

WRITING ABOUT KIMBERLEY PEOPLE

On 6 February 2002 members and friends were privileged to hear from the authors of two books on relations between Aboriginals and Europeans in the Kimberley. Christine Choo, author of *Mission Girls: Aboriginal Women on Catholic Missions in the Kimberley, Western Australia, 1900-1950* (details in the February 2002 *Boab Bulletin*) spoke not only about her own book but also about Ian Crawford's *We Won the Victory* and Ambrose Mungala Chalarimeri's *The Man from the Sunrise Side*.

All three centre on Kalumburu Mission but examine relations from different perspectives. In *Mission Girls* Christine looked at women from two communities – the Benedictine Mission at Kalumburu and the Trappist, then Pallotine, Mission at Broome and Beagle Bay. Kalumburu was isolated while missions in the Broome area had greater contact with outsiders. As a historian Christine used archival material as well as interviews with Aboriginal women, missionaries and lay workers on the missions. She looked at the women as survivors rather than victims.

Ambrose Mungala Chalarimeri's account is autobiographical and provides details of life at Kalumburu and the people there that Christine only knew from archives and interviews. Ian Crawford's book is based largely on oral history from his long contact with Kimberley Aboriginals. In using interview material and photographs Christine was meticulous in following protocols for oral history to ensure that she didn't use any material or photographs that the people involved didn't want published.

Mary Anne Jebb, author of the soon to be published *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers* spoke about the background to her book. The title refers to three phases of colonisation in the period 1903 to 1972: the conquering phase, the relatively benign pastoral phase and the changing scene in the 1950s to 1970s with the coming of welfare and equal wages. This book is in press, due to appear in April 2002, published by the University of WA Press at \$34.95. It has already won the 2001 Western Australian History Foundation Award and an Australian Historical Association Centenary of Federation Award. This book, like Christine Choo's, is based on the author's PhD thesis.

Mary Anne spent time in Fitzroy Crossing in the 1970s. In the 1980s she spent time in Derby and along the Gibb River road studying relationships and interactions between Europeans and Aboriginals and particularly the impact of equal wages. She came to Perth with her young family and concentrated on the written records including 400 files on the records of Aboriginals on stations, held by the Native Welfare Department. She realised that these records needed to be fleshed out by personal stories so she returned to the Kimberley to interview many people, black

and white, including Billy Munro in Derby and Howard Coate, a former missionary, who took Mary Anne up the Gibb River Road in 1989, stopping along the way to talk with Aboriginal communities. Her book concentrates on the Kimberley ranges and stations north of the Gibb River Road.

There were two major phases – when Aborigines moved on to the stations and then when they moved off and drifted into the towns. After World War II (about 1950) welfare payments started and influenced people to move off the stations to take advantage of services and pensions in the towns. However when Mary Anne visited Mt Elizabeth Station in 1989 there were few signs of change from the 1960s. There was still a 'black's' camp, women working in the house, men in the stockyards with children watching, a scene of peace. While economic and political analyses stress the struggle for land and power between whites and blacks, a social analysis shows that, on some stations at least, Aboriginal people were very poor but lived in peace and comfort comparative to the town reserves. In response to questions Mary Anne said that one of the problems with oral history in a cross cultural context was the very different versions of stories, some of which became traditional storytelling and myth and difficult to integrate into standard historical accounts. 1972 was chosen as the end point of this history because that was the year that Kimberley Aboriginal people received citizenship, under the Whitlam Government, although in other places this had happened much earlier. Men were officially able to earn wages and to drink but there were no wages for women who worked in the homesteads and even as stock'men'. Communities began to move to towns.

If you are interested in Kimberley history here are four books that taken together give a wonderful picture of Kimberley life in the first three quarters of the 20th century from several different perspectives.

Loisette Marsh