First published 1992 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

First edition reprinted 1992, 1993, 1996, 2000.
This edition first published 2026.

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159
fremantlepress.com.

Cover design and illustration by Jenna Lee, jenleeart.com.au
Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760995669 (paperback)
ISBN 9781760995676 (ebook)

Fremantle Press is supported by the Western Australian State Government through the Department of Cultural Industries, Tourism and Sport.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.

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When the PELICAN LAUGHED

ALICE NANNUP
with Lauren Marsh
& Stephen Kinnane

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are respectfully advised that deceased people are referenced in this publication.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people: Wendy Jenkins for her support and insight, Mark Turton for many things over the past four years, Uni Parker for Aboriginal language words and for helping to hunt down family photographs, Girlie Clarke for the photographs on pages 19, 43 and 129, Joan Gray for her support and the photographs on pages 188 and 199, and Penny Taylor from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Margaret Florey from Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, and Dr Alan Dench from the Anthropology Department of the University of Western Australia.

We also wish to acknowledge the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Aboriginal Arts Unit of the Australia Council for their financial assistance with the preparation of this book.

The creative writing programme of Fremantle Arts Centre Press is assisted by the Australia Council, the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press receives financial assistance from the Western Australian Department for the Arts.

Introduction

In the course of researching material on Stephen Kinnane's grandmother, Jessie Argyle, Stephen and I met many elderly Aboriginal women who knew his nanna, and were willing to talk to us about their experiences under the repressive *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA). We came to meet Alice Nannup through one of these ladies, Aunty Jean Hill. When Stephen explained to Aunty Jean that he wanted to understand more about his nanna's life, her immediate advice was, 'Go ask Alice.'

Alice Nannup (Nan) and Jessie Argyle had met, and formed a friendship, during the late 1920s. Both women shared the bond of being Nor'westers, had been taken from their families as children and, under the control of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, were contracted to white households as servants.

Our first meeting with Nan was in Geraldton Hospital, where she lay flat on her back in a hospital bed, surrounded by visitors. We approached her bedside to introduce ourselves, and when Stephen explained he was Jessie Argyle's grandson, Nan was both surprised and welcoming. Although she had

other visitors that day, Nan made the time to tell Stephen about how she came to be in Perth when she met Jessie, and explained how important their friendship had been to her. When we left Nan, we promised to keep in contact and to visit again – when she was back home – and bring with us a collection of old photos that belonged to Stephen's nanna.

A couple of months later, Stephen and I drove up to Geraldton looking forward to meeting Nan properly and spending time talking and hearing stories. Towards the end of 1989 we started working with Nan, recording an account of her life experiences on tape, with the intention of including her story in an anthology.

Over the next three years we made regular trips to Nan's, and as our friendship grew, so did the size of Nan's story. Our main method of working was for storytelling sessions to be taped in the morning and big lunches to be eaten in the afternoon. In between trips to Geraldton, Stephen and I transcribed tapes, carried out research at the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, collected photographic material, and I began organising material from the transcripts into a single story format. Central to this working process was Nan's involvement and editorial control over her emerging story. I believe this was an essential part of our working relationship as it ensured that the written version was in a language style Nan felt comfortable with, and that any stories told to us privately during a taping session would not turn up in print twelve months later unbeknown to her.

In January 1991, Nan, Stephen and I discussed the idea of publishing Nan's story separately from the anthology. By this time, the content and scope of our work together had well and truly out grown the original concept. Nan was very enthusiastic about having her own book, so from this point on *When the Pelican Laughed* started to take shape.

Now that the book is finally finished we are all feeling a mixture of things: satisfaction, relief, pride and amazement. This book means different things to each of us, but to all three of us it is as much a product of the valuable friendship that developed between us as it is our response to the need for more Aboriginal women's perspectives on the history of this country.

Lauren Marsh
December, 1991

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Radio Theatre: Geraldton, 1950

I used to take my kids every Saturday afternoon to the matinee in town. We'd all go in, sit down and try to enjoy ourselves, but there were a few white kids in town who were really terrible. They'd turn around and poke their tongues out, or sling off at us with 'Nigger, Nigger, pull the trigger – BANG BANG you're dead.'

On this particular day a Tom Mix picture was on. Tom Mix was a cowboy, and he'd be going 'bang, bang' too, you see, so those kids would just turn it on to us.

There was one boy, and he was the main one. On this day he had chewing gum and he went and stuck it on my son's seat while he was out of the room. I didn't see him do it, of course, and I was that cross because these were brand new melange pants. They were the only pair in Wright's and because they were a bit damaged, shop soiled it was, they let me have them cheap.

The kid that did it thought it was a great joke. I said to my daughter, 'I've had enough of this Pearl. You tell me when the picture is nearly over.'

'Why, what are you going to do?' she asked.

'I'll show you what I'm going to do. You just tell me.'

'Well, it's just about finished now, Mum.'

Right, I thought, and I got up with my baby and I walked outside.

Out in the foyer, near the place where you buy the tickets, there was a rail running right to the other end of the room. There was a break in the rail where the audience goes in, so I went and stood there with my little bloke on my hip.

Before long they all started coming out, but I was blocking the way see, so some of the little kids started slipping under the rail. I was holding on to one baby, and I had another one of my kids at my feet clutching my dress, when I put up my hand. 'Just a minute, I've got something to say – and I want you all to listen.'

Everyone just stood there and looked at me, and there were quite a few of them too; the foyer was full.

'Look,' I said, 'I've been coming here every Saturday afternoon, bringing my children to enjoy the matinee, just like you people, and what do we get? Nigger, nigger, boong, boong, pull the trigger, this, that, and the other. Well I've had it. I want you people to try and understand how that feels. Why don't you bring your children up, don't drag them up – it's a disgrace!' Well, they were all standing there, not saying anything. They were shocked, I suppose, that the likes of me could get up there and dress them down.

'You know,' I said, 'it's not fair. We're all the same, we're

all human beings; we walk, we talk, we eat the same kind of food, we are all just made the same. Colour is skin deep and I think we should all be treated as human beings.'

Pearl was standing next to me and I said to them, 'I'll send my daughter next door to the tearooms to get two saucers. Then whoever of you is willing to come up here can be blindfolded. I'll take blood from me and from you, swirl it around in the saucers … then you come and tell me which is your blood.'

While I was saying all this, two policemen came in, broke past and went and stood in front of me. I saw them there but I kept on telling them. I said, 'When we come into this theatre we don't throw off at you people, yet we're called everything. I'll tell you another thing too, there were three of your goody-goody boys across the road the other day and an old lady came out of the butcher's shop. She had two bags of groceries and every time she went to step off the kerb a car would come, and she'd have to step back. Well, those goody-goodies would laugh their heads off. That's shame,' I told them. 'But my son was with me, this "boong kid", and he walked across the road and carried that old lady's parcels home for her. That's what a "boong boy" does. And why? Because I brought him up to respect other people, not like you people. You're dragging your children up.'

They were all quiet, all just looking at me. The police were looking too and I tried not to look at them. But you should have seen these police, grinning from ear to ear, and one of

those policemen didn't like Aborigines much either.

Then I said, 'I'll be back next week, don't worry about that. And I want to be treated as such, no names called, because we want to enjoy the matinee as well. Furthermore, before I go, if any of you can defend yourselves, come out here and tell me if I'm wrong. You come out here and tell me.'

But they didn't tell me, they just stood there.

'Right,' I said, 'you haven't got anything to say. You can go.' And I just stepped aside.