important mission, re-established by Methodist in the 1950s and founded on a deep recognition of language, is now the annual site of the most significant meeting of Aboriginal leaders from around the country. Yirrkala mission and the Yolngu people who lived there, created this space, and welcome people from around the nation, to their place.

There is not a whinge in these letters. There are knowing critiques, there are thoughtful analyses woven into day to day stories of life in a mission station at the top end. Discomfort is described as exasperating or with humour. These are letters from a crucial moment in Australia's Aboriginal history, they speak to a deep hunger in our nation. As well as the living body that requires food and clothing, which Beth provided, there is the thirst for effective responses to intractable problems and to the long and ongoing hunt for a successful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This country could do a lot worse than follow Beth's thoughtful but no-nonsense approach. It is a powerful voice from a perceptive woman. I commend this book to the audience, I urge you all to buy a copy and I declare it launched with great pleasure.