

# The Rabbit Proof Fence

When the British settlers came to Australia, they brought many new things, things that amazed and frightened the people who lived in that isolated continent. They brought new tools, new metals, new clothes, new foods, and new weapons. They even brought new animals. But not everything they brought was good for the country. The new weapons killed many who resisted the settlers. New diseases killed many more. And the new animals of the European settlers spread rapidly over the continent, killing the native marsupial creatures. The millions of sheep ate the grasses of the open lands, turning the fields to dust. The newly introduced dogs killed the kangaroos of the wild bush country. Even the rabbits proved deadly: these creatures multiplied even more rapidly than the white people, and they soon numbered in the billions, causing an incredible tide of destruction by stealing the food other animals needed.

But the European settlers also brought new ideas to Australia. Big ideas. They would build a great fence across the entire country that would keep the hundred billion rabbits of the open deserts from spreading to the valuable sheep grazing lands of Western Australian. This great fence exceeded all the dimensions that anyone had ever imagined. They called it the Rabbit Proof Fence, and it stretched fully 1000 miles from the burning hot northwest to the cool and rainy south of the great continent. It was and is an incredible monument to folly of man, for the rabbits soon managed to dig beneath the Rabbit Proof Fence and spread to the sheep lands, where they ate the grass that fed the animals that fed the men. The fence still stands, but what use is it?

As the white men built the great fences of Australia, they overpowered the aboriginal people, and put them behind new fences in new reservations. The Mardu people of Jigalong, in northwestern Australian comprise one of the nations of natives overwhelmed by these new white masters. They were forced to adapt to the white idea of how the world works. The Jigalong people began wearing clothes, learning English, and working the lesser jobs of the white nation. The Mardu of Jigalong came to depend on their white rulers. The young men looked to the white men for jobs; the young women looked to the white men for favors. The white were willing to bestow jobs

and favors, but they wanted things in return. From the men they wanted submission; from the women they wanted pleasure.

One woman of the Mardu once gave a white supervisor of the Rabbit Proof Fence what he wanted, and the two produced a mixed race child. Australian whites called such children “half-castes”; the natives call such children “muda-mudas”. Everyone – white and native – looked upon these children as “others.” Within this strange and temporary marriage, the father was Thomas Craig; the mother, like most aborigines, had just one name – Maude. The child they produced was named Molly. After making the baby, Mr. Craig left the child-rearing to Maude, forgetting the promises he had made to her. But no matter – Maud loved her child and raised the girl to believe that her fate was to be a special one.

When Molly was almost six weeks old, Maude took her up to show Mr. Keeling, the Superintendent. The child was wrapped in a piece of calico and was sound asleep in her mother’s arms. Mr. Keeling said all the nice things about the babe and wished them good health and issued Maude with her own ration order, which included a few yards of unbleached calico to make clothes for the baby. He later recorded in his files that he had just seen the first half-caste child to be born amongst the Jigalong people.

Molly grew into a pretty little girl. Her mother was very proud of her and her father brought her gifts of clothing and pretty colored ribbons. The other members of the family received parcels of brightly colored material and tobacco. These gifts were shared amongst family members and the community, and were proudly displayed and shown-off to the people at the depot.

As she grew older, Molly often wished that she didn’t have light skin so that she didn’t have to play by herself. Most of the time she would sit alone, playing in the red dusty flats or in the riverbed, depending where her family had set up camp. The dust-covered child stood out amongst her darker playmates. The Mardu children insulted her and said hurtful things about her. Some told her that because she was neither Mardu (black) or wudgebulla (white), she was like a mongrel dog. She reacted in the only way she knew. She grabbed handfuls of sand or stones and threw them at her tormentors, and sometimes she chased them with a stick. After a while she

became used to the insults, and although they still hurt she didn't show it. One morning, when Molly was about four years old, her mother told her some exciting news: two of her aunts had babies, little girls, and they were both muda-mudas (racially mixed) like her.

The first question Molly asked was, "When are they coming to Jigalong?" She was very happy. Now she had two sisters.

First came Daisy, who was born at Mad Donkey Well, south-west of Jigalong towards Mundiwindi Station. She was followed by Gracie, who was born at Walgun Station northwest of the depot.

As they grew older, Gracie and Molly became inseparable and they supported each other when other children teased them. They also saw Daisy quite frequently when her family moved closer to work on Murra Munda Station.

Mr Keeling had been taking a great deal of interest in Molly and Gracie. One day while he was observing the children at play, he noticed that the attitude of the Mardu children towards the two girls was unfair. He wrote to the Department of Native Affairs in Perth advising them that the girls would be better off if they were removed from Jigalong. In his report, he mentioned that the girls, "were not getting a fair chance as the blacks consider the H/ Cs [half-castes] inferior to them..." (Department of Native Affairs file no. 173/ 30.)

Thousands of miles south, politicians and other officials were planning the destinies of children like Molly, Gracie and Daisy.

Official concern shifted from the decreasing numbers of traditional or full-blood Aborigines to the half-castes and part-aboriginal children who were being born all over the country. The common belief at the time was that part-aboriginal children were more intelligent than their darker relations and should be isolated and trained to be domestic servants and laborers. Policies were introduced by the government in an effort to improve the welfare and educational needs of these children. Molly, Gracie and Daisy were completely unaware that they were to be included

in the schemes designed for children who were fathered by white men. Their mothers were accused of being promiscuous. A few critics were honest, however, when they said many white men satisfied their lustful desires with the native women until they were able to return to white society.

Eventually the Western Australian government decided to establish two institutions for Aboriginal children with white fathers: one at Carralup Settlement near Katanning in the southwest, and the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth and thirteen kilometers west of Mogumber. Although the births of these children were not registered, they were still noted by station owners in their journals so it was easy for the authorities to locate them. Also, movement between stations throughout the Pilbara was not quite as frequent then as it is today because the travel was mostly by foot. This helped the government officials to track down a family group.

Patrol officers travelled far and wide, removing part-Aboriginal children from their families and transported them hundreds of kilometers down south. Every mother of a part-Aboriginal child was aware that their offspring could be taken away from them at any time and they were powerless to stop the abductors. That is why many women preferred to give birth in the bush rather than in a hospital where they believed their babies would be taken from them soon after birth.

The years passed by, and the seasons came and went. Except for a couple of years of severe drought when no rain was recorded in the district, nothing extraordinary happened — life and the cycle of nature proceeded. Molly, Gracie and Daisy had outgrown the insults and the teasings. Once the other children accepted their differences, their lives became quite normal. Nevertheless, the trio stood out from the main community at the depot.

No matter where the three girls went, there was always someone watching them very closely and recording their behavior just as Mrs. Chellow from Murra Munda Station did on 9 December 1930, when she wrote to the Commissioner of Native Affairs.

Murra Munda 9th December 1930

To Mr. Neville Chief Protector of Aborigines, PERTH:

There are two half-caste girls at Jigalong — Molly 15 years, Crissy [also called Gracie] 11 years; in my opinion I think you should see about them as they are running wild with the whites. (Singed) Mrs Chellow.

(Department of Native Affairs File No. 175/ 30)

The girls were very fortunate to be part of a loving, caring family who tried to compensate for all the nasty insults and abuse by spoiling and indulging them at home. Their grandfather even went as far as to take them on walkabouts in the bush where he ground black charcoal into fine powder and rubbed it into their bodies, covering them from their faces right down to their toes. This powder, he promised, would solve all their problems. It would darken their light skins and end all the teasings and tauntings, but most importantly, it would protect them and prevent them from being taken away from their families. The trio was joined by ever-increasing numbers of half-caste or part-Aboriginal children in the East Pilbara region. However, the birth rate there was insignificant compared to the rate in the south-west of the state.

In July 1930, the rainy season was exceptionally good. For the Mardu people throughout the Western Desert this was the season for taking long walks in the bush, foraging for bush tucker and feasting on the day's catch. Every Mardu welcomes the glorious warm weather, when the azure skies are even bluer against the grey-green mulga trees and the red dusty earth. Grass grows under the small shrubs and between the sandy patches around the rocky ledges and even the spinifex is fresh and green. Alas, like everything that is revived and resurrected by the winter rains, their beauty and brilliance is shortlived. They seem to fade and die so quickly.

Molly and Gracie spent a lovely weekend with their families digging for kulgu yams and collecting bunches of yellow flowers from the desert oaks, which they brought home to share with those who had stayed behind to take care of the old people and the dogs. They soaked bunches of flowers in a bucket of water to make a sweet, refreshing drink. The other bush foods, such as the girdi girdi (kangaroos), murrandus (lizards), and bush turkeys, were shared amongst

the community. After supper the weary girls curled up in their swags and in no time at all, they were fast asleep.

Early next morning, Molly's step-father Galli rose at dawn and lit the fire. He made a billy (*a little pot*) of tea and sat under the shade of a large river gum, drinking a mug of warm tea. He glanced over to the sleeping forms of his two wives, and called out, "Come on, get up." The women began to stir. Galli then cut a piece of plug tobacco and crushed it in his hand, mixed the pure white ashes of the leaves of the mulga tree into it, then put it into his mouth and began to chew the gulja (*mixture of ash and tobacco*), spitting the juice occasionally. In the old days, the people would collect and chew the leaves of wild or bush tobacco that grew on the cliffs or on rock ledges.

The Mardus preferred the white man's tobacco, plug tobacco, because it was easily available and also it was stronger and lasted longer. They chewed The Mardus preferred the white man's tobacco, plug tobacco, because it was easily available and also it was stronger and lasted longer. They chewed it and spat out the juice, the same way that other races chewed betel leaves.

Maude was Galli's second wife. She and his other wife both belonged to the same group under the kinship system. Both were Garimaras, the spouse category for Galli. Between them they prepared breakfast for the whole family, which included three big dampers cooked in the hot ashes of the fire and the girdi girdi leftover from the hunting trip in the bush. They all agreed that it had been a successful and enjoyable day.

Molly and Daisy finished their breakfast and decided to take all their dirty clothes and wash them in the soak further down the river. They returned to the camp looking clean and refreshed and joined the rest of the family in the shade for lunch of tinned corned beef, damper and tea. The family had just finished eating when all the camp dogs began barking, making a terrible din.

"Shut up," yelled their owners, throwing stones at them. The dogs whined and skulked away.

Then all eyes turned to the cause of the commotion. A tall, rugged white man stood on the bank above them. He could easily have been mistaken for a pastoralist or a grazier with his tanned complexion except that he was wearing khaki clothing. Fear and anxiety swept over them when they realized that the fateful day they had been dreading had come at last. They always knew that it would only be a matter of time before the government would track them down. When Constable Riggs, Protector of Aborigines, finally spoke, his voice was full of authority and purpose. They knew without a doubt that *he* was the one who took their children in broad daylight — not like the evil spirits who came into their camps in the night.

“I’ve come to take Molly, Gracie and Daisy, the three half-caste girls, with me to go to school at the Moore River Native Settlement,” he informed the family.

The old man nodded to show that he understood what Riggs was saying. The rest of the family just hung their heads refusing to face the man who was taking their daughters away from them. Silent tears welled in their eyes and trickled down their cheeks.

“Come on, you girls,” he ordered. “Don’t worry about taking anything. We’ll pick up what you need later.” When the two girls stood up, he noticed that the third girl was missing. “Where’s the other one, Daisy?” he asked anxiously.

“She’s with her mummy and daddy at Murra Munda Station,” the old man informed him.

“She’s not at Murra Munda or at Jimbalbar goldfields. I called into those places before I came here,” said the Constable. “Hurry up then, I want to get started. We’ve got a long way to go yet. You girls can ride this horse back to the depot,” he said, handing the reins over to Molly. Riggs was annoyed that he had to go miles out of his way to find these girls.

Molly and Gracie sat silently on the horse, tears streaming down their cheeks as Constable Riggs turned the big bay stallion and led the way back to the depot. A high pitched wail broke out. The cries of agonized mothers and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air. Molly and Gracie looked back just once before they disappeared through the river

gums. Behind them, those remaining in the camp found strong sharp objects and gashed themselves and inflicted wounds to their heads and bodies as an expression of their sorrow.

The two frightened and miserable girls began to cry, silently at first, then uncontrollably; their grief made worse by the lamentations of their loved ones and the visions of them sitting on the ground in their camp letting their tears mix with the red blood that flowed from the cuts on their heads. This reaction to their children's abduction showed that the family were now in mourning. They were grieving for their abducted children and their relief would come only when the tears ceased to fall, and that will be a long time yet.

At the depot, Molly and Gracie slid down from the horse and followed Constable Riggs to the car.

Mr. Hungerford, the Superintendent, stopped them and spoke to Riggs. "While you are here, there's a native woman with a fractured thigh, in the other natives' camp, the one on the banks of the river. Can you take a look at her, Constable?"

"Yes, I'll examine her," replied the Constable.

"I'll come with you," said Hungerford. "We'll borrow that native boy Tommy's horse and sulky," he added. "I'll fix him up with some rations later as payment."

After Riggs had splinted the woman's leg, he told Hungerford that he would have to take her back with him to the Marble Bar Hospital. "Lift her gently onto the sulky," he asked her two brothers who were standing watch nearby.

As Hungerford seated himself beside Constable Riggs he said, "And by the way, the other woman, Nellie arrived from Watchtower Station while you were collecting Molly and Gracie. You know the one suffering from VD (*stds*). She needs to go to the hospital too."

“Alright,” Riggs replied. “But I still intend to speak to Frank Matthews, the station manager about her and remind him that he has no right to examine or treat any of the natives here. That should be left to us. We are the Protectors of Aborigines in this district.”

Constable Rigg was referring to the Protection Policy Regulation, number 106m:

Whenever a native falls ill, becomes diseased or sustains an accident and such illness, disease or accident appears to an employer to require medical attention or hospital treatment beyond that which can be efficiently or reasonably given at the place of employment, the employer shall as soon as reasonably possible, send the native to the nearest or most accessible hospital or to the nearest **protector** and thence to the nearest and most, accessible hospital at the protectors' discretion.

The crippled woman, Mimi-Ali, was transferred from the sulky to the car with Molly and Gracie. “Tommy,” yelled Constable Riggs. “Take your horse and sulky to Walgun Station and wait for me there,” he ordered. “Molly and Gracie, you had better sit in front with me, and you Nellie, can sit in the back with Mimi-Ali,” said Riggs as he cranked the car.

Half an hour later he was greeted by Matthews. “You have a load this time, Constable Riggs,” he said as the officer got out of the car. “Yes, I know. It can’t be helped. I’ve got the two sick native women. Which reminds me, there is something I must speak to you about.” The Constable explained the duties of the Protectors of Aborigines in the Nullagine district and cautioned Matthews that he should not take on those responsibilities himself. “I’d better get moving,” said Constable Riggs. “I have to search around for Daisy. I’ll call in next time I’m on patrol in the district.”

The patrol officer drew up in front of the Walgun Homestead gate and was greeted by Mr and Mrs Cartwright, managers of the station. “Hello,” said Don Cartwright as he shook hands with the visitor. “Come inside and have a cup of tea,” said his wife warmly, pointing towards the door.

“Thank you, but not just yet. I must find the half-caste girl, Daisy,” he said. “She’s somewhere between here and Murra Munda Station, near the soak. I already have the other two, Molly and Gracie in the car with Mimi-Ali from Jigalong and Nellie, the cook from Watch-tower Station who are in need of medical attention.”

“But where are you taking those half-caste girls?” asked Mrs Cartwright.

“They’re going south to the Moore River Native Settlement, where we hope they will grow up with a better outlook on life than back at their camp,” he answered with great satisfaction. “I’ll leave the car here, but first I’ll drop the women off at the native workers’ camp. I’ll take Molly and Gracie with me, though,” he said. “I don’t want them to clear out.”

Constable Riggs drove slowly down to the camp, followed closely by Tommy with his horse and sulky. Soon, he and Tommy were heading across the flats, over the spinifex grass and through the mulga trees in search of Daisy, who was with her family at the camp. Finding her had proved more difficult than the Constable expected. He had searched the Jimbalbar and Murra Munda area on horseback covering 60 kilometers, and a further 30 kilometers in the dry, rough country between Murra Munda and Walgun stations before he finally found her. The search was so tiring that he decided to spend the night at Walgun Station. His passengers stayed at the camp with Gracie’s mother Lilly, her grandmother, Frinda, and some other relatives.

At 3.30 in the morning, on 16 July, the Constable noticed that rain was threatening. The roads were bad enough as it was, but when wet they were even more hazardous, so he decided to make a start. “I don’t want to be marooned on the road with these natives,” Constable Riggs explained to the Cartwrights.

“We understand,” said Mrs. Cartwright, “we’ll see you when you’re in the district. Have a safe trip home.” “Thank you. I’d better get going,” he said. “The women must have finished their breakfast by now, so I’ll go down and pick them up. Thanks again for your hospitality.”

Grace's mother, old Granny Frinda and other relations in the camp began to wail and cry. "Worrah, Worrah! He take 'em way, my grannies [granddaughters], wailed the old lady, as she bent down with great difficulty and picked up a billy (*cookingpot*) can and brought it down heavily on her head. She and the rest of the women began to wail louder, their hearts now burdened with sadness of the girls' departure and the uncertainty of ever seeing them again. The girls were also weeping. The wailing grew louder as the vehicle that was taking them away headed towards the gate. Each girl felt the pain of being torn from their mothers' and grandmothers' arms."

As the car disappeared down the road, old Granny Frinda lay crumpled on the red dirt calling for her granddaughters and cursing the people responsible for their abduction. In their grief the women asked why their children should be taken from them. Their anguished cries echoed across the flats, carried by the wind. But no one listened to them, no one heard them.

A couple of hours after the three girls had been driven away, Gracie's mother, distraught and angry, was still sitting on the ground rocking back and forth. Maude and her brother-in-law had ridden over in a horse and cart to discuss the distressing news and stayed to comfort and support each other. Some time later, she calmed down enough to hurl a mouth full of abuse at Alf Fields, Gracie's white father, who was standing silently near the galvanized iron tank. She screamed at him in Aboriginal English and Mardu wangku (*language*), and beat his chest with her small fists.

"Why didn't you stop them?" she cried out in anger and frustration.

"I couldn't stop them taking my daughter — yes, she is my daughter too," he said sadly. He was so proud of his beautiful black-haired daughter whom he had named after his idol, English singer Gracie Fields. He tried to explain to her mother that the patrol officer was a government representative and an officer of the Crown. Had he interfered or tried to stop the man he would have been arrested and put in jail and charged with obstructing the course of justice.

Gracie's mother didn't listen. "You are a white man too; they will listen to you. Go and talk to them," she pleaded softly.

“I am sorry but I can’t do anything to stop them taking our daughter away from us,” he said finally.

She couldn’t accept his excuse or forgive him for just standing by and doing nothing to prevent their daughter from being taken away from them. She packed up and moved to Wiluna.

.....

The three girls were not used to rising before dawn, so they settled down in the car and fell asleep. When they opened their eyes they realised that they had slept longer than they expected. They had passed through Ethel Creek and Roy Hill stations and were on the main road to Nullagine, which was an unsealed dirt track, full of pot holes and fine red bull dust that seemed to fill the car. They were so exhausted they couldn’t cry anymore and they spoke only in whispers and sign language.

Except for a curt, “You girls awright back there!” the policeman didn’t speak to them or tell the girls where he was taking them. All they knew was that they were going to the settlement to go to school.

After five days of sailing down the coast of Western Australia, they arrived at the Port of Fremantle. The next stop would be their final destination — the Moore River Native Settlement — the place that the three girls from Jigalong had travelled hundreds of kilometers to reach. It was intended that this would be their home for several years, and where they would be educated in European ways.