

FROM THE GLENS TO THE OUTBACK

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Ngurra ganakarrinha yingu buluy-gayi birbiwarni wankgayi thurdud mirda nyuantharri biyiyarri.

'Country, we come here today to visit you and talk straight. Please do not get angry and harm us.

THE DATE WAS the 18th of September 2012. It was mid morning and the blistering sun was reaching the centre of the ocean blue sky. My colleague and I were sitting patiently on the pebbled banks of a dry creek bed eating some of our packed lunch. We both gazed through the flames of the camp fire towards where the group of traditional owners were sitting in the shade of the gum trees. Three of the men were assiduously grinding and preparing various shades of ochre from small lumps of rock, while another crafted a series of small circular bands from wattle. The rest of the group were chatting and laughing with each other in their own language. Then, with a slight but intuitive glance towards the sky, the lead elder arose to say: 'it is time now'.

It was on this day that I took part in an Aboriginal ritual ceremony somewhere deep in the heart of the Western Australia outback, a long, long way from my native home in Glenfarne, Co Leitrim! It had only been a year previously that I had



■ Lunch beside the campfire. Top: Map of Australia showing location of Pilbara

emigrated from Ireland to Perth following the promise of stable employment as an archaeologist. Of course, so many Irish people my age opted to do the same over the last four or five years and this is reflected in the vibrant Irish communities that populate the cities around Australia currently, not least in Perth. The lucrative promises of the mining boom in the iron ore-rich northwest is mostly responsible for this wave of immigration from around the world into Australia.

The surge in wealth of the Australian economy as a result of big mining companies being granted vast tracts of land for resource extraction has been one of the main reasons why the country has sailed through the recent global downturn better than most. However, Australia's

economic reliance on trading of mineral resources with other countries, namely China, remains vulnerable to fluctuating stock prices and can be tentative in these days of global economic uncertainty. While the mining industry has played a major role in the economic and cultural fabric of Australia as a whole, it has also had a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal Australians, both past and present.

The earliest evidence of human activity has been discovered in caves, rock shelters and along the shores of lakes throughout the Australian continent. Radiocarbon dates have indicated that it had been first occupied from between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago. From the late eighteenth Century onward the continent was established as a British colony mainly for convicts

but later, free settlers made their way to Australia in vast numbers as well. In the short space of time between then and the present, the geographical and sociological landscape has changed greatly for the first Australians. The current population in Australia is over 22 million and people of Aboriginal descent account for 2.5% of this. There had been more than 250 languages spoken on the continent prior to British colonisation but only fifteen of those are still widely spoken among individual regional groups today.

In the early twentieth century, aboriginal children were often separated from their parents and sent to church missions or other state-sponsored agencies so as to absorb them into 'white' society. Up until the late 1960s, the Australian government did not even recognise 'full-blood aboriginal natives' in their population counts (this was how they were referred as).

Even today, many people at the forefront of national debate in Australian politics and society recognise that a gap between the 'civilised' world of modern Australia and the 'community' world of Aboriginal people still exists. Aboriginal Australians themselves acknowledge that they live a complex coexistence with their non-Aboriginal neighbours in the modern world. Personally I have learned that many Aboriginal people seek that this coexistence be based, at the very least, on respect; respect for place and



■ **Lead Elder examining the cave paintings**

respect for the people who inhabit those places.

Most of my work is based in the Pilbara region of the north-west, a short two-hour flight north of Perth. We are mainly employed to carry out archaeological surveys on areas that will be potentially impacted by mining activities or, as sometimes the case may be, to fully record and salvage artefacts in areas that cannot avoid complete destruction. The heritage legislative guidelines for Western Australia have recently been subject to review principally due to the demand for more cost-efficient exploration by the mining companies. In short, this makes it more difficult for every single object or site of aboriginal significance to be preserved in the face of mining.

The Pilbara region, like most of

Australia is a dry, arid and fairly rugged place. In many ways it is beautiful but in other ways it is harsh and unforgiving. The temperatures can rise to over 50°C in the summertime, settling to a cooler 25°C in winter. It contains an absolute abundance of archaeological material, which can be found undisturbed on the gravel floors of its valley plains or in the rocky fabric of its many hills. The material can range from stone or wooden artefacts to rock art, modified trees or walled rock shelters. Some of the earliest dates of occupation in Australia have been found in this region.

The archaeological surveys we carry out are aided by the Native Title (a.k.a. Traditional Owner) Groups who have certain rights to the land we are working in. The *Native Title Act* enables Aboriginal



■ Pre-ceremonial ritual of grinding ochre

communities to form organisations that can liaise and negotiate with mining companies who are intent on carrying out exploration on their land. One of those groups is the Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation, who represent the Yindjibarndi people. Their country incorporates the outstanding Millstream-Chichester National Park, the prominent Hamersely Ranges and the huge Fortescue River found right at the heart of the Pilbara region.

Having worked closely with this group on many surveys over the last couple of years, I have come to appreciate their treatment of

the land as a living, dynamic entity. They mindfully acknowledge that their ancestors have, for thousands of years, located permanent springs to set up campsites, discovered places to mine ochre and designated special places to use for initiation ceremonies. It is also imperative in their culture to hand this knowledge down to younger generations for the fear that these places may be forgotten in the future. I have worked with many Yindjibarndi people from different age groups and the most obvious thing that stands out for me is their passion and love for their

country. Not only have they granted me access through their country to particular archaeological sites of importance, but they have happily imparted with traditional stories and songs of their Dreamtime that have been passed down from generation to generation.

One of the most astounding discoveries in my time in Australia came, as I have said, in September of 2012 when a colleague of mine literally stumbled into a discretely located and partially hidden cave on a thickly vegetated slope. Within this fairly small-sized cave, or rock shelter as it is known, there was an impressive array of rock art and engravings on the walls and the ceilings. Many of these were figure paintings of Dreamtime human representations and etchings of kangaroos and other animals. The floor was also littered with stone artefacts, some that were apparently used as tools and not far outside the opening were the remnants of grinding bases (similar to quern-stones in Ireland). However, the most significant item in this discovery was wedged into a tiny ledge at the back of the rock shelter. It was the bone of a human upper arm (humerus) and looked to have been there for some time.

The traditional owners that were present on the survey were as impressed as we were by the place and a ritual ceremony was organised very quickly afterwards by the elders. It was a true honour to be asked by the group to be part of the ceremony. In fact up until the moment when the lead elder arose



■ Ceremonial procession to the cave

from the group around the campfire and declared that it was time, I had not expected to be involved considering that I had never been through their cultural initiations! They felt it was important that we take part and show our appreciation and understanding and we were only too happy to oblige.

On the day of the ceremony, we all had our lunch around the campfire and then made the short journey from the creek bed up the gentle slope to the cave. We stopped just outside to prepare ourselves before entering into it. We all took off our shirts and the elders applied the ochre to our faces and chests. The bands of wattle were then attached to our upper arms and some of the men applied larger bands around their heads. Apparently, this was a symbolic gesture to denote to the spirit of the cave that we came in peace. The lead elder then started to rattle two boomerangs together and began to chant in his own language. We then followed him into the cave as he continued to chant and dance. One of the men then built a fire in the centre of

the cave. The smoke filled the small chamber and we were all beckoned to move around and wave our hands over the flames. The lead elder then called on us all to remain silent as he spoke to the spirit in the cave. There was an enormous feeling of privilege when he referenced my colleague and I by name during his speech, apparently thanking us for our involvement in discovering the place. It was an extraordinary experience and one that will live long in my memory.

On reflection, it is refreshing to know that there is a group of people in this world who stand up for traditional values and acknowledge the importance of continuity in life and the reality of regeneration. The Yindjibarndi people have had many difficulties in recent times with mining companies trying to manipulate them, pay them off, set their people against each other or, as the case has been, destroy their ancient sites without consultation. But they have remained defiant in the face of adversity and have demonstrated that a strong,

united group with a love of their people and country can be a powerful one even in this day and age.

Having grown up in a part of Ireland that attests to outstanding beauty and contains an array of relatively intact archaeological sites and monuments, I see a parallel between Leitrim and the Pilbara. I believe the friendliness and accommodating qualities of the Leitrim people coupled with the rise of organic farming and eco-tourism in recent times has contributed greatly to the county being recognised as a unique and special place from the outside. I know I am very proud to be from there. However, the increasing threat of mining in north Leitrim and the surrounding vicinity is now widespread knowledge and has raised many concerns for me. Having discussed with many people here in Australia over the pros and cons of what mining has brought to their economy and what it can bring to the Irish economy, it is clear to me that the biggest losers are almost always the locals, the people who care for the country the most.

The lead elder of the Yindjibarndi people was recently quoted in a national newspaper saying thus: 'We believe true self-development can only happen when the will and spirit of a people are at the centre of it. We fight to hold onto our culture and identity and we fight for our country.' I hope that the people of Leitrim can be mindful of this viewpoint whatever may happen in the future.