3

OENPELLI BEFORE THE MISSION

The people of the Oenpelli region have been navigating cultural differences and negotiating with outsiders for centuries. Interactions between western Arnhem Land Aboriginal groups and foreigners began with South-East Asian mariners, at least 400 years ago (or possibly much earlier).¹ Aboriginal people painted images of South-East Asian sailing vessels or *prau* in rock art in north-western Arnhem Land. One example of rock art, found under beeswax, dates back to the mid-seventeenth century.² So far, there is no firm archaeological evidence for early interactions extending as far south as Oenpelli. But people living at Oenpelli certainly had heard about the sailors; the Aboriginal exchange systems, ceremonial gatherings and seasonal walking routes meant that information about these newcomers and Aboriginal people's interactions with them spread far and wide.

Then came fleeting visits from European explorers, such as Dutch explorer Maarten Van Delft who reached Melville Island in 1705.³ Moving inland, later overland explorers made first European contact with Aboriginal groups across western Arnhem Land and what is now Kakadu. These included Ludwig Leichhardt in December 1845.

1 For example, Clark and May, *Macassan History*; Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*; Taçon et al., 'A Minimum Age', 1–10; Theden-Ringl et al., 'Buried on Foreign Shores', 41–48; Wesley, O'Connor and Fenner, 'Re-evaluating the Timing', 169–95.

2 Taçon et al., 'A Minimum Age', 1–10.

3 Sheehan, 'Strangers and Servants of the Company', 6–34.

Figure 3.1: Map showing location of Oenpelli.

Source: Open source map edited by Laura Rademaker.

Nearing the end of his long journey, Leichhardt and his team were in the vicinity of the current Oenpelli township for a few days. Leichhardt complained that when he offered ‘presents’ (iron pieces, tin and leather belts) to a party of local people in return for fish, they became ‘exceedingly noisy’. One of them, ‘an old rogue’, apparently began helping himself to Leichhardt’s party’s stores – a red blanket, spade, pot – so Leichhardt ordered the group be scared away. Trying to make amends later, Leichhardt’s party offered them ‘half a goose’ that they refused, preferring their own food.⁴ Undeterred, the group returned a few days later and became Leichhardt’s guides. They showed him where it was safe to cross the East Alligator River. One man, Apirk, pointed them to food and water and gave them directions to continue safely on their way.⁵ Apirk ushered Leichhardt north towards the British settlements of the Cobourg Peninsula and nearby islands. The ‘explorers’ were not so much ‘discovering’ routes across Arnhem Land as following instructions from those who already knew the way.

⁴ Leichhardt, *Journal of an Overland Expedition*, 512.

⁵ Leichhardt, *Journal of an Overland Expedition*, 513–15.

Figure 3.2: ‘Native Camp, Port Essington’, 1877. Photograph by Paul Foelsche.

Source: Northern Territory Record Series (PH1060/0057).

Buffalo era

The British had established garrison settlements on Melville Island in 1824 and the Cobourg Peninsula in 1829 (Figures 3.1 and 3.2).⁶ When they failed, the British let their water buffalo loose. This suited the buffalo perfectly. Local monsoonal conditions meant they multiplied rapidly, spreading down the peninsula and across Arnhem Land.⁷ By May 1839, Lieutenant Stewart sighted buffalo below the neck of the Cobourg Peninsula.⁸ In 1845, Leichhardt noted Aboriginal people using the name ‘Anaborro’ (*nganaparru*) to refer to buffalo. Taking advantage of the buffalo’s increasing numbers, shooter camps emerged along the river plains by the late 1800s.⁹ Aboriginal men, women and children were the backbone of this industry, shooting, skinning and salting large numbers of buffalo (Figures 3.3 and 3.4).¹⁰

6 Levitus, ‘Social History since Colonisation’, 64–93.

7 Berndt and Berndt, *Man, Land & Myth*, 5; Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 11.

8 Allen, ‘Archaeology and the History of Port Essington’, 352–53.

9 Leichhardt, *Journal of an Overland Expedition*, 524–25; Bowman and Robinson, ‘The Getting of the Nganabbaru’, 192; Levitus, *Everybody Bin All Day Work*, 13–21.

10 Albrecht et al., ‘Convergence of Culture’, 361–78; Berndt and Berndt, *Man, Land and Myth*, 5; Levitus, *Everybody Bin All Day Work*, 13–21; Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 13; Robinson, ‘Buffalo Hunting and the Feral Frontier’, 893.

Figure 3.3: Reuben Cooper sitting on a wounded buffalo surrounded by the shooting and skinning team, c. 1914–17. Photograph by Edward Frederick Reichenbach (Ted Ryko).

Source: Northern Territory Library: Karilyn Brown Collection (PH0413/0044).

Figure 3.4: Buffalo shooters ‘dining’ on the carcass of the buffalo with photographer Edward Frederick Reichenbach (Ted Ryko) pictured front right, c. 1914–17.

Source: Northern Territory Library: Ted Ryko Collection (PH0055/0007).

Figure 3.5: Paddy Cahill and Quilp (on horses) with other buffalo shooters in the background near Oenpelli (Gunbalanya), c. 1901.

Source: Northern Territory Library: Peter Spillelt Collection (PH0238/0707).

Among the European buffalo hunters was Patrick ‘Paddy’ Cahill (1863–1923). He was one of the first commercial buffalo shooters to work in western Arnhem Land. Cahill was, according to archaeologist John Mulvaney, a ‘stocky, broad-shouldered extrovert’. Apparently he claimed, ‘43 buffalo with 52 cartridges was his best day’s effort’.¹¹ Born in Queensland, in 1883 Cahill drove his cattle west with his brothers to the Northern Territory, working at Wave Hill, Delamere and Gordon Downs stations before being moving into the Oenpelli region in the late 1800s.¹²

There is some question as to how Cahill developed an interest in western Arnhem Land. Perhaps he was attracted by reports of up to 60,000 buffalo running wild on the plains of the Alligator River.¹³ Mulvaney suggests that Cahill’s interest was simply because the government made it available for lease. He knew the terrain and had seen its great agricultural potential. He knew many of the local people too; he had hired them to help with his buffalo-hunting enterprises.¹⁴

11 Mulvaney and Calaby, *So Much That Is New*, 302.

12 Clinch, ‘Cahill, Patrick (Paddy) (1863–1923)’.

13 Clinch, ‘Cahill, Patrick (Paddy) (1863–1923)’.

14 Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 37.

CMS historian Keith Cole explains that the kinship connections of those he already knew, including Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul, attracted him to the region (Figure 3.6). Nipper's older brother Narpan had married a woman from Wave Hill and lived there while Cahill was based there. When Narpan was killed in a fight, Cahill moved to Narpan's country at Oenpelli.¹⁵ According to Nipper's adopted son, Frank Djendjulg, Nipper considered himself as host to those on his country:

Nipper was boss of these camps, because his country. This is where he was born. Happy to have mission on his country, happy to have people from other areas on his country.¹⁶

Figure 3.6: Senior Traditional Owner for the Oenpelli area, Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul, photographed in 1948.

Source: Mountford, *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, Vol. 1, 14.

Cahill had connections with Aboriginal kin beyond Nipper and Narpan. He had an Aboriginal son born around 1900 to Kuludjba, a woman of the Wilirrgu clan who was living near the present-day Cahill's Crossing. This son was known as Paddy Cahill Junior Neyingkul, and he died in 1971. Neyingkul was raised by his Aboriginal relatives including the husband of Kuludjba, Bill Mayimarlba (Gerrmurrugu clan). His descendants still live in western Arnhem Land today. Cahill senior likely benefited from having an Aboriginal son. Perhaps his son eased the way for his long-term occupation of the area. Cahill's connection to the Oenpelli area was already well established by 1900, 10 years before the establishment of a permanent settlement.

¹⁵ Cole, *A History of Oenpelli*, 15.

¹⁶ Frank Djendjulg, oral history interview with Robert Levitus, 20 July 1981.

Figure 3.7: Left to right: Ruby Mudford (Roney), Paddy Cahill, unidentified man, Maria Cahill and Quilp (possibly) (date unknown).

Source: Northern Territory Library: J.A. Austin Collection (PH0412/0093).

Paddy Cahill (senior) had a non-Indigenous family too. Maria Cahill (née Pickford) was born in Stirling, Adelaide, in 1873 but lived in Darwin where her father was the publican at the Club Hotel. Cahill married Maria in 1899 and their only child, Thomas, was born not long after Neyngkul, in 1901.¹⁷

The Oenpelli settlement

After years of buffalo hunting in the region, Cahill and his business partner William Johnstone established a permanent settlement at Oenpelli in January 1910 (with the official lease granted in April 1910).¹⁸ This included 640 acres of land, which was later reduced to 320 acres at Cahill's request. He also held a pastoral permit.¹⁹ Ruby Mudford (later Roney), Cahill's niece, described this period in her oral histories (Figures 3.7 and 3.8). After the death of her parents, she had come to live

¹⁷ Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 9.

¹⁸ Roney, NTRS 226, TS 735.

¹⁹ Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 35.

with her uncle and aunt from 1904 until 1922. She described the family's arrival at Oenpelli and their dependence on local people throughout the early days of the settlement:

In 1910, we packed up to go to Oenpelli and one January day, January in the height of the wet season, we went aboard this boat ... We left Darwin on the Sunday morning and we got to the East Alligator landing on Thursday where a lot of uncle's natives were waiting for us. How glad we all were to get off that boat. I remember some natives arrived and they had a tremendous big bit of barramundi on a pole which they carried on their shoulders for us. But the mosquitoes were very plentiful there too. We camped on the river bank that night and the next day we went up to the station. The boys brought some horses down. They already had my uncle's horses at Oenpelli. It was seven mile from the landing up to where we were going to live. We were glad to get up there and the natives and Johnson brought the stores later which we'd taken down, and the fowls. After a bit of a rest, this Johnson took the boat with a couple of native helpers back to Darwin and then brought everything else we wanted down and also our goats ...

On Oenpelli we had fowls, goats, pigs and horses but there wasn't much of a living in it for uncle Paddy so when Doctor Gilruth visited us (I can't remember the year; it may have been '12 or '13), he decided to buy the place for the Government and appoint uncle Paddy a Protector of Aborigines which he did. Then he looked after the natives. He was pretty good with the natives, my uncle. He could speak the Kakadu language and they all knew him from when he was younger and single. When he was buffalo shooting in that part of the country, he knew many of the natives and spoke their language. So he looked after the natives there.²⁰

It seems Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul saw some benefit in allowing Cahill to establish a settlement on his land – at least in the early years. Having an Aboriginal son and speaking the local language also allowed Cahill certain access that would have been otherwise unobtainable.

20 Roney, NTRS 226, TS 517, 16–19.

Figure 3.8: Paddy Cahill, his son Tom Cahill, Maria Cahill and Ruby Mudford (later Roney) with unidentified Aboriginal children, Oenpelli, c. 1912. Photograph by Elsie Masson.

Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (1998.306.61).

During his 1912 visit to the station, anthropologist and Chief Protector Baldwin Spencer recorded its layout and day-to-day activities (Figure 3.9). He described a 'small house with a detached kitchen, built of stringy-bark, and sundry outhouses'. Around this, a 'large garden slopes down to the lagoon, nearly a mile long and a quarter of a mile broad'. Maria and Ruby, he commented, were 'just as keen on bush life as is Cahill himself, and both of them never so much at home as when they are on horseback, exploring the country for miles round the homestead'.²¹ Carl Warburton, a traveller who visited in 1921, recorded Cahill as saying that Maria 'was the only white woman living who could speak the native language of the blacks'.²² According to him, Cahill, too, associated closely with local people:

21 Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 742–43.

22 In Cole, *A History of Oenpelli*, 17.

Figure 3.9: The Cahill settlement at Oenpelli with Arrkuluk Hill in the background, c. 1912–14. Photographer is Mervyn Holmes or Elsie Masson.

Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (1998.306.120).

He never laughs at them; he speaks to them in their own language, and calls them by their native names. In return, they give him their confidence, and no ceremony is too sacred to be enacted before him.²³

Both Paddy and Maria were resourceful. Their home impressed visitors (Figure 3.10). Warburton even noted that they owned an impressive library of several hundred books.²⁴ In 1915 Elsie Masson, a friend of Spencer and au pair for the children of the Administrator of the Northern Territory, briefly visited the station and described Cahill's work training the men to grow vegetables and build houses and the women learning domestic work in positive terms.²⁵

23 Masson, *An Untamed Territory*, 103.

24 Warburton, cited in Mulvaney and Calaby, *'So Much That Is New'*, 302.

25 Masson, *An Untamed Territory*, 100–19.

Figure 3.10: Two unidentified Aboriginal men standing out the front of a house designed by Paddy Cahill and built by local Aboriginal people in Oenpelli (date unknown).

Source: Northern Territory Library: J.A. Austin Collection (PH0412/0192).

But it was not an easy life. Roney was bored and tired. She recalled that they played cards almost every night and that, when she finally left Oenpelli, she refused to play cards ever again. Maria treated her more as servant than kin. Roney recalled, 'I done all the cooking, bread and baking, all the mending, and making of my aunt's and my own underwear. I was always busy and darning all the socks and stockings'. Maria, meanwhile, apparently constantly found fault with her work: 'she didn't do anything at all, only complain'.²⁶

About two o'clock every afternoon, after I'd cleared away and washed up after the midday meal and set the afternoon tea tray ready for uncle and auntie, I went riding from two o'clock till five. I had a great time. I had plenty of nice horses to ride and I used to roam about ... It's lovely country down Oenpelli, beautiful country, lovely open plains and even sometimes I rode up to the ports and always enjoyed my get away from nagging and fault finding for a while.²⁷

²⁶ Roney, NTRS 226, TS 517, 23–24, 31, 38.

²⁷ Roney, NTRS 226, TS 517, 21.

Trouble in paradise

Cahill's relationship with local people was not always rosy. In 1917 the Cahill family along with a non-Aboriginal assistant, O'Brien, two 'housemaids', Marealmark and Topsy, and the dog were poisoned with strychnine. It was in their butter. Only the dog died. But all were seriously unwell, and fortunately (for them) had medicine on hand. Cahill blamed Romula, a trusted Aboriginal friend, responsible for bringing mail to Oenpelli. Romula had accused Quilp, an Aboriginal stockman rumoured to be Cahill's son, of sleeping with his wife, Topsy. According to Cahill, Romula had wanted to poison them all because Cahill had prevented him from beating Topsy.²⁸ But some Aboriginal people thought that Cahill 'interfered too much' in their affairs and was too harsh in his discipline, and many were angry.²⁹

There were violent reprisals. Thomas Cahill described how, after the butter incident, his father was about to chain Romula around the neck and flog him. Romula went to hit Paddy, when Paddy struck Romula's head with the chain.³⁰ Cahill wrote to Baldwin Spencer to justify his violence:

I at once got a chain and padlock and arrested Romula. When arresting Romula he came towards me ... I doubled up the chain and struck him on the head very hard; knocking him down. I at once fastened the chain on his neck and tied him up. You can imagine my feelings and the frame of mind that I was in. Mrs Cahill vomiting, O'Brien almost dead, the two lubras rolling on the ground vomiting and likely to die at any moment ... When I got things fixed up, Romula said 'You look out boss nother one boy put poison in the water bag'.³¹

28 Cahill to Spencer, 30 June 1918 in Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 125.

29 Cahill to H. E. Craey, 25 January 1917, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) A3, NT1917/427.

30 Australia, Royal Commission on the Northern Territory, *Minutes of Evidence*, 28.

31 Cahill to Spencer, 10 October 1917 in Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 119.

After the head injury, Cahill 'sent for the police' and 'committed Romula to Darwin' (that is, Fannie Bay Gaol).³² Cahill also accused Nipper of being the ringleader, citing a rumour that Nipper ordered the other men to poison him after a group meeting in which they had expressed resentment at Cahill's discipline. Mulvaney inferred that 'as the owner of the land on which Cahill lived, Nipper may have suffered many slights and ceremonial discourtesies prompting his reactions in 1917'.³³ Soon after the poisoning, Nipper and Munnierlorko killed a cow. That was it: Cahill sent them to Fannie Bay Gaol too.

The poisoning of the butter, along with cattle killing, suggests that relationships between local people and Cahill were breaking down by 1917, most likely a product of Cahill's increasing assertion of control (Figures 3.11 and 3.12). Some of what was going on at Oenpelli was exposed in a 1920 royal commission. Cahill's violent treatment of Aboriginal workers was scandalous, even in its day.³⁴ Cahill acknowledged he used his role as 'Protector' to act as judge and jury over Aboriginal people, sentencing some to prison in Darwin, others to corporal punishment. When asked if his intent 'was to be Pooh Bah of Oenpelli', he admitted, 'yes; that was quite right. I wished to have power over the natives'.³⁵ A former Oenpelli employee, David Hogg, confessed that although he too had 'struck', 'hit' and 'punched' Aboriginal people for crimes such as 'not doing the milking', the Cahills were worse. One time, Thomas Cahill had put a gun to a teenage boy's face, cutting him. The boy was then chained to a beam for hours and, finally, given a 'good hiding'. The boy's offence: he had brought only 14 cows in for milking, not the 18 Cahill had requested.³⁶

Following the disgrace of the royal commission, 2,000 square miles of land (including the Oenpelli area) were declared an Aboriginal reserve in 1920. Paddy, Maria, Thomas and Ruby remained until 1922 when the Cahills retired to the south of Australia. Paddy died the next year.³⁷

32 Australia, Royal Commission on the Northern Territory, *Minutes of Evidence*, 135.

33 Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 62.

34 Ben Silverstein, 'The "Proper Settler" and the "Native Mind"', 94.

35 Australia, Royal Commission on the Northern Territory, *Minutes of Evidence*, 144–45.

36 Australia, Royal Commission on the Northern Territory, *Minutes of Evidence*, 153–54.

37 Clinch, 'Cahill, Patrick (Paddy) (1863–1923)'.

Figure 3.11: Women and children gathered at the Oenpelli settlement, c. 1917. Photograph thought to be by Tom Cahill.

Source: Museum Victoria (Item XP 8454).

Figure 3.12: Four Aboriginal men competing in local 'games' possibly on Christmas Day, c. 1922. Paddy Cahill is seen standing at the back and his wife Maria is seated with an umbrella.

Source: State Library of South Australia (PRG 280/1/39/345).

Cahill was always afraid that if missionaries came to the region they would interfere with the traditions of local Aboriginal people.³⁸ According to Warburton, Cahill stated that, 'the only thing to do with them in the Territory ... is to segregate them in areas and leave them alone'.³⁹ He did not seem to consider his own presence on Aboriginal land as interference, but it seems many local people thought otherwise. Years later, some in the community came to the conclusion that missionary discipline and interference was mild, at least compared to Cahill:

Missionary people were good people, they were showing them good things. Paddy Cahill did hard things. Shot dogs. That's what I heard. Growl at them sometimes. Missionary people helped black people. Missionaries would send black away bush if they did wrong thing, like stealing.⁴⁰

Loyalties and loss

On Cahill's departure from Oenpelli, the Mengerdji-speaking people remained, while other Aboriginal families who had long associations with Cahill began to move away. Cole described an exodus of Cahill's workers and their replacement with others:

Among other Aborigines who lived and worked at Oenpelli in Paddy Cahill's time had been Herbert Yupidj, Old Major (Burrrrlirl), Captain Madjaralaga, Garrinba, Mamuna, Marrawalawal, Arrawindji, Manujulug and Nawumirili. When Paddy Cahill left, these and others left except Herbert, Old Major and Arrawindji (Lazarus) ... As Paddy Cahill's workers left others filled their place as stockmen.⁴¹

Cahill would have hated that the station went to the CMS. Having observed the work of the CMS at the Roper River mission, he thought missionaries concentrated too much on piety, at the expense of practical work. His view was they achieved little other than 'singing and schooling – also prayers'. In terms of the 'industrial work', construction and 'cultivation', he thought missionaries were useless.⁴²

38 Cole, *A History of Oenpelli*, 17; Warburton, *Buffaloes*, 141.

39 Warburton, *Buffaloes*, 141.

40 Hannah Mangiru, oral history with Robert Levitus, 27 July, 1981.

41 Cole, *A History of Oenpelli*, 23.

42 Cahill to Baldwin Spencer, 19 December 1912, in Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 81.

Until the missionaries came in 1925, a government-appointed caretaker, Mr Donald 'Don' Campbell, managed the station with his wife.⁴³ Campbell had been a government stock inspector and had also served in the First World War.⁴⁴ A 1923 report in the *Northern Territory Times* described him as having a 'refreshing personality; whose vigour is indicated in his style and action'.⁴⁵ Mrs Campbell, on the other hand, is described as being in ill health but nevertheless had apparently 'done splendidly considering her lack of all previous experience of the loneliness and privations of outback life'.⁴⁶

Dyer had mixed feelings about the Campbells. He found them personally supportive, writing in 1925 that Campbell has 'helped me much ... he is an expert, I wish I were as capable'.⁴⁷ But he did not think much of his treatment of Aboriginal people. According to Dyer, Campbell was a threat to Aboriginal people:

There are plenty [of natives] about. Mr. Campbell said he had about 300 last Christmas. His policy has been to hunt them, because of the cattle killing; as you read between the lines you will see plenty of problems for the Superintendent of Oenpelli – we will have an uphill fight.⁴⁸

'Hunt' in Aboriginal English could mean simply to scare people away, though it implies the threat of violence. We cannot be sure in exactly what sense Dyer used the word, but it is clear Aboriginal people were unwelcome. When the missionaries arrived, the region was already under upheaval. Some families were fleeing, others were coming in, looking for work. Aboriginal people had good reason to mistrust the new missionary 'bosses', just as they had the Cahills and Campbells before them.

43 'The Maskee Returns', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 2 December 1924, 4.

44 'Appointment', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 23 December 1922, 3; 'A Long Tramp: Cooktown to Darwin', *Northern Standard*, 27 July 1923, 1.

45 'Bush Personals', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 30 November 1923, 6.

46 C. J. Kirkland, 'A Trip to the Alligator Rivers', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 5 May 1923, 4.

47 Dyer, 'First Report on Oenpelli', 21 September 1925, NTRS 1099/P1 vol. 1, Mission Reports.

48 Dyer, 'First Report on Oenpelli'.

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