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ABORIGINAL VIEWS

BELLBROOK : MY FATHER'S COUNTRY

*M. Quinlan

FOREWORD

Mrs Quinlan's story has been transcribed verbatim from tapes recorded between October 1982 and February 1983.

I first met Mrs Quinlan in 1981 when her daughter, Mrs P. Dixon became one of four Aboriginal people training at Armidale and New England Hospital. As I was involved peripherally in this training program, I was introduced by the trainees to their families and friends.

Mrs Quinlan decided some time during the following months that she would like me to record her story. She had some doubts about how we might go about it, but she was definite that she wanted to make a statement to leave for her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Further, she wanted to establish her right to Bellbrook which she considers to belong to her and her surviving siblings because her father established the settlement.

Mrs Quinlan also decided that I would need to see Bellbrook, that she wanted to "show me the place" so that I might understand better what she was talking about once we started recording. Consequently a group of us visited Bellbrook on October 8th, 9th and 10th 1982. Mrs Quinlan began telling her story at our camp site on Nulla Nulla Creek. She continued over several Sunday afternoon sessions at my home, a venue she chose.

One of Mrs Quinlan's greatest worries was "how are we going to put it all together", the other "but is it going to be really important?"

We dealt with "how to put it all together" by simply recording what was upmost in her mind at the time of any one session. When what she considered to be the important aspects had been recorded, I put these in a rough time sequence, wrote them down, discussed each section

* Mrs. M. Quinlan. (Compiled by Dr A-K. Eckermann, Armidale C.A.E.)

with her and her family. We made some additions and deleted some memories which might have been too personal.

"How to put it all together" proved a persistent worry to the whole family until the finished product was actually written up and could be disected, revised and finally accepted. Certainly recording the material on tape contributed to this problem. Mrs Quinlan forgot which areas she had already detailed, which parts of the story would need elaboration. This made her anxious because she wanted to tell the whole story.

"Is it going to be really important?" remains one of her doubts.

I believe Mrs Quinlan's story is important because it supports and emphasises a number of important events in the living history of Aboriginal people in south eastern New South Wales.

Thus the reader is familiarised with the period of early contact, simply referred to as "the time of the killings" - a reality that lives on no matter how often these events are rationalised by members of the majority. We are told of Bellbrook's development - one man's drive to provide for his family the best way he could. We are reminded of government policy during the Great Depression in the 1930s, when,

the law in New South Wales allowed an Aboriginal or a person 'apparently having an admixture of Aboriginal blood' to be removed by order of a court to a reserve, where he must remain until the cancellation of the order...thus during the depression New South Wales authorities followed the hard practice of what was sometimes referred to in Western Australia as 'clearing the towns'. This correspondence in time of economic disaster with harsh laws is suggestive of majority attitudes...

(Rowley, 1971:49)

Mrs Quinlan's story poignantly describes ignorance of such decisions by the powers that be - but clear recognition that her people had been degraded, "dogged about". Their independence, or relative independence, was eroded when the white manager "took over". Her story recounts the people's confusion and resentment, their persistent struggle against interference with their lives and livelihood, their deep frustrations when their children's time to learn was wasted by managers/teachers who "loafed" on the job. Despite all this there appears to be little bitterness, not because there was no hurt, but perhaps rather because truth should be recognised and accepted and lived with.

This story is also Mrs Quinlan's land claim to Bellbrook. It is clear that both parents belonged to the Dhunguddi language group. Tindale's (1974) tribal map of the area indicates that both Walcha and Sugarloaf Mountain as well as Bellbrook itself (which is located in its shadow) are part of Dainggati or Dhunguddi country. There is no doubt that Richard Kelly established Bellbrook. It is clear that government policy changed Bellbrook's population and nature during the 1930s from a "farm" settled by "free people" to a government institution.

Thus, Mrs Quinlan's story is more than a record for her family. It is a claim to her father's country as well as an example of living history which holds a legitimate and important place in Australian history generally. (A-K. Eckermann, July 7, 1983).

I am Mrs M. Quinlan, my father was Richard Kelly, my mother was Essie Mills.

I was born on the Macleay, on Bellbrook; there were nine of us in the family, now there is only me and my younger sister and my brother. My father, he'd have belonged to the tribe around Walcha, I don't know, and my mother, she was Dhunguddi. But there's not many of that tribe left because they were all killed out - no Dhunguddi - no good anyone claiming them, 'cause I'm the oldest about here.

My father and mother were the first half-caste kiddies - how could you put it? - my grandmothers were all Aboriginal and then they had white fathers - so they were fair. When my father was little, that was the time of the killings - before I was born - it's a wonder how he escaped. They were killing everywhere, all through the area. The worst was a fella called McMarr, he lived on Pee Dee, that big cattle station on the Macleay. Suppose he had a lot of others to help as well. I lost one grandmother over the bluffs near Armidale. They killed a lot of our people - pushing them over them bluffs - Wollam-ambi, you know. Then the other grandmother, I lost down on the Macleay on Pee Dee Creek. They used to herd them up and shoot them - go about shooting blacks like wallaby I suppose. They were only young women.

My old people never talked about that, never talked about the past. I reckon that was wrong, they should have told us. Might have been too much pain, maybe there was a law about it. Now my mother and father, they weren't very big, they were only little when all that happened. I don't know how they got away from the killings, they must have hid somewhere. Our tribe, there's no one left, we were all shot out; there was only the few that lived.

But they reckon that Queen Victoria - she stopped the killing of our people. Them Germans too helped us a lot, took them into their homes. See, the Germans weren't frightened of my people so McMarr didn't come around there. And then that Queen that stopped the killings, she gave my people food and blankets and clothes - everything.

My father and his friends, they walked to Bellbrook. There was no other way. They'd walk down from Armidale and it wouldn't take more than half a day - just straight walking. Armidale got too cold for our people. You know, it's all right in summer, Armidale, but when it gets cold, we'd have to come down from the tablelands.

My people, they really didn't live anywhere like Armidale or Bellbrook. They roamed around the Macleay, they were free in their own country. But they didn't go and mix in with other tribes; our tribe was there on the Macleay, they'd go down as far as Kempsey and then there'd be different tribes again. I think the tribes must have been frightened of one another too. You know, our people, they lived on good food; but then they got destroyed with bread and drink.

Years ago they used to have corroborees - you ever seen 'em? Suppose that's where my father met my mother. He met her down on the Macleay and then he stopped there.

Years ago there was a man come from England - Toose, he was. He had a post office in Bellbrook Village and he really took interest in Aboriginal people. *Nice* person, and he got that place for my father. My people used to have a sort of camp over the hill about two miles from Bellbrook - my three elder brothers and my sister were born there. Me, I was the first to be born on Bellbrook, 70 years ago. My father fenced Bellbrook three or four times - something like 60 acres. And you know, he wouldn't have the up-to-date tools, only what he borrowed from somebody. Nobody else lived there. They built three or four homes on Bellbrook, but no one lived in'm. Just my father was there. He had the farm. Well, to get that farm going he had to go half for a white man, you know? Mr Toose gave him that place to live in and he'd give half of everything he grew to a white man - who'd ever used to run the farm. My father used to grow everything that we needed to live on. Corn, and fowls and vegetables. He used to work for them people up the creek and they used to lend him tools; then he'd come back and work on his own place. We'd help him on the farm, grow corn, husking and thrashing. One thing I used to hate is husking the corn - had to pick every bit up. My father was a hunter too. He used to take shooters from Kempsey up the Big Hill for pidgeon and turkey. They'd give him all the bullets and things that were over. So he'd

get *us* some pigeon and turkey then. My mother - she used to work for them German people - that Mrs Schmidt. She used to help her because she was crippled. My mother was a good cook. It was *all right* we had a good life then. Even when I think about it now, it wasn't a lonely life, we enjoyed that life.

My people lived where they got a livin'. Some of them lived out at Kempsey, Tarooka, out at Wabra and we got a living out of this creek, Nulla Nulla Creek. Everybody couldn't live on one place, they had to go and live where they could get a living - the Quinlans now, they used to live at Lower Creek. People didn't bank up in one place. They moved about and in the old days, when you got too old to go on walkabout lookin' for food, they'd leave you. Well, my mother and father, they had twelve old people that was left on their hands on Bellbrook. They were just dumped there. Suppose they were asked to mind them because they were more kind hearted than the white people.

My old father...he had more white ways in him than Aboriginal ways. He never ever brought that into our home, our ways, you know. He brought us up as white people. We never had it in our home, see, never ever had that way, our language and things. We'd hear the language, but we never ever talked it in our home. Sad. There's a Fiji family here that can all speak their language, but we can't. I'd like to have learned more about Aboriginal things. Lots of our people roaming about then and they had things that were left to them. I only remember the corroborees the managers put on for the white people to see, that was much later. I can remember the last corroboree they had. My father didn't want his boy to go out to it. I didn't ask any questions about it, but his son, my brother George, he didn't want him to go out there. They were going to take the boys out into the bush for a week. My father he'd take the food, but he wouldn't stay out there with'm. So I used to think, "suppose it was too rough, he had it easier at home." What I can see of my people and learned about, they'd take notice of their old people. They weren't cheeky or anything. You'd never see a brother cheekin' or talkin' to you; not like now, people will have a row with you all the time. They were really sensitive that way.

But my mother and father, they didn't encourage that talk in our home. When they got into the white world, nothing was told. 'Spouse wasn't nothing to be proud of, they thought. They were happy in the other world. My father wanted us to have a fair go in life. He knew we'd never get it the other way. My father he wanted us to have the education...my father. My mother, she used to be more with going about learning things. She used to work a lot for white people and a lot of these people were her friends. But they wanted us to have the education.

In those days only my family lived on Bellbrook and to get a bit of schooling my mother used to have to get other kiddies and look after them. You had to have nine or ten to get a teacher. So my mother took her cousin's couple of kiddies and reared them - you know, to get a teacher.

We had a nice big school, even had toilets. We had a good teacher. I went to her school when I was 7, till I was 14. That was good, she was strict. She used to come up 9 o'clock or half past eight and she had to walk two miles over and two miles back. I know that she never ever missed a day. Good teacher, she never ever used the cane but then she'd punish us other ways - she used to keep us in and that. I remember her giving me sums that was *really hard*. I wouldn't do it and she still kept me in. I remember my mother comin' and rousin' on her - ah!

We used to play lots of games, rounders, that sort of thing. She'd find games for us and then, if we wanted to take them home to play, we'd have to cut that out with extra lessons. After I left school she used to bring me books and things. I used to read in the evenings because I couldn't study much at school. My mates were backwards and the teacher used to waste most of her time helping them. So I really didn't get that much schooling, only what I learned myself.

It was a lovely big school. Robinson built it. Most of the things went through the police in those days. We got our home built through the police too.

When I was 14, I stayed home, helped my mother look after the kiddies, send them to school and that. The boys used to go with my father to do bush work, always worked in the bush. They would have been 14 when they started. Most of the time my mother'd be over at Mrs Schmidt's, the crippled lady. When she had her day off, she'd be cookin' us lovely meals - you know, she died of that diabetes - too many sweets. At 50 she died. My mother used to be the midwife in the district and all the Aboriginal people walkin' through Bellbrook, and if they were having a baby, they'd hang about waiting for her to deliver it.

It's two miles from the river to where we lived, but yet we never ever went to the river to fish, 'cause our creek had enough fish. Oh! I loved fishing - was the only sports we had - go fishin'. Used to be a lot of swimming years ago too and yet we only lost one little child in all them years. Always someone with them cause it's one place - they only got to struggle a little bit and they'd drown. Fishin' and swimming, that was our sports.

When I got to about 16 I went to work. I used to work for a pastor in Kempsey, you know, a minister. He came and got me. I used to work with them. My mother organised that, he was our minister. His wife died and he had another lady that was helping and I stayed as a companion. I was thinking about the wages we used to get years ago - I couldn't remember to tell you the truth. It was enough I suppose to clothe us, wouldn't be enough money now.

Anyhow, there was a show coming up and I seen a dress in the window and I told her, this lady, "You know," I said, "I'd like that dress made." You know, she used to go everyday 'till she picked that pattern out of that window to make me that dress. I'll always remember.

He had a car, well that was good. We used to go to places, you know, visit converts. That was all right, I enjoyed it for a while, then I got tired of it.

Oh, whenever I got sick of it, my other sister used to take over. Then there was other jobs. I left the minister when I was 18. Got sick of it and came home. I used to fret for home. I'd miss my little brothers and sisters too much, 'cause we didn't have no companions.

I used to work at the hotel then - you know that hotel there in Bellbrook. I used to walk to the work and walk home at night. Two miles each way, but I didn't fret for my family. I was a housemaid there. Oh - there used to be different people come there. I used to like it because in those days they always had a cook. They don't really have those cooks now. We used to get these nice meals and there'd be cricket and that on; I used to always help out. I worked for years in that hotel, they were lovely people.

We used to have turn-outs too. There used to be always some dances or sports and the people used to come from the stations and from Lower Creek. White people used to have them things, even we used to, we used to have dances too. White people didn't mix with our people, only in the school. They didn't stop our mother and father going to school, they'd even bring lunch for them, my mother used to say. My mother could read and write, she learned from them, they wasn't that bad. It's only few white people that were no good.

They took my sister and cousin away and you know, they kept them in Sydney for five years. Worked them. Made them Aboriginal wards, they called them years ago. They'd be about 16, I suppose, and they kept them. My mother couldn't get them back. My father used to try to get them out of that place. My sister, she got sick.

Only when she got sick they sent her home. They weren't allowed to come home. They were nice, religious people they worked for, but then they weren't allowed to come home. That was a horrible law.

I got married when I was 20. Met my husband on one of those dances. After I got married we used to live on Pee Dee and only come home on weekends. Pee Dee was a big cattle station and my husband and his brother worked there; then my father used to dingo kill and that. My father couldn't ride; he'd do it all walking. People from Armidale not really good riders, and he couldn't swim either.

But there was plenty of station work about. On Pee Dee they didn't just take anybody to work, you had to be someone special, good worker and all that. Well, my husband and his brother worked there for years and my father, and my brother and my son after them. I stayed the seven years until my eldest daughter had to go to school. The people on Pee Dee treated us good. They had huts for us to live there. I'd go up to the station and get books and things. We had a good life there.

My husband and his brother, they used to get a dollar a day then, that was all. I used to work there sometimes if she wanted me to. They were real good to us.

Then, when my little girl was ready for school I took her back to Bellbrook. But my husband kept working at Pee Dee. Then when we lived back on Bellbrook, he used to ride up to Pee Dee - 10 miles - and he'd stay up there during the week, him and his brother. They'd come home on weekends then, riding back. See, it was a big cattle station and they'd be mustering and clearing the paddocks, that sort of work. Cattle were a good price then and there was plenty of work for our boys on the stations. But then the banana started in Taylors Arm. Most of them went down there then 'cause they was giving good wages. That stopped a lot of them stations.

I had 12 kids. I lost one little girl. She died, hit her head in the water while she was swimming - jumpin' too high. And I reared two grandsons. I had nine girls and only three boys and then I reared them two grandsons. Oh, I had a sister that helped me and then when the girls got bigger they took over. Then, when you're young and used to it, work's nothing. We used to go down the creek and wash. We used to make a day of it. We had to walk down there, but we all had horses to carry the things back and forth.

They ordered us into a mission then, after a while. Wasn't that long ago, they made Bellbrook a mission. The manager only came lately when Valerie was a baby, that must be 50 years ago I suppose.

And you know, what I can't understand, when the manager came there, the people gathered up there. A lot of managers that come there, they were people that bullied you. What I can see, they just wanted to make money on our people - put all of them together. You'd have a bit of a deal if you got a good manager, but we had 20. Twenty managers.

Managers used to be the teacher too, right 'til my youngest daughters went to school. Manager used to look after the teaching and the people. Wasn't much to look after, I reckon, the people was all right, there was nothing wrong with them. He never found them jobs or anything. You'd have to find your own job - there was plenty of work about then, bush work, you know, plenty of bush work. And when I think on it now, everybody had their own places to work. For years that family might work for somebody at Taroooca and then somebody up the creek, where we went. So they'd always find work, they weren't really short of work.

We never had rations, the rations they used to get years ago - right back - it was only people that really needed it. They was all workers, you know. They really didn't need rations. Them managers they didn't do that much. It wasn't that long ago, about 50 years ago that the managers took over.

Some of the managers weren't any good. Well, our people wouldn't take that. They were nasty fellas and their wives, matron, used to come around, see if you were cleaning up, had the house kept. The people wouldn't like that. To think, now they got their own way - oh - back in those days they couldn't. Like my mother delivered my first two babies for me on Bellbrook. But then they said it was unhealthy to have babies at home. So we had to go to Kempsey. We didn't like going to the hospital. They'd have special dark wards and they'd leave you there by yourself till you really had your baby.

You know, the manager would have a girl working for them. She'd be working every day of the week. Them managers had a good life, never had to do nothing. I think they paid with rations, they never paid any money out. A girl would go up at nine o'clock and knock off at three - that's every day. She'd get so much ration.

If we got a good school teacher it'd be all right. All them managers used to teach too. But it was only in the later years we'd get good ones. The first lot, they'd loaf on it, you know, used to really waste our kiddies' education. What little bit of schoolin' we got, we used to report them - we just went on 'till we got a good one. They'd always take notice down below and they'd always put them off if they weren't any good. My brother there, he's a self taught fella, but he can write so they didn't have their own way with our kiddies.

Wasn't that they were cruel to them, they'd have got a good hiding, they didn't have it all their own way. But they wasted our kiddies time.

My youngest daughters, they went to high school. The bus would run every day. They'd catch the bus into high school, but the others missed out on that. They had good teachers there. If they'd got that bus only a bit sooner they could have been nurses and things, but they missed out.

So most of my girls, they went to Sydney, working for big shots, when they were 14. Pat went away - I didn't want her to go. My husband, then, he was working for the manager and they asked me to let Pat go. And you know, Pat never ever came home. Sometimes she wouldn't even come home for Christmas. Anyway, one Christmas I went down and saw them about it and the manager, he'd take Pat's part. But I said, "Look Mrs..., Pat never ever even sent me a card!" She missed all those years, Pat, being home. She's sorry for it now, staying with them people, them white people.

My girls really didn't do the housework or anything. Just lookin' after them kids. I used to wonder why they didn't have white girls doing that. Flossy, she was a good cook. Elva worked for a doctor, five years. They took her up to Surfers Paradise and they rang me up to wait for them in Kempsey. I went down there waiting for them and Elva to pass. I had my two youngest with me and this doctor, when he came, he had two little ones about the same age. I saw him lookin' at mine and they were more healthy lookin' than his two...! And he asked Elva, "What's your mother do when they get sick?" Elva said, "Ah, mummy rubs them and that. Rubs them with Vicks and that." We had to learn to be a doctor too in a place like Bellbrook. We couldn't just turn around and take our child to the doctor. We'd only go to the shop once or twice a week, so we'd have to learn a lot of things ourselves.

My sons, they used to do station work. They were good riders. My boys could ride horses without bridles. Denzil, he worked on Pee Dee like his father. They thought a lot of him. When he was there a white man worked there too. But when the boss went to town he'd always throw Denzil the key to look after the place. He always frets for that place, for down there at Bellbrook.

Mostly everyone'd come home for Christmas. Ah! - big time every Christmas time, they'd all be there. I'd get tired of it in the end. Ah! they'd all come home - it was all right then.

Sometimes we'd have dances, good turn-outs, at the big school. Christmas time, that used to be wonderful times. And then they'd travel, down to Nambucca or some place like that to have a big carnival. They used to have a good life.

My husband got a job on Bellbrook, he was the handyman, caretaker when they took the managers off. Used to drive the kids to the bus and that. I used to watch the phone and cook. The last manager, Mr Moroney, when he left we had to take over on our own - about ten years ago I suppose that was, maybe longer. It wasn't that hard.

I had four homes on that place and I'm left with none now. I paid for the first lot through the endowment, you know. Got the wood through the mill, got the tins. The brother-in-law, he was a good builder. He built it for me. But they put me out. See, I think *now*, they only wanted to show what they were doing to fixin' them homes up. They *really* wasted a terrible lot of Aboriginal money building new homes. We *had* good homes. I had four homes in Bellbrook and look, most of them were beautiful homes. There was three new homes went up and they went and took them down. Beautiful new homes, they was really a show. Wasted all that money. The last home we had was lovely, I didn't want to go out of it. I told that man then, "I'm not shifting into another home," I said, "to be ordered out," I said. "I don't want to leave this home, I left too many." Soon as they got you out of that home they'd take it down. But they put me out when my husband retired. My husband didn't care, see; he should have fought for it. I wanted a home that we could retire to. So I never got no further ahead, and I'm still wandering. All the homes I had, now I got nothing, just a little flat.

I only left Bellbrook, oh, six to seven years ago. All the family grew up and went away. Got lonely again. And then my husband retired and I had to leave my home. Beautiful furniture I had. The girls used to buy me things, we had lovely things. We lost all that.

When I was a child, no people lived on Bellbrook, just my family. They were all scattered - most of them lived at Lower Creek and down at Taroooca and outside Kempsey. They didn't go in a group, see, they'd scatter. They only came to Bellbrook when the manager came. They just got dogged about - put there. Most of them people in Bellbrook are all strays, you know, just come there from somewhere. They never really was always there. School, they put a big school up, and they came to send their children to school. Only when the manager came.

What cut all that out was Charley Perkins. He brought a big bus load of students over, right 'round. I know, I was in Kempsey that day. And you know, people hardly spoke in shops, they were that frightened. I always think of that. That was the first time someone stood up for them, the Aborigines - I always remember that. I always think Charley Perkins was someone like Moses. I always look on him like that - someone that saved our people, got a go for our people.

We used to be really on our own on Bellbrook. My father fenced that place in four times. No one helped him, he even grew grass - had to bring grass to grow in that place. We should have got that place, it's only really, like me and my sister and my brother that could claim it; all the others are strays.

There's nobody that we can get to help us, to speak for us. If they want the people living there now to stay there, they might pay us something for compensation.

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