

# YIWARRA KUJU THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

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**NATIONAL  
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CANBERRA**

## Droving on the Canning

'I been hearing lotta stories 'bout this droving,  
Wiluna to Billiluna, and I don't even believe  
myself I'm here, halfway in this road.'

Mervyn Street, 2007





The era of droving down the stock route did not begin well. The first drovers to bring cattle down the route in 1910 were killed by desert people at Well 37. A punitive expedition was sent out and several Aboriginal people were killed. Drovers became afraid to use the route and it was rarely used during the next 20 years. During this time many of the wells were destroyed or fell into disrepair. In the early 1930s the reconstruction of the wells along the route led to a new era in droving.

From 1930 to 1959 about one mob a year was driven down the stock route from Halls Creek to Wiluna. The mobs consisted of anything from 300 to 800 head of cattle, mostly from Billiluna or Sturt Creek stations, plus the plant, a team of about 15 camels and 50 workhorses, packhorses and night horses. Camels carried heavy loads and were used to draw water, a huge job given that 800 head of cattle, and a team of horses and camels, could consume over 30,000 litres of water at each well. From the perspective of Aboriginal people who lived in this region, when droving started after the reconstruction of the wells, the white stockmen and their animals were considered to be mysterious new creatures to be treated with fear and dread.

*I thought them camels were bringing bad news. I didn't know what they were.*

**Nyangkarni Penny K-Lyons, 2008**

At that time, many of the artists in this exhibition were children growing up in the bush. They and their families had to make sense of the strange men and beasts that were appearing more frequently in their Country. In time they did more than make sense of the stock route — they incorporated it into their lives with the result that the stock route was used in ways that Canning and his employers would never have foreseen.

- 1 In the 1930s some Martu came across the tracks of a camel from a droving team. The Martu men believed the camel tracks to be the imprint of 'little fella bums' — small spirit-beings who were 'sitting' their way across the country.

Even after they discovered what made the tracks it would have been a strange sight for the Aboriginal people to see — drovers, camels, horses and hundreds of cattle, with clouds of dust rising under the hooves of the animals and the cries of the stockmen and women as they raced off on their horses to round up straying cattle.

*Bullock chase my mummy. That bullock there nearly kill Mummy now, coming for her. Too big! [The bullocks from] Billiluna, all a big one.*

**Dusty Stevens, 2007**

The cattle could also be a source of nourishment to the Aboriginal people who lived along the route.

*We used to walk until we came to the Canning Stock Road. At the stock road we speared bullocks. That was where they travelled on the Canning Stock Road along the wells to Kulyayi [Well 42] to Katajilkarr [Well 43] from there to Kujjuwarri [Well 46]. That's where they used to spear bullocks, my father and Kuji's [Rosie Goodjie's] father.*

**Mayapu Elsie Thomas, 2007**

During this period some of the drovers fostered better relations with desert people, leaving meat and bones for the people they encountered.

*When a killer was prepared, George would always leave behind any meat that was not required for the bush natives when we moved camp.*

**Eileen Lanagan, in *Canning Stock Route and Travellers Guide*, 2004**

Other drovers were not quite so inclined to care for the desert people.

*My auntie's husband was poisoned by white people. They used to leave bullock leg with poison for people to eat.*

**Jartarr Lily Long, 2009**



2 Aboriginal stockman from Billiluna working cattle, photo by Joe Mahood, about 1969

### Who were the drovers and stockmen?

For much of the history of the Canning Stock Route there were far more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal drovers and their skill with stock was legendary. Many of the Aboriginal drovers were women.

*All the women were drover-men on Canning Stock Road.*

**Ngilpirr Spider Snell, 2008**

Women can describe returning to work in the saddle a day after giving birth, their newborns tied to their backs with swaddling.

*Mum went up the Canning Stock Route. She had labour pains one night. I was born at Well 7 and she said, 'Gotta go on the horse tomorrow.' Got straight back on the horse. I was in a little carrying bag so I could get some titty.*

**Lena Long, 2007**

2 Despite outnumbering the non-Aboriginal drovers, Aboriginal people were always stock workers, never in charge of the mob. Many were referred to as 'boys' even when adults, and their names are not documented in non-Aboriginal records.

3 *A lotta old people telling me 'bout [how] they used to drove from Billiluna straight across to Wiluna. But they're not in the photos, they got no name. Nothing. They got be part of this droving story.*

**Mervyn Street, 2007**

Wally Dowling was possibly the best-known drover along the route and received column inches in newspapers of the time. His lifestyle had caught the imagination of the non-Aboriginal population. For Aboriginal people he evokes strong memories. His death from influenza in 1959 coincided with the end of droving on the Canning Stock Route.

4 *That old man Wally Dowling was the boss in Canning Stock Route. He don't use 'em boot, just bare feet. He walked too much, every sandhill on that Wiluna road. Strong man.*

**Yanpiyarti Ned Cox, 2007**

*He had his revolver all the time. No smile on him. He been a rough bloke, and he wanted a black woman.*

**Anga Friday Jones, 2007**

The first white woman to travel the stock route was Eileen Lanagan. She accompanied her husband George on his second drive rather than be left alone at home for four months with no word.

### What effect did droving have on the Aboriginal people?

The opening up of the stock route led to a great movement of Aboriginal people along the country it traversed — as drovers themselves, as relatives of drovers, as travellers to missions, seeking employment on stations, or as children. Not all station managers treated the Aboriginal workers well, however, and some who sought employment under them soon decided to leave.

*The [Christmas Creek] station manager was hitting people, so we ran away. We went back [to the] desert to see if we can find any of our people left, but nothing, only all the dead ones. Police tracked us down and put chains around the men.*

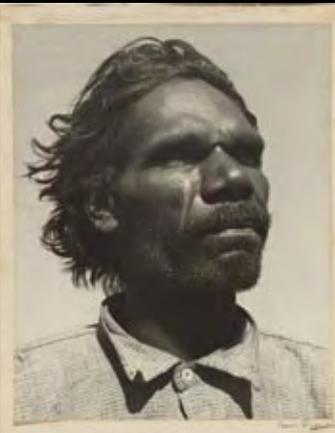
**Wakartu Cory Surprise, 2007**

As droving down the Canning became a regular event, it began to take a place in Aboriginal lives as another seasonal activity and stories began to be added to the oral tradition. Freda Tjama Napanangka was a camp cook on several expeditions down the Canning. Here is her account of the work:

*We been go to all the wells and same way we fillim up water for bullock and camel and start cooking for the ringers. Same way after supper, man watching bullock, change ... change ... and 4 o'clock we wake up. It hard work for cookie.*

From *Footprints across our Land*, Magabala Books, Broome, 2007

Despite their legendary skill, Aboriginal people were paid at best 'two bob (shillings) a week' and most often not in cash but in food, clothing and tobacco. When paying equal wages to Aboriginal people became law, drovers and pastoral companies stopped employing them. Aboriginal people then faced a struggle to survive but ultimately emerged with a thriving arts enterprise movement.



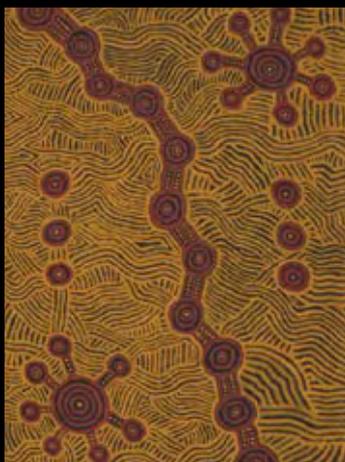
3 Head stockman, 1942, photo by Axel Poignant, National Gallery of Australia



4 Wally Dowling, 1957, *People magazine*



5 **Canning Stock Route**, 1989,  
by Rover Thomas,  
Holmes à Court Collection



6 **Canning Stock Route Country**,  
2007, by Clifford Brooks,  
Birriliburu Artists, Tjukurba Gallery,  
National Museum of Australia

(front image) **Canning Stock Route**,  
2008, by Mervyn Street, Mangkaja  
Arts, National Museum of Australia



### The story of Rover Thomas

- 5 Rover Thomas is one of Australia's most prominent artists and pioneered the East Kimberley school of ochre painting on canvas. Although he is not known principally as a Western Desert artist, his life is closely linked with the stock route.

Rover was born in 1926 at Yalta, a soak just north of Well 33 (Kunawarritji). His parents died when he was about 10 years old, and drover Wally Dowling found Rover at Kunawarritji and took him north to Billiluna station. His brother had been away when their parents died. His nephew remembers:

*[My father] went looking for his young brother Rover ... but nothing, empty. No track. Only track was wagon wheel and yawarta [horse] and bullock, that's all.*  
**Clifford Brooks**, 1986

Rover Thomas grew up with relatives, learning traditional Aboriginal skills as well as eventually becoming a stockman himself. He began his artistic career as an adult living at Warmun (Turkey Creek). He composed a song cycle which eventually led him to want to also paint his stories. This started him on the path to being one of Australia's leading artists. He was finally reunited with his brother in the 1980s, a lifetime later, after family recognised the artist's face in a newspaper.

*You have got to come back to your Country. You should have come through the Canning Stock Route; you went away from here through the stock route and you should have come back through the stock route. I've been waiting for you.*  
**Charlie Brooks**, Rover's brother (as recalled by Clifford Brooks), 1986

Charlie himself travelled south along the Canning to Jigalong mission. A sister, Nyuju Stumpy Brown also followed the drovers out of the desert. She travelled with her uncle Jamili, a stockman, to Balgo mission. Later Nyuju moved to Fitzroy Crossing where she too became an artist. Another sister, Kupi, travelled to La Grange mission (Bidyadanga) with her daughter Mary Meribida who is also represented in this exhibition. In this family alone, four different schools of contemporary painting are represented.

- 6 In 2007 Clifford travelled the entire Canning Stock Route, retracing the journey of Rover Thomas. Clifford paints his parents' Country along the middle stretches of the stock route, including the story of Rover leaving the Country, and his father's search for his brother. He paints in ochres, following Rover's artistic practice and that of the East Kimberley movement he pioneered.

Because so many Aboriginal people were engaged in droving work between Wiluna and Halls Creek, a major result of the stock route was to foster opportunities for making new family connections.

The story of Billy Patch or 'Mr P' who said of himself, *I'm just a stock route baby ...* demonstrates how the stock route facilitated the growth of family connections between people living along its length. Mr P's mother was crippled and unable to carry him. Following the Aboriginal tradition that everybody in the group is responsible for caring for the children, many people cared for him. One of his uncles, a drover from Fitzroy Crossing, picked him up as a young child and took him to live in Wiluna where he eventually settled down and had a family of his own. For Aboriginal people who live around it, the Canning Stock Route was much more than a line of wells to service cattle.

Nearly all the artists in this exhibition are related one way or another. The Canning Stock Route story is of people, movement, stories and art tied together by Country. In this story, droving, the principal reason for the construction of the route, is a rather insignificant background which can be used to bring into focus the Aboriginal story of contemporary desert life.

### Questions and activities to share with your students

1. On a map of the region, trace the journeys of Rover Thomas, Charlie Brooks, Mary Meribida and Nyuju Stumpy Brown as they travelled out of the desert with the drovers. How far did they travel and how far away were they from each other?
2. Aboriginal stockmen and women were paid mostly in rations for the time the Canning Stock Route was in use. What improvements in Aboriginal rights occurred after 1965 that led to equal wages for Aboriginal stockmen?
3. Find out about cattle droving. What were the duties of a stockman?
4. What effect did droving have on the Aboriginal people? Explain your answer.
5. Research the artists in Rover Thomas's family. Find out about their paintings and the four different schools of contemporary painting they represent.