

SOME PEOPLE WANT TO SHOOT ME

Wayne Bergmann &
Madelaine Dickie

Introduction: Madelaine Dickie

In 2014 Wayne interviewed me for a job as media and communications officer at KRED Enterprises in Broome, Western Australia. He was the chief executive. During the interview, he looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Some people want to shoot me.’

I had no idea what he was talking about.

I had no idea Broome was a battlefield, full of those wounded during the James Price Point negotiations, which, had it not been for the lead proponent’s withdrawal, would have led to the construction of a giant gas plant just north of the town. Wayne had spearheaded the negotiations on behalf of Traditional Owners for that country, back when he was CEO of the Kimberley Land Council.

I knew none of this when I accepted the job. What I did learn, very quickly, was that I loved working with Wayne. He was demanding, smart, intensely political and visionary. He had assembled a team at KRED who were loyal and who shared his vision.

Over the next five years, I celebrated with Nyikina Mangala people as they were granted native title at Lanji Lanji, a place on the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) of whistling ducks, barramundi and saltwater crocodiles. Wayne’s people had been fighting to have their native title recognised for eighteen years. I accompanied ABC’s Landline program to Nyikina-owned Mount Anderson

Station, to document the birth of the Kimberley Agriculture and Pastoral Company, an Aboriginal-owned pastoral venture which would come to control over seven hundred thousand hectares of the Kimberley. While not quite in the league of billionaires Gina Rinehart and Andrew ‘Twiggy’ Forrest, it was on its way! I became inculcated in the world of native title; addicted to the Kimberley’s rich and dark history, and to its politics.

When Wayne asked me to write this story—a story of independent Aboriginal economic development—I felt his sense of urgency. It has been a privilege to work on.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes attributed to Wayne, or others, come from interviews I conducted between 2020 and 2022. Wayne and I worked closely together on the final text. I am proud to be a co-author of his story.

Prologue: Bilby killer

‘Your dad kills baby bilbies.’

This is what they say to his children.

‘You think white. You lie white. You talk white.’

This is what they say to him.

A Ku Klux Klan hat and a hangman’s noose swing from a lamp-post on the road into town.

This is what they say to the people of Broome, a place in the Kimberley region of Western Australia that prides itself on its Aboriginal and Asian history. A multicultural town. A welcoming town.

There comes a breaking point.

For Nyikina man Wayne Bergmann, that point is in August 2011.

Earlier in the year, he’d stepped down as chief executive of one of the most powerful land councils in Australia—the Kimberley Land Council (KLC). After exhaustive consultations with native title groups, Wayne had successfully negotiated a 1.5 billion dollar compensation agreement between the Western Australian Government, Woodside Petroleum Ltd and Kimberley Traditional Owners over a proposed gas plant at James Price Point, just north of Broome.

The proposal ripped the town right up the belly.

It turned brothers against sisters, daughters against fathers,

employees against bosses, friends against friends. There was no sitting on the fence. You were either for or against a gas plant.

‘Dad, why can’t you do a job where people like you?’ asked his daughter Tessa.

Tessa was still too young to know that native title gives no veto over development.¹ That if you refuse a seat at the table, you might end up with nothing. That for Aboriginal people facing development proposals, there is no level playing field. That the economic rights of her ancestors had long since been taken away.

By August, Wayne is exhausted. His children have been bullied at school—even his eldest daughter, Sara, who’s boarding two thousand kilometres south, in Perth. His wife, Christine, has been abused while grocery shopping. For the last eight years, he’s been trying to hold Kimberley Traditional Owners together. For eight years, he’s been fighting the Australian Government, the Western Australian Government, the pastoralists, the media and the protesters. He’s been fighting Woodside—is fighting them right at this moment, urging the company to release sensitive footage to the public showing non-Aboriginal protesters spitting on Aboriginal people employed to conduct heritage clearances at the proposed site.

‘We live here,’ he tells Woodside staff in a meeting in Broome. ‘We’re being attacked every day. You need to tell the truth about what’s happening.’

But Woodside won’t budge. Won’t make the footage public.

It’s the first time Wayne loses control in his professional career. He thumps the table with his fist and walks out of the meeting in tears. He feels broken; they’ve broken him. Wayne drives home, packs the car, and then keeps driving, with Christine in the front and their two youngest children, Jarred and Tessa, in the back.

They pass the crocodile park and the mango farms of 12 Mile. They skirt portly old boabs and cross floodplains of whistling ducks. Finally, they draw close to the mighty Martuwarra, the Fitzroy River—lifeblood of Nyikina country, Wayne’s country, his children’s country—made by Woonyoomboo when the world was still soft.