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Green Ringer
A Fitzroy Crossing Memoir

Steve Hawke

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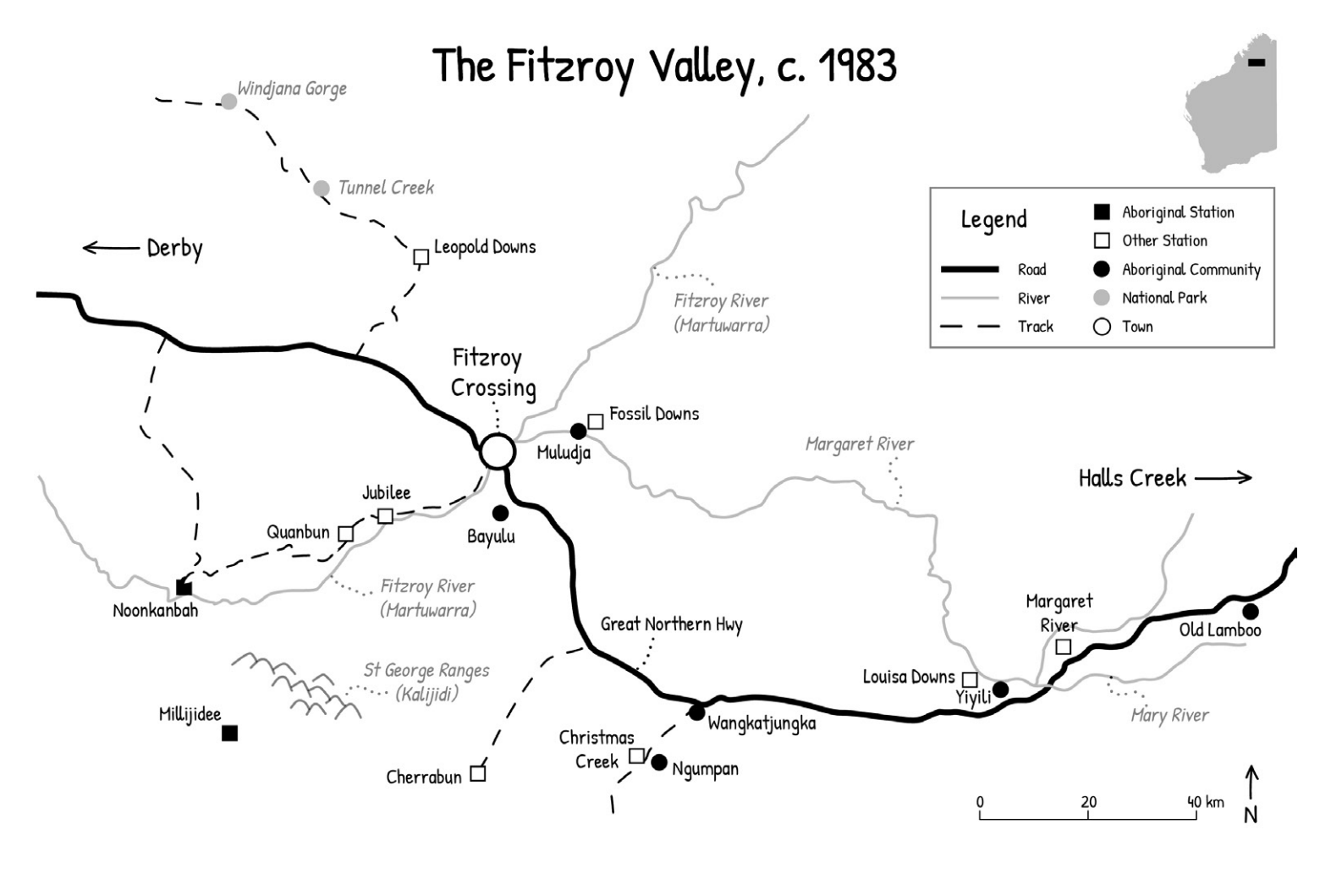
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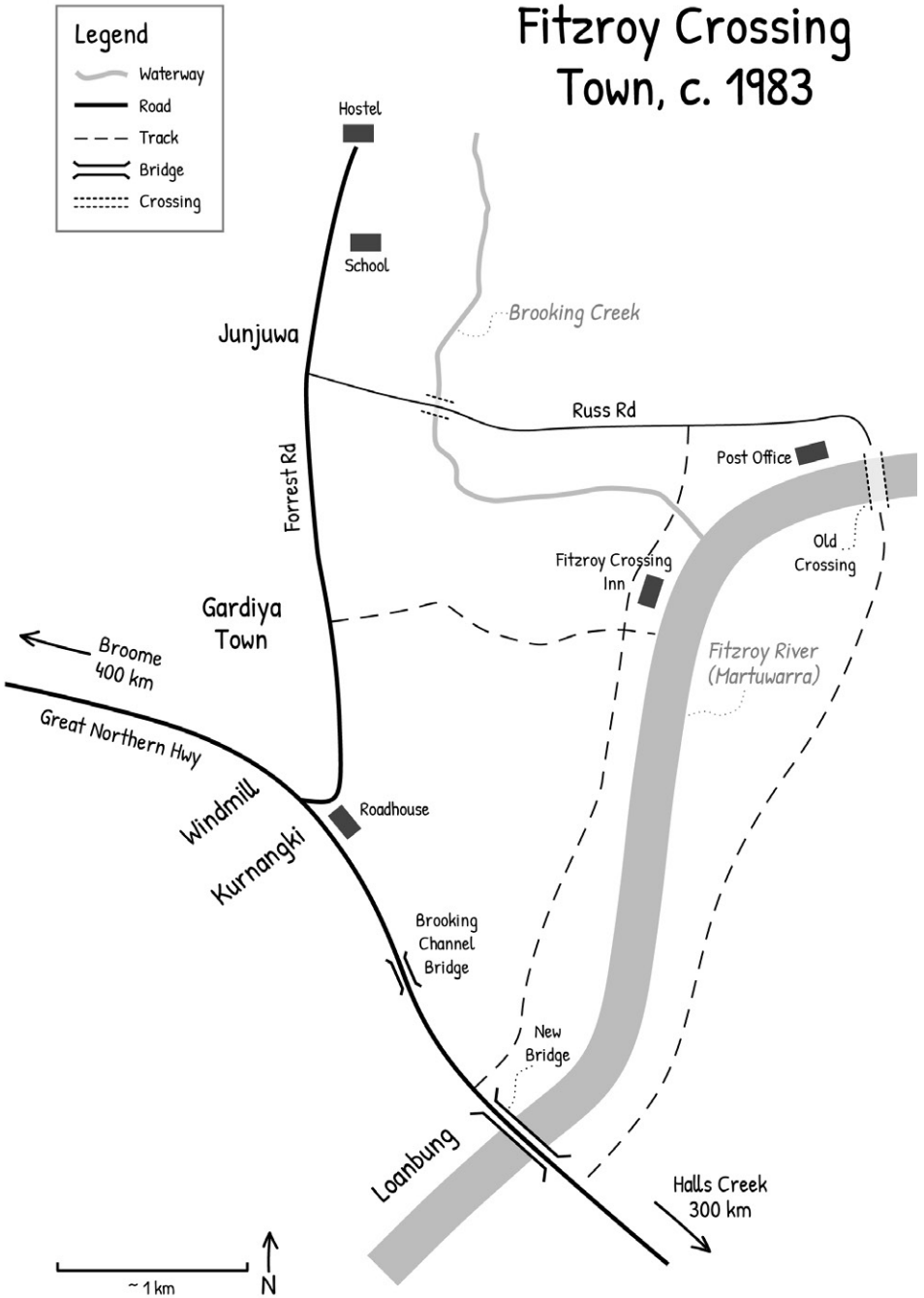
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this book contains names and images of people who have died. It also contains historical descriptions of violence in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Note on spellings

This book includes words that come from several Aboriginal languages, especially Walmajarri and Bunuba. These are primarily oral languages, and spellings in this book vary, depending on the source or speaker.

For my old mate, the late Howard Pedersen.


The Fitzroy Valley, c. 1983
Windjana Gorge
Tunnel Creek
Leopold Downs
Derby
Fitzroy River (Martuwarra)
Fitzroy Crossing
Fossil Downs
Muludja
Margaret River
Halls Creek
Jubilee
Quanbun
Bayulu
Noonkanbah
Fitzroy River (Martuwarra)
Great Northern Hwy
Margaret River
Old Lamboo
St George Ranges (Kalijidi)
Louisa Downs
Yiyili
Mary River
Millijidee
Wangkatjungka
Christmas Creek
Ngumpan
Cherrabun
Legend
Road
River
Track
Aboriginal Station
Other Station
Aboriginal Community
National Park
Town
0
20
40 km
N


Fitzroy Crossing Town, c. 1983
Legend
Waterway
Road
Track
Bridge
Crossing
Hostel
School
Junjuwa
Brooking Creek
Russ Rd
Post Office
Forrest Rd
Old Crossing
Fitzroy Crossing Inn
Gardiya Town
Broome 400 km
Fitzroy River (Martuwarra)
Great Northern Hwy
Windmill
Kurnangki
Roadhouse
Brooking Channel Bridge
New Bridge
Loanbung
Halls Creek 300 km
~ 1 km
N

Author's note

MEMORIES, LIKE DREAMS, reside in your subconscious; they can elide and overlap events, and can embellish and omit. They are not to be fully trusted. We all, unconsciously, recreate versions of our lives that glorify, justify or memorialise our younger selves. In the story that follows, where there is fact-checking available to me, I promise to honour it, no matter how embarrassing. But I am diving into the murk of a time past, where corroboration is largely scarce. Please remember, this is memoir, not history.

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Introduction

I FIRST SET foot in Fitzroy Crossing in 1978. I was only nineteen years old when I stumbled almost accidentally into a location and a circumstance that would defy understanding today. A most peculiar hamlet, Fitzroy was part of a time warp in the Australian story that was on the verge of unravelling. I was drawn into a lifetime of working for and with the Indigenous mob in the Kimberley. My career, if that's what you can call it, began just eleven years after the 1967 referendum, which felt like ancient history even then. It has brought me much to treasure, and very few regrets.

I'd gone north in the aftermath of a bruising end to my first serious relationship, which brought my post-schooling hippie year in Tasmania to an end. I was following my nose, with no plan, and no real idea of what I was doing. And I was trying to escape what I saw at the time as the burden of my surname. My father, Bob, was still a few years short of attaining the prime ministership but was already well-established as a prominent national figure, as the president of both the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the national Australian Labor Party (ALP).

At the time, Fitzroy Crossing was a dying remnant of a colonial, semi-feudal era; a remote outpost in a ferment of turmoil, where the Indigenous peoples were mobilising to challenge almost a century of unrelenting repression. Tumultuous times lay ahead. To experience and to participate in such a time of rending, of disruptive and profound change,

is a scary and thrilling privilege. This is the story of my first stint in Fitzroy Crossing, which came to an end in the second half of 1983.

LATE TEENS AND early twenties. On the loose. Free from parents. Gap years. First loves, second loves. Mad adventures; some held dear in memory, some rued. Which years in the arc of our lives are quite so rich and formative?

I suspect that if I met my twenty-year-old self now, we would not get on terribly well. He would find me curmudgeonly, too slow to act or to commit to anything. I would find him too opinionated, too unwilling to see the other side of any particular coin; just too bloody sure of himself altogether. But knowing what I know, I would also concede that his anger was righteous, and justified.

I am hoping to evoke the flavour of those times that provoked such passion and anger in my younger self. And to remind the reader of some of the stark realities of a not-so-distant past, as a new era starts to take shape after the defeat of the 2023 Voice referendum.

But my passions ran in other directions too. I discovered a deep love of country, and especially of the Martuwarra – the Fitzroy River – which is still to this day the country of my heart. And I found love, a love that has lasted.

These were the years of my coming of age.

There are two strands to this story. While seeking to paint a picture coloured by the nostalgic glow of a youthful past, I also want to convey a message: a reminder that in the cycle of less than a lifetime, the world as we once knew it can become unrecognisable.

I THINK THE starkest way to convey this duality, and to illustrate the reality of that era, comes from a sheet of notepaper that I came across in an old file. In my woeful scrawl, it is headed:

> Overheard in the front bar of the Spinifex Hotel in Derby. 11am 3/1/81[1]

I have been known to get dates and years mixed up, but in my mud map of memories I've never had any trouble pinning down that first week of 1981. It still has a rosy glow, a semi-sacred aura. I was a month shy of my twenty-second birthday. On New Year's Eve I'd driven the 260 kilometres from Fitzroy Crossing to Derby in my three-cylinder, soft-top Suzuki, top speed 85 km/h. Love was in the air!

Lesley and I had been dancing around each other up to that point. Her landlord had gone home for the holidays, and she had the place to herself. Those next few days are when it got real. Three years later we had our first child. Over four decades later we have our first grandchild. Never married, but just about as married as you can get. My mud map has it as a week of sex, joy, unbridled endorphins. The point at which my life took its most fundamental turn. I knew something was happening, even if I did not quite know what it was at that point.

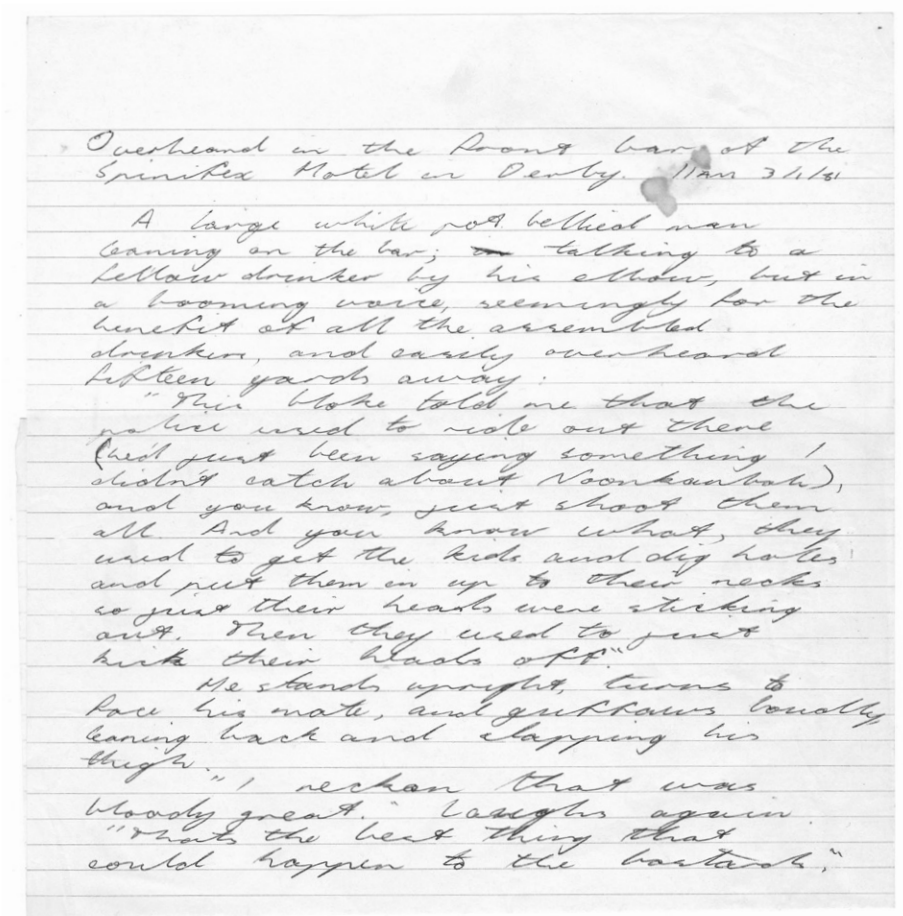
The third of January 1981 is smack in the middle of that rosy week.

I have no mental memory of the event. Lesley has no memory of me telling her about it. Perhaps I kept it to myself, not wanting to spoil the magical vibe we had happening. I have no idea what I was doing in the front bar of the Spini at 11 am. Perhaps getting a six-pack for a picnic at May River, or a carton to take back to Fitzroy?

The rest of my note reads as follows:

> A large white pot bellied man leaning on the bar; talking to a fellow drinker by his elbow, but in a booming voice, seemingly for the benefit of all the assembled drinkers, and easily overheard fifteen yards away.
>
> 'This bloke told me that the police used to ride out there (he'd just been saying something I didn't catch about Noonkanbah), and you know, just shoot them all. And you know what, they used to get the kids and dig holes and put them in up to their necks so just their heads were sticking out. Then they used to just kick their heads off.'
>
> He stands upright, turns to face his mate, and guffaws loudly, leaning back and slapping his thigh.
>
> 'I reckon that was bloody great.' Laughs again. 'That's the best thing that could happen to the bastards.'[2]

That was the Kimberley forty years ago. Or should I say, one aspect of it.


Overheard in the Front bar of the Spinifex Hotel in Derby. 11am 3/1/81

A large white pot bellied man leaning on the bar, talking to a fellow drinker by his elbow, but in a booming voice, seemingly for the benefit of all the assembled drinkers, and easily overheard fifteen yards away.

"This bloke told me that the natives used to ride out there (he'd just been saying something I didn't catch about Noonkanbah), and you know, just shoot them all. And you know what, they used to get the kids and dig holes and put them up to their necks so just their heads were sticking out. Then they used to just kick their heads off."

He stands upright, turns to face his mate, and guffaws loudly leaning back and slapping his thigh. "I reckon that was bloody great." Laughs again. "That's the best thing that could happen to the bastards."

Overheard in the front bar of the Spinifex Hotel in Derby,
11 am, 3 January 1981.

First time at Noonkanbah

HOW DID I come to be in the Kimberley? It sure hadn't been on my radar. Tom Stephens and I tell slightly different versions of the story, but the guts of both tales are true.

It is Darwin, late 1978. Cyclone Tracy has been and gone, almost four years earlier, but the port city still has a dilapidated, battered air about it. I'm renting a caravan beneath an old Queenslander-style house in the northern suburbs for nothing much at all, and having the time of my young life.

During my year in Tasmania, I'd fallen in with the Movement Against Uranium Mining (MAUM) crowd and, through that, become fascinated with the opposition to the proposed Ranger uranium mine, and the emergent land rights movement.

I attended a MAUM conference in Melbourne that coincided with the 1977 national conference of the ALP in Perth. My involvement became a story in the press, as Dad was engaged on the pro-mining side in a bitter dispute at the ALP conference that resulted in a vote in favour of an indefinite moratorium on uranium mining.

Despite our differences, I never fell out with my father to the extent that many assumed and speculated. That said, it was a rocky time. It was the nadir of his relationship with Mum, as another woman made a concerted pitch to take her place. As such, it was also the nadir of my relationship with Dad. Silly me was urging Mum to get out; if she'd listened

to my advice, she would have missed out on the best years of her life.

To top things off, when I got back to Tasmania from the MAUM conference, my lover had debunked! The shack a few kilometres out of Deloraine lost all its appeal. It was time for a change.

I deferred an Arts course at Melbourne Uni for the second time and headed north, hitchhiking up via Brisbane and Mount Isa, with a brief layover in Katherine. When I hit Darwin, I assumed Mum's maiden name as a surname. It didn't work very well. I became known as Steve 'Wink Wink' Masterson.

I had the writing bug even then, and found a taker in the left-wing rag *Nation Review*. I wrote pieces about the appalling racism I'd encountered in Katherine, about the traditional owners resisting Malcolm Fraser's attempts to enforce uranium mining on their country, and about attending a traditional dance festival on Groote Eylandt, amongst other things. My byline started as Steve Masterson, but at some point *Nation Review* invented another one for me. Someone there with a sense of humour went for a play on words with my real surname, and dubbed me Matt Dove.

THE KIMBERLEY LAND Council (KLC) had just come into existence, but no-one knew of that existence beyond the boundaries of the region. They had hardly a dollar to their name, nor office, nor staff. The smell of oil on their rag was very faint indeed.

They needed some coverage. They needed to get their story out. There was a court case coming up in Broome: a diamond exploration boom was in full swing, and the Yungngora Community at Noonkanbah Station were

objecting to mining tenements being granted over their newly acquired pastoral lease.

The station had been bought on behalf of the community just two years earlier by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission that had been established by the Whitlam government in December 1974. At a million acres (approximately 4,000 square kilometres), and at one time running over 100,000 sheep, Noonkanbah was one of the largest stations in the Kimberley.

Noonkanbah was also the birthplace of the KLC, at a huge gathering held just six months earlier, in May of 1978:

> On the first day of the meeting all the representatives of the different communities (more than 30) talked about their own situations and experiences and about the benefits they would get from joining together and sharing their common experience and making their voices one voice, and they decided yes, they would set up a Land Council.[3]

Tom Stephens and Rod Dixon, two whitefellers who had other day jobs but were supportive of the embryonic KLC, had an argument about which of the *Nation Review*'s two Territory correspondents, Steve Masterson or Matt Dove, might be the best to try to entice over to Broome for the court hearing, and to maybe do some work on a newsletter.

Tom had to go to Darwin for his day job, and we hooked up. He got both the correspondents as a package deal. But only after I'd hit up Mum for the Darwin to Broome airfare. The KLC couldn't afford it. Neither could I, but I didn't want to miss this opportunity.

THE BROOME COURTHOUSE is a magnificent building: large, square, resting on six-foot-high stumps, with steps leading up to crazy-wide verandahs of dark polished wood. There is a story I once heard, probably apocryphal, that it was designed for the Kimberley in South Africa, but all the materials got shipped to the wrong Kimberley, and they built it in Broome instead. It sits on an expansive, well-treed block in the heart of town, and is famous these days as the home of Broome's Courthouse Markets every Saturday. But back then, it was just a courthouse a bit too big for its boots, with a resident magistrate. That's where I spent my first three days in the Kimberley.

The magistrate was sitting in his capacity as the Mining Warden. The Yungngora Community of Noonkanbah Station, represented by the Aboriginal Legal Service, was objecting to the granting of mining exploration tenements on their pastoral lease. As I described it in my book *Noonkanbah: Whose Land, Whose Law*[i]:

> The courtroom made a most unusual sight; rows of old men with stern faces in the public benches at the back, listening with earnest attention, but virtually no comprehension, to the Queen's Counsels and the Magistrate at the front.[4]

At each break in proceedings the men would file out and gather on the verandahs, or under a shady tree, to get

i I have included quotations from *Noonkanbah: Whose Land, Whose Law* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1989, republished as ebook and print-on-demand by Ligature, 2021) where it is appropriate to use the direct words of community members, or where the details in an account written closer to the time seem most appropriate.

a debrief and explanations, with me hovering on the fringes. The lawyers gave the mob no false hope. The magistrate was sympathetic and thorough, but he only had jurisdiction over the technicalities of mining law; whether the lease was properly pegged or the like. He reserved his decision. No-one was expecting a win. The main defendant was Conzinc Riotinto Australia, better known as CRA, the predecessor of Rio Tinto of Juukan Gorge fame. They were never likely to be tripped up on the technicalities.

I left Broome on the afternoon of the third day, once the hearing was completed. I'd been invited to go out to Noonkanbah. I got a ride with Doug, an officer of the state's Department for Community Welfare who worked closely with the Noonkanbah mob. How many times have I done that drive since? Without doubt it numbers in the hundreds. Four hundred kilometres. I must confess, it is not the most exciting drive in the world. There is none of the grandeur of the Gibb River Road, or of the same National Highway Number One where it reaches the East Kimberley and wends through the ranges. I did get my first ever glimpse of the Fitzroy River as we rumbled over Willare Bridge, and marvelled at the boab trees that flashed past. But the truth is, it is almost entirely flat, and pretty bloody scrubby; not particularly inspiring on first sight.

Dusk fell rapidly, as it does in those parts. My first intimation of Fitzroy Crossing was a distant glow of lights. 'Silver City,' Doug said in that dry way of his – he was a taciturn sort of feller. 'Silver City' was the nickname for Windmill Reserve, nowadays known as Mindi Rardi.

Other scattered twinklings appeared as we got closer, but the glow of Silver City dominated. It had the feel of a floodlit sporting arena. We crested a slight rise, came down onto the

curve of road crossing Plum Plain, and swept past that blaze of light that was the first sign of life since the roadhouse at the Willare Bridge, 230 kilometres ago. All I got was the briefest glimpse of what looked like a bunch of corrugated iron sheds.

Half a kilometre further on, a roadhouse, already closed down for the night. A left turn, a two- or three-kilometre stretch, with more sprinklings of lights, until we turned up at Doug's place. I could get no sense of, make no sense of, this place in which I'd arrived.

The next morning, I was picked up early by one of the Yungngora leaders, the one and only, gravel-voiced Hanson Boxer – better known by his true name of Pampila – and we headed for Noonkanbah. Any exploration of Fitzroy Crossing would have to wait for another time.

Pampila dropped me at the schoolteachers' camp, which comprised three caravans by a building of corrugated iron in semicircular Nissen hut–style, but expanded to a ridiculous degree. It had been one of the world's largest shearing sheds in the days when Noonkanbah was in its prime as a sheep station, but by then the sheep had been replaced by cattle. Since the start of that year it had served as the new independent school, established by the community so that they would not have to be separated from their kids.

The two caravans that were occupied by the teachers at least had bough shade–style roofs to provide some shade. The third one, which I was shown to, sat open to the blazing sun. I don't think they had been warned of my arrival, but the teachers were friendly, and fed me. That said, they had work to do. It was November. The temperature in the shade was well north of forty. I had never been so hot in my life. And nothing happened for two days. I sweated, I fretted, I wondered what the hell I had got myself into.

On day three, I was summoned to a meeting. That day, and the two or three that followed, changed my life. I didn't know it then, but it set me on a course that I had not envisaged.



Setting out for Noonkanbah the very first time with Pampila Hanson Boxer, November 1978.

About the author

STEVE HAWKE grew up in Melbourne but found his way to the Northern Territory and then to the Kimberley as a nineteen-year-old in 1978. Captivated by the country, the history and the people, he stayed for almost fifteen years working for Aboriginal communities and organisations. He then settled in the hills outside Perth, returning to the Kimberley most years and continuing to work for the communities for over forty years.

His books on the Kimberley include *Noonkanbah: Whose Land, Whose Law* (1989), the children's novel *Barefoot Kids* (2007), the local history *A Town Is Born: The Fitzroy Crossing Story* (2013) and adult novel *The Valley* (2018). He collaborated with Bunuba Cultural Enterprises to create the play *Jandamarra* that premiered at the Perth International Arts Festival in 2008 and toured the Kimberley in 2011, as well as the libretto for the dramatic cantata *Jandamarra: Sing for the Country* that premiered at the Sydney Opera House in 2014 and was reprised in 2019.

He has also written the biographies *Polly Farmer* (1994) and *The Boy from Birdum* (with Bill Dempsey, 2021) and novels *Out of Time* (2019) and *The Brothers Wolfe* (2023).

Green Ringer is his first memoir.