

RABBIT-PROOF FENCE

The Aborigines were the first people in Australia. They were living there long before the white man came south from Europe, bringing his animals, his illnesses, his way of living, his ideas, his government . . . and his laws.

One law in the early 1900s was about mixed-race children, or ‘half-castes’ as they were called at that time. This law said that these children – of Aboriginal mothers and white fathers – should be taken away from their families and sent to government or church settlements, to be trained to become servants and farm workers. The Australian government believed it would be better for these children to learn the white man’s ways, to learn to behave and think like ‘Europeans’.

This is the true story of Molly, Daisy, and Gracie, children aged fourteen, eight, and ten, who were taken away from their families and sent to the Moore River Settlement. But they escaped and walked home, 1600 kilometres across Western Australia.

Seventy years later Doris, Molly’s daughter, listened to her mother and her aunty Daisy talking, and realized that this was a story that the world should hear – the story of a famous escape, of a long long walk . . . a story of cold and hunger, heartache and fear . . . a story of great courage and determination . . .

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Retold by
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THE FENCE



IT WAS 1,834 kilometres long, and ran from the Southern Ocean near Esperance in the south, to Eighty Mile Beach north of Port Hedland on the north coast.

It was built in 1907, to keep the rabbits out of Western Australia. When the white man first arrived in the country, he brought strange new animals with him – horses, cows, sheep . . . and rabbits. Before long there were thousands and thousands of rabbits, eating all the grass meant for the cows and the sheep. The government of the time believed that a good, strong fence would stop the rabbits moving west into farmlands. The plan did not work, of course, because there were already more rabbits on the Western Australian side of the fence than there were on the South Australian side.

But the rabbit-proof fence became an important landmark for everyone. And when the Mardudjara people – the Mardu – began to move out of the Western Desert, they used to follow the fence to the government depot at Jigalong.

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1

Growing up at Jigalong



JIGALONG WAS A long way from anywhere, right out in the desert. In the early years it was just a small depot for the white men who worked on the rabbit-proof fence. They rode on horses up and down the fence, clearing away branches of trees and dead animals, and mending holes made by fire or storms or kangaroos.

There was also a government store at Jigalong, which gave out free food, clothing, and blankets to the local people. And in the 1930s the Mardu people decided that Jigalong would be a good place for them to stay. It became a new home, a 'sitting down place' for their people.



Molly grew up at Jigalong, among her people, the Mardu. Her mother, Maude, was a young Mardu woman who used to work as a domestic servant for the superintendent at the depot. Her father was Thomas Craig, an Englishman who worked as an inspector of the rabbit-proof fence. He called the baby Molly, after his sister, and often brought her presents of clothing and dresses. But after a few years his work on the fence finished, and he moved on.

Molly was a pretty child, but while she was still quite young, she already knew she was different, because her skin colour was not as dark as the other Mardu children's.

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Rabbit-Proof Fence

‘You not Mardu, you not wudgebulla!’ the children used to shout at her. ‘You nothing! You just a mongrel dog!’

Molly used to throw stones at them, or chase them with a stick, but the words still hurt her. So she was very pleased one day when her mother said:

‘I got some news for you. Two of your aunties have had babies, little girls, and they’re both muda-mudas, like you.’

‘They coming to Jigalong?’ asked Molly, very excited.

‘Yes, very soon,’ said Maude.

‘What are their names?’ Molly asked.

‘Gracie and Daisy. They’re both younger than you, but they’ll be nice friends for you.’

Molly was very happy. ‘I got two sisters!’ she cried. ‘I got two sisters, coming to Jigalong!’

And so it was. Molly, Gracie, and Daisy grew up in and around Jigalong, among their big Aboriginal family of mothers and aunties and uncles and grannies. They became as close as sisters, always together, living, sleeping, playing, walking in the bush, hunting for bush tucker . . .

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The white man called these children half-castes, children of Aboriginal mothers and white fathers. All over the country more and more half-caste children were being born, and the government was worried. Where did these children belong? To their black Aboriginal families? Or to the white man’s world? The government decided that these children should go to school, where they would learn how to become domestic servants and farm workers. Two schools were started, one in

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*Growing up at Jigalong*

the south-west, and one near Perth, called the Moore River Native Settlement. Aboriginal children all over Western Australia were taken away from their families and sent to these schools, to learn how to live like the white man.

The years passed, and the seasons came and went. Jigalong was a long way from anywhere, but government officers rode all over the country, looking for part-Aboriginal children. The arm of the law was long, and reached even to Jigalong. Notes were kept at the depots and the stations, reports and letters were written, orders were given . . .

To Mr A. O. Neville

Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth

The half-caste girls at Jigalong have a hard time with the other Aboriginal children here, who say unkind things about them. The girls need a better chance in life than they can get out here in the bush.

Arthur T. Hungerford

Superintendent, Jigalong Depot

To Mr A. O. Neville

Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth

There are three half-caste girls at Jigalong – Molly 14 years, Gracie 10 years, and Daisy, about 8 years. I think you should do something about them as they are running wild at Jigalong Depot.

Mrs Chellow

Manager, Murra Munda Station

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*Rabbit-Proof Fence*

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To Constable Riggs

Marble Bar Station

Find the three half-caste girls, Molly, Gracie, and Daisy, at Jigalong and bring them in. They will be sent to the Moore River Native Settlement. Send them down by ship to Fremantle, and an officer will meet them there.

Mr A. O. Neville

Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth

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