

**Beyond Fabrication of Australia's History: A Documentation and Multi-Method Critical Analysis of Ngarabal and Biripi Elders' Perspectives and Experiences of Australian History.**

**By Fabri Blacklock**

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Recently the long-running controversy over the historical relation between Europeans and Indigenous people was fuelled by Windschuttle (2002) in the first volume of his series: *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. The ensuing 'history war' has been largely underpinned by Anglo Australian perspectives and research methodologies whilst the perspectives of Indigenous people are seldom evident. This is hardly surprising given history has largely been written by non-Indigenous historians; and unique perspectives of Indigenous historians are still only emerging. Yet "to share history involves changing the way history is constructed and represented. It involves non-Indigenous Australians identifying with aspects of Indigenous Australians' cultures and histories. It also involves Indigenous Australians sharing their knowledge and perspectives of history in this country" (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR), 1994, p. 1). As Craven (1999, p. 52) has asserted "there is a dire need for Aboriginal historians to contribute to the documentation of Australian history...At the same time, Aboriginal historians' expertise and research methods must be recognised in their own right as valid and reliable historiographic approaches". The primary purpose of the proposed research is to add a primary history study by an Indigenous researcher to the literature by undertaking a multi-method critical analysis of Ngarabal and Biripi Elders' perspectives and experiences of Australian history. The study aims to add a history of NSW Indigenous people to the literature by an Indigenous researcher. Focussing on oral history traditions, case studies, and traditional historiography methodology to document and critically analyse Ngarabal and Biripi Elders' perspectives and experiences of Australian history. Elders from the Ngarabal and Biripi clans from northern NSW will be interviewed in order to document an understanding of the impact that European colonisation has had on these Indigenous people. The paper will discuss the background to the research on the Ngarabal and Biripi people.

### **Introduction**

My research will document the history of the Ngarabal and Biripi peoples of whom my family are descendents from the perspectives of my Elders. As such my work is similar to that of other Indigenous historians (e.g. Miller, 1989) and works by Elders (e.g. Moran, 2005). There are not many Elders left in my family and I believe that it is important for their stories to be told to the wider community and also as a record for the younger generation of my family to have as a tribute to our people. Oral history is an important part of our culture, it is how we tell our stories and communicate. Oral history forms an important part of Indigenous people's lives because it is the basis of how our culture has been passed down from each succeeding generation to the next. Many of my Elders have not received the equivalent education of their non-Indigenous counterparts. My Great-Grandmother (Lock 1999. p, 51) says: "Flo and I would go over our life. Where we grew up, who our relatives were, the history of our family, we kept it alive in our minds over the years". La Maistre (1996, p.1) acknowledges the importance of such knowledge stating that: "Aboriginal people ... kept an oral history about an identified area. Their right to be there was explained by their forebears' occupation or by family history... Respect for elders is fundamental to Aboriginal society and they appear strongly in Aboriginal history. Accounts of their lives and prowess were kept orally in traditional society. Under European influences, accounts of their lives have been written down." Miller (1985, p. 235) also agrees about the importance of oral history: "The important thing about oral history is that it gives you a personal view of events – a Koori view, and you will never get that from a document written by a white man. ...the best source of information will be your own family, because it is their story." The historical story of my Elders life experiences will form an important contribution to Australian history as it will add an Indigenous perspective to the literature which is dominated by non-Indigenous historians.

### **The Present Investigation**

The primary purpose of my research is to address this concern by adding a new primary history study by an Indigenous researcher to the literature that capitalises on a synergistic blend of oral history, case study, and traditional historiography methodology to document and critically analyse Ngarabal and Biripi Elders' perspectives and experiences of Australian history. More specifically the purpose of the proposed research is to:

- Utilise an innovative multiple oral history case study approach to document Ngarabal and Biripi Elders' perspectives and experiences of Australian history as a primary historical source over time and further elucidate the impact of this history on succeeding generations;
- Make a significant contribution to our conceptual understandings of and documentation of Australian history and the impact of government policies; community attitudes, and critical social justice issues on my Elders;
- Identify Ngarabal and Biripi Elders' perspectives on current successful advances for our people and current challenges facing our people and proposed solutions;
- Investigate and analyse Australian history from an informed Indigenous perspective to ensure Indigenous historians' interpretations and perspectives are voiced in critical academic analyses of Australian history;

- Capitalise on a synergistic blend of oral history, cross-case analysis, and historiography to critically analyse and triangulate the findings, and provide a model multi-method and sophisticated research design for establishing Indigenous history; and
- disseminate the findings in international journals of high repute.

### ***Significance and Innovation***

The proposed research makes a potentially significant contribution to documenting new understandings of Australian history and the impact of this history on contemporary societal concerns. In addition, the proposed research offers potential educational and social benefits to Australian society. Elucidating our understandings of the impact of Australia's history on two Indigenous groups can assist Australians to comprehend that Australia has a black history; understand the historical forces that have impacted on current policies and community attitudes; and develop a commitment to contributing to shaping the reconciliation process and creating a more socially just Australia for all Australians.

My research will also form a significant contribution to the Ngarabal and Biripi people as there has been very little research into our historical perspectives and experiences. The most recent written research is an oral history of my Great-grandmother Millie Brown by my Aunty Pat Locke. This book was self published and due to a lack of recourse has not been widely distributed to the public. I have been actively encouraged by my family to research and record our history for the present and future generations of Ngarabal and Biripi people.

### **Research Design and Data Analysis**

The oral histories will comprise of multiple case studies and will focus on the descendants of my Great Grandfather, Frank Brown a Ngarabal man from Tingha, and my Great Grandmother, Millie Brown (nee Glover) a Biripi woman from Dingo Creek. Participants will include male and female Elders from my extended family who can trace their ancestry through my Great-Grandfather and my Great-Grandmother. Interviews with their children, now the Elders of my family, will form the main focus of the stories, with sections on my Great Grandmother's life recorded before her death. Older members of this lineage will also be focused upon initially in order to expand my analyses of the historical period from 1929 to the present. In addition, significant searches will be undertaken to identify recent government policies and initiatives in order to contextualise oral histories in specific historical events and ascertain the impact of such initiatives on living generations.

Firstly I will conduct a semi-structured extensive interview with each of the participants. The recordings will then be transcribed and the raw data will be analysed by reviewing the oral history with each individual. Content and narrative analysis will then be undertaken to identify key themes and rich narrative descriptions. Each separate case will then be presented based on the key themes identified and cross-case analysis undertaken to identify the commonalities and differences in perceptions. Finally historiographic sources (e.g. Fennel & Grey, 1974; LeMaistre & Hardie, 1996; Locke, 1999; Byrne & Nugent, 2004) will be compared to the key themes identified to fully triangulate the data, and conclusions presented. As such and consistent with the aims of the study a range of historiographic research methods will be utilised to implement the

multifaceted approach to the study of historical layers. The case study approach will draw on a range of primary and secondary historiographic resources from past to present periods.

The primary and secondary historical data will include archival and newly generated recorded oral histories, written historical accounts based on both European and Indigenous perspectives and interpretations of specific historical periods, and critical analyses of government policies during specific historic periods. This data will be accessed and retrieved from virtual libraries on the World Wide Web, State Archives, the State Library of NSW, the Mitchell Library, the National Library of Australia, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Autobiographical data will be generated based on an oral history method and contextualised in analyses of recent government policies. In particular the autobiography of my Great-Grandmother will be utilised. Miller suggests (1985, p. 228): “The most important place to begin is with your own family members – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etcetera. The best thing to do is to get them talking”. Miller (1985, p. 228): emphasises that there is a need to: “Ask for important events that they can remember happening or that they were told about... Finally, interview as many people as possible, because one person remembers something that someone else has forgotten and because different people view the same event in different ways.” Hence the combination of archival and new data sources should ensure the work results in a unique history and analysis of progressive generations of Ngarabal and Biripi families.

### **Ethical Considerations**

#### ***Values and Ethics Underpinning the Research***

Ethical permission to undertake the study was sought and approved by the University of Western Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee. Once permission was gained I began approaching Ngarabal and Biripi Elders to discuss their participation in the study. All my Elders were extremely enthusiastic about participating in the research as they saw it as a way of passing on their knowledge to the younger generations of our family. As the research is focused on Indigenous Elders I will address the Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research guidelines in relation to the following values and ethics:

***Reciprocity.*** The values and respect of the participants will be of high significance to the research. The benefits of the community will be a comprehensive history for them to keep and pass onto younger generations.

***Respect.*** Whilst the research I am conducting is based on my family’s history I know all of the people I will be interviewing and I have a trustful relationship with them. All the participants will have a written agreement concerning the ownership and distribution of the research material.

***Equality.*** The research will value and acknowledge the wisdom and contribution of the participating Elders. All participants will be treated with equality and trust in that

if they do not wish to answer specific questions they will not have to. All participants will be able to contribute to the distribution of benefit.

**Responsibility.** With myself being the researcher, it will be integral that I do not contravene Indigenous protocols. I will be accountable in the way in which I conduct the research with my Elders. The process of a written agreement about the way the data is to be collected, stored and the research findings disseminated will ensure my accountability.

**Survival and protection.** The research will contribute to the social and cultural bonds of the Ngarabal and Biripi people. It will provide a comprehensive history for the future generations of my people and will draw the family together forming a strong connection between the Elders and younger generations.

**Spirit and integrity.** The research will help keep the continuity between past, current and future generations alive as a written and recorded history of the Ngarabal and Biripi people. In addition, the research demonstrates a deep understanding of Indigenous culture and is based on existing relationships with the participants of the research.

### **Community Research: My Relationship with the Elders**

The relationship that I have with my Elders will inevitably affect the outcome of this thesis. I am close to all my Elders and have the utmost respect for them but how they view me and their relationship with me will, I hope, add a dimension to the interviews. Smith (1999, p. 139) notes that: “Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position.”

As an insider I will be accountable for the way I conduct myself and the research, as the final outcome could be scrutinised by different members of my community. I may uncover information that is unpleasant and my Elders and I may differ on what is of value to the literature. Smith (1999, p. 139) notes: “One of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories.”

I hope to continue to have a good relationship with my Elders and to do justice to the knowledge that they share with me. They will need to have the utmost confidence in me to allow me to record, interpret and analyse the information about their lives that they share with me. They will have certain expectations of me and how I use the knowledge they share with me whilst conducting the research.

### **Summary**

The outcomes of the research will be an oral history documentation and multi method critical analysis of the Ngarabal and Biripi people’s history from the perspective of Elders. The research will contain oral histories recorded by me with my Elders and as such, add new knowledge to the literature based on Indigenous people’s perspectives of

their history and as interpreted through the eyes of an Indigenous researcher. The research also offers innovation in the research methodology employed in that multiple methods (i.e. oral history, case study, and historiography) will be employed to accurately document and interpret Ngarabal and Biripi people's history. As such the research is anticipated to result in an innovative multi-method approach for documenting Indigenous perspectives of history that can be emulated by other Indigenous historians.

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