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Pulling down fences

An oral history with Lyall Munro Jr

by Susan Forde (<https://www.griffithreview.com/contributors/susan-forde/>)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this article contains the names of people who have died.

In 2012, researchers Susan Forde, Kerrie Foxwell, and Elizabeth Burrows embarked on a research project to collect and present the ‘voices’ of the movement for land rights and equality in Queensland. It was motivated by an urgent need to record the contribution of many activists and political voices little known to the broader Australian community who have had a significant impact on the shape of Indigenous politics and affairs over the past century. The project was scoped in consultation with the people interviewed, and aimed to engage with and listen to both the Indigenous researchers who worked on the project and the interviewees themselves to guide the project’s content and boundaries.

For much of our recent history, Aboriginal voices have been interpreted and twisted to meet particular news and political agendas. Given this understanding, a key aim of this project has been to present the voices of the movement ‘unfiltered’. The following interview with long-time activist Lyall Munro Jr has been lightly edited in the interests of moulding the story and bringing reading clarity to Lyall’s memories and thoughts; but on the whole, the text presented below is raw in its insights and recollections.

Lyall Munro Jr is a Kamilaroi man who was born in Moree, in northern New South Wales, in 1951. He has taken a leading and radical role in the Aboriginal land rights movement, participating in major actions such as the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 1982 Commonwealth Games protests, 1988 bicentennial protests, anti-Bjelke-Petersen actions in Queensland, and the dismantling of the gates of the Parliament Houses in both Sydney and Brisbane following failed land rights negotiations. He was involved in the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal housing co-operatives in the 1970s, and was a key spokesperson when nineteen-year-old Aboriginal man Ronald McIntosh was shot and killed by white locals in Moree in 1982.

The son of an activist, Munro Jr traces his ‘goolie’ – the fire in his belly – to his childhood on the New Moree Mission and his unfaltering awareness of the racial undertones that infiltrate a town such as Moree. It was indeed the only local government area in Australia that had enshrined racial segregation in its local by-laws, and along with other western New South Wales towns formed the core of Australia’s ‘geography of confrontation’ [i] on race issues. For this reason, Moree became the target of the late Charles Perkins’s Freedom Ride, in which Perkins and his supporters forced their way into Moree’s segregated public pool to swim with six young Aboriginal boys from the Moree Mission. Lyall Munro Jr was thirteen at the time, and his older brother, Dan, was one of the young boys who swam with Perkins.

In this interview, Munro Jr – affectionately called ‘Lyally Mo’ by those who know him – shares his memories of the struggle for rights from the 1960s through to now, alongside his early recollections of life on Moree Mission and his prickling need to be free.



(Lyll Munro Jr, photograph by Keara Forde)

I WAS BORN across the road here, at the hospital behind me, in 1951. It was a time of intense segregated racism in the town. I think we were one of the only towns where it was legislated, the apartheid system. I was born in the section of the Moree District Hospital called the McMaster Ward, which was restricted for Aboriginal people – most of us from my era and most of us who were born in the late '40s were also born there. Most of those of us born in the '50s and '60s were also born there in the segregated section.

I was born into a family of twelve children, we basically lived on...the New Mission Moree. We went to the mission school, which was called Moree Aboriginal School. It went through a name change because there was a great lot of confusion about who we were at the time. We were unfortunately [initially] identified as Wiradjuri people, then some people of the mission, including my Dad, decided that out of respect for the biggest nation in this part of the country [the school should change its name]...because we are not Wiradjuri people, we are Kamilaroi. Some of us have married into Wiradjuri people. We are proud of that because the two nations played major roles in the struggle and the role we've played in the struggle.

On the mission, we had our own swimming pool down there which we helped to build, us kids, at the time. The men dug it out with the help of the Apex Club, because of the apartheid legislation here. We were more at home there in our own swimming pool, we took great pride and joy in cleaning it every Tuesday and Thursday with our brooms. There was no filtration system then, and our beautiful water would fill it. We had our own water system down there, had our own bore, almost pure mineral water. That serviced our whole system including our drinking water, and filling our pool up twice a week.

An anecdote, and it's a rather personal one. When I was a young fella, I had a problem dealing with the fence, in particular. The fence I think was a three-string wired fence. And that restricted us to that little area [the mission grounds]... Even though it was a fence maybe not even three-foot high, it was only three strands of wire. But you just didn't go beyond that.

I used to wait until my parents were asleep and I'd sneak out, and I'd sneak up to the mission through the oval and to the ramp or the main gate. And I knew a lot of the dogs, so it was pretty easy to control them, to stop them from barking. Because the manager was always alert and always watching with an evil eye. And I used to sneak through the oval, even though I was frightened, and I'd sit on the gate, and I'd sit there and think, *What is out there?* Even though at the time we were allowed to come into town for authorised visits like sport with the East Moree Primary, but on most occasions, most of the schools here came to the mission. And I always thought, what else is there? These kinds of children's thoughts about 'what's out there?' And then I'd

find myself sort of getting down the other side of the gate very slowly, and just standing there for about twenty seconds, and then jumping back on the gate in fear of the unknown, and what the unknown had to offer, and what it was going to do to me immediately, because of the emphasis on the restriction of this simple fence.

I'd done that a couple of times before I'd started to be aware of what that fence represented, subjugation and beyond, that thing called freedom... The essence of the word itself started coming home to people of our generation.

Moree has got a reputation, people refer to it as the Little Rock of Australia, in reference to the [deep] south in America, because of the similar racist practices... We couldn't go into most shops, it was only the Middle Eastern people here that catered for the needs of Aboriginal people, and that was actually the Christian Lebanese immigrants. Families like the Lahoods and the Haddads and families like that, who stood strong with Aboriginal people. The Lahoods in particular would bring their truck down to the mission with all the necessary foods and goods and stuff. And they had an ongoing saga with the manager, being allowed to come in, then not allowed, depending on the whim of whatever manager was there.

We had two managers there, the manager and the assistant manager. And the high school headmaster was also resident on the mission. So their kids also grew up with us on the mission too. But there was still that segregation. We literally couldn't try clothes on [in the town]. If we did buy clothes, we bought them and our parents obviously would have to apply the needle and amend them to suit us [because we couldn't try them on in the shop]. That was serious stuff.

I don't think the realisation started until after 1967 to exactly how real it was, and how terrifying it was. Because of our close proximity to the border we were aware of what was going on the other side of the border, particularly with the Joh Bjelke-Petersen regime, that also had an influence here.

I FIRST WENT to Sydney with my cousin, Sammy Munro... Sammy and I, I think we were sixteen or seventeen, and we went down to stay with relatives in Bondi Junction in 1968, and subsequently met up with all the future brethren through the old Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs group down in George Street, which was one of the only places available to us that was controlled by Aboriginal people like Charles Perkins, and Charlie's group at the time, who were instrumental in the struggle at the time. So that's where we started meeting people. I then went up and down the central coast for my sport and work – up to Umina, then to Newcastle, to Wagga up and down the coast visiting relatives, and working for electrical contractors in Bondi and then Newcastle...and went back to Moree in 1969 and ended up in Wee Waa cotton chipping in 1972. When cotton started opening up in the Namoi Valley in the 1960s and early '70s we worked cotton chipping, ten hours a day for a dollar an hour in heatwave conditions and repeated spraying every day by the planes with insecticide and pesticides. We became aware then of the real politics in Wee Waa when families like the Flicks there in Collarenebri, Michael Anderson, the Murray family from Brewarrina and that area around Collarenebri and Wee Waa. We got together and formed the Wee Waa Aboriginal Cotton Chippers Caucus, and proceeded to take 1,500 Aboriginal cotton chippers out on strike for the new award, which we were successful in and [that's] the award they work to now.

We had a series of meetings there in the back of the Royal Hotel, getting this body together. So that was my first foray into politics in reality. It was one of the first times I ever addressed an audience, a political audience, it was pretty scary but it went okay. I got a bit brave then and took control of an 18-gallon keg that was kind of languishing around there in the backyard of the hotel, and that ended up in the Moree and Walgett camp and as a result of that it was my first association with police, and I found myself in Wee Waa police cells. Wee Waa police station was new then, and it was referred to as the Opera House.

Paul Coe and Sol Bellear from the new Aboriginal Legal Service arrived, brother Billy Craigie came from the [tent] embassy earlier on, Michael Anderson came from the embassy and stayed in Wee Waa, and was involved in the Cotton Chippers Caucus and the strike, and he was very influential actually. And as a result of the strike we had to go and raise money to feed everyone, so I was elected to come to Sydney along with Michael Anderson to do a series of talks before the Trades and Labour Council and other groups in drumming up support for the strike and also to drum up money to feed the strikers. We were successful in that. I addressed the Trades and Labour Council there in '72, at the Trades Hall there in Sydney.

That went okay, we were successful in the strike, and we got the new awards through, and then became involved with the Aboriginal Legal Service of course. The rest they say is history. It became a new part of my life. A demanding part of my life, and it was a time of an awareness that I suppose 'got our goolie up' as they say, the resistance went from there.

AS A RESULT of the foundation of those organisations, in particular, I went to places I'd never dreamed of going to outside of this town, outside of this state, outside of this country. I feel privileged in the history of the struggle and the role that I've been allowed to play. Very privileged to be associated with, I would say, some of the bravest Aboriginal people that I've ever had the privilege to come in touch with, in all aspects of life. And I take great, great pride in that. Out of that leadership came very important Aboriginal leaders, the likes of the Coes and the Foleys, the Craigies, Mayers, and the Belleair brothers, and in Queensland people like Selly J (Selwyn Johnson) and the Johnson family, Santa Unmeapo and Sugar Ray Robinson.

Moments that stick out [in my mind]: the dismantling of the Parliament House fence in New South Wales and the dismantling of the Parliament House fence in Brisbane [for example]. The 1982 Commonwealth Games protests, and the National Aboriginal Government on Capital Hill in Canberra. That's pretty high up there, if they can be afforded as achievements in the struggle, they rank very highly on my priority list.

[And] I'm proud of the stand that we took collectively, over at Fingal... We took two twenty-seater buses over there when Ocean Blue, a multinational company, was going to redevelop Fingal as a marina after Fingal had been raped by the Japanese with the sand mining. We stood our ground there against the development, and the desecration of the cemetery site there. That was with the elders there with people like Noeleen Lever, Nan Fay and Sister Perseppa and then the Cherbourg mob led by Selly J (Selwyn Johnson) and the Johnson family and the Brisbane Natives [football team], and the Moree mob.

They set up the embassy called 'The Mingle in Fingal' and we were successful in denying Ocean Blue the development application to completely destroy Fingal and create another marina there to cater for white opulence. That was a real success story, part of my more direct involvement in the struggle.

I'm always reminded of my role with the founding of NAILSS, the National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Service Secretariat. I was the inaugural co-ordinator there, as a result of that myself and [Paul] Coe and Sugar Ray Robinson we ended up in being the delegates to the human rights commission in Geneva in '83 and '84. Ended up starting a special course there, and an international indigenous [peoples] program in Strasbourg, that at times included lectures at the International Human Rights University there in '84.

[Being in Europe I was] lonely, I thought of home every day and at times I cried with the loneliness. When I got back here in '84 I just decided there and then that I'll never leave this country ever again. For whatever reason. Never again will I leave this country. You just can't get on a bus and go home in Europe.

I don't know whether I could sit here and say if I had that time over again I'd do the same things. When you grow up with people in this time like I have, you tend to think you're pretty special sometimes, you tend to think you're bulletproof, for example. You tend to think you can't be hurt. You tend to think at times that you can protect everyone around you. Which is what we had to do while marching in the frontline. We also had to make sure that everyone was safe; that was a bit of a worry.

But there were stronger men and women than me in the struggle. We complemented one another like I've never seen and never witnessed in my life. The fact that we can come from all different areas of this country at a given time in history and be on the same wavelength. Some of the situations we've found ourselves in were pretty freaky, pretty unreal. Very, very dangerous at times.

But in our struggle the step was always taken forwards, there was no thought of taking a backwards step. And I think we proved that at Musgrave [Park, in Brisbane] and I think we proved that at the '82 Commonwealth Games, I think we proved that at all the embassies and all the marches, and I think in Queensland and New South Wales, in particular, we proved that in '88 when we defied the old conservative gathering and dared to disagree and march down to Lady Macquarie's Chair, which we thought was more effective. We had direct access to the boats coming in, and direct access to the activities that were affecting us, and the embassy there was very successful.

I am reminded of one of the incidents there with brother Billy Craigie [one of the original four men who set up the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra, 1972]. By then, [the Bicentenary Group had] just finished their first copy of their bicentennial history book and they asked one of us for the privilege to launch it. So brother Billy Craigie, he went and launched it...straight into the fucking sea. The six delegates there with monkey suits, they hit the water before the book. Like they were saving the cross of Jesus or something. It was the first copy...it came off the press, so brother Bill launched for them – straight into the fucking water.

Those memories are still with me, the spirit of those people are still very much a part of my life. I feel my body is made up of all of these dear brothers and sisters that I miss dearly, they have not only influenced me but played a major role in some of the [actions] that we have been successful in. It's been a tremendous journey, it's been a tremendous ride.

[GOING INTO BRISBANE and south-east Queensland under the Bjelke-Petersen government was] fuckin' scary. The border was scary. Boggabilla was even scary, Moree was scary. And the reality of all this fucking heartache was that sixty or eighty miles above us [over the border], was the State of Queensland. Moree people ventured into Queensland and actually bought Cherbourg people here to live.

They were aware of the notorious Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act whilst working in the ringbarking camp up there. For example, when they were all getting paid, the Moree men saw the brothers from Cherbourg were putting their pay in an envelope and sending it home to the [mission] manager. The Moree mob started asking questions: 'What the fuck are you doing? No. Not anymore. No way. That money's going into your wallet and your family and if you like you can come to Moree to make sure that occurs.'

And it was very scary, for fuck's sake at the time, but it didn't take long to realise the strength of the struggle in Queensland, and I think that other than Redfern, it was the only area I've seen on par with what we were witnessing and with what'd we'd seen here in Moree.

So we were aware of the Bjelke Joh[**ii**] regime. We are aware of that history because we are so close to Queensland. And we're Murriss. We're the only the Murriss outside of Queensland. So we have a close association not only with the people, but with their history. Because a lot of our people, my grandparents, my grandfather was born in St George, my grandmother was born in Goondiwindi, and I have other relatives up there in southern Queensland, that are hooked up through the storylines and the dreaming areas and the songlines. It was a pleasure serving the struggle in Queensland.

I'D HAVE TO say pulling the fences down at the two Parliament Houses [in Sydney and Brisbane was a moment I'll never forget]. I think that was my greatest thrill. It was the greatest feeling. To see how easy those fucking fences that stood that long came down. The mob were basically Redfern and Brisbane people. It wasn't preconceived. It just happened. To say we were aware of what was to happen was a bit exaggerated. It just seemed the time to do something like that. It was never heard of, no-one's done it before.

[And] the ringbarking of the famous Captain Cook tree, even though no one was arrested, but that created a bit of a shemozzle at the time. There was a famous historical tree [a Cook Island Pine, planted near the Cook Obelisk near Botany Bay to mark Cook's 'landing place']; all the radical field officers of the Aboriginal Legal Service decided it was time it was ringbarked, and they went out there and spent about eight hours ringbarking this tree. They [the government] tried to save it, there was a great backlash from the media... They flew doctors in from all over the world to save this tree. Six months later and their efforts in vain, they were selling historical Captain Cook matches. So what was left over of the tree they made matches out of and called them historical Captain Cook matches.

Things like that [I remember them], even though they were dangerous. The Moree bombing was pretty freaky. That was part of the struggle here. The profound effect on my life forever will be the shooting of Cheeky [**iii**].

But the real joy of them all, was pulling down the bastions of white man society, that represented the invasion, the representation of all that white Australia stood for, was simply all fucking weighed up in those two wrought iron fences [the Parliament House fences].

We revelled in the struggle of the '70s, if we disagreed with an institution, we walked into their headquarters and simply took over the building and occupied it until we were moved. That's simply what we did. That applied to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in Queensland and the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The struggle was about going forward when fences needed to be pulled down, or some over-zealous police needed to be dealt with.

The majority of protests were set up in a very short space of time. There was no area between A and B. It was straight from A to B. There was no C, there was no plan B or anything. If we had an opinion, we had a view, we discussed it, three or four hours later... All embassies were established the same way: on a whim. Musgrave and all that was established the same way, on a whim. That whim just turned out to be the right whim. And I'm proud to be a part of that struggle. The brothers and sisters I walked with, we knew our backs were covered. We knew our women and elders were safe.

I get confused when people say Billy Craigie is the Malcolm X of Australia. Well, who's to say that Malcolm X is not the Billy Craigie of America? Who's to say that Nelson Mandela is not the Paul Coe of South Africa? Our kids are entitled to their heroes. And their real heroes are the people that I'm talking about, and those who played a role before us. Learn about the heroes. Learn about the decisions that their heroes made, and the time they had to make these decisions in.

Our biggest achievement, sister, was to combine that conservatism of our relatives, of our parents, into the front line. That's why we had Lyall Munro Snr, Steve Mam, Mick Miller, and all those people walking in the front line. My brother up there, Murradoo, and his father, brother Philip Yanner. I served with their fathers, we all did as young people on the same struggle and that's how we're familiar with their families. We tell our kids all the time, me and Jenny[iv], you can go to any part of this country and be welcome, simply because you're part of the struggling families that make up the resistance that became very strong on the east coast.

When they destroyed that resistance, they destroyed the rights of black people in this country. And until that resistance is united on the east coast, this situation is going to prevail.

[MY ADVICE TO any black scribes currently working], I refer them to the history of John Newfong. That's all I'll say. You can forget any other black scribes in this country until they become aware of John Newfong, and what he is, and what he represented. And how John Newfong acquired his skills from [being] the paper boy, all the way through the ranks of Fairfax media. To become the first editor of the very first black media entity [in Australia], *Identity*...

Keep in mind he came out of the closet in the '60s, which was pretty fucking brave. Strutted his stuff in the front line of the struggle like you've never seen. And cuddled and kissed the brothers long before it was trendy. It took courage to do that, back in those days. Be that as it may, I think *Koori Mail's* got a lot to learn, there's not enough proactive journalism coming from the *Koori Mail*. It's been around for a long time, they tend to copy other media. Which is unfortunate. *Indigenous Times* had a better approach, more radical, but keep in mind both were started by the same man. Owen Carriage.

I really have no respect for the influence of the black media in the struggle other than to reiterate, if you're going to be a black journo, you first have to be aware of John Newfong. He was fucking brilliant. He wrote for prime ministers. And he wrote for some very conservative prime ministers. He created *Identity*, which was in the front of the media's stuff with the embassies and the radical media[v]. But he had the respect with the white media. He was very straightforward with them. I've actually seen him grab a few by the fucking throat on occasion.

I'll pay my dues to a black journo who comes to me and says, 'I started my career, I was influenced by a man named Newfong, I am influenced by what he's done. I've been influenced by his political nous.' You will never be a black scribe, and you will never be effective unless you know about John Newfong. He saw the writing on the wall, he saw Labor going from the extreme to the middle to the right and to the extreme. John Newfong had a vision and these visions are still being played out.

There's a person there in Queensland, who was in the front of everything: Selly J [vi]. Selly J wasn't interested in reaching the heights of everyone else. Selly J had his achievements, he had his personal problems and that. But they never detracted from his commitment. [He gave a sense that] we're not moving, we're not going to

stand down. No matter how conservative this country gets, this fucking black duck is not standing down. Neither is this black duck's fucking descendants. No Munros are going to stand down.

There's over three or four thousand of us. I'm pretty sure no Coes [the Coe family, Munro's in-laws] are ever going to stand down. So we've got the struggle in the future covered. My mum's got so many grandchildren, Jenny's [Munro, Lyall's wife, nee Coe] mum's got half of those on our side. There's still Craigies around, there's still Foleys around, there's still Johnsons around. In actual fact, we don't need a community to go to a demonstration anymore, we can fit all those sons and daughters and grandsons on the bus. We've already got our struggle, we've already got our numbers.

*Saturday, 12 August 2016
Moree, New South Wales*

Notes and references

[i] Clark, J (2008). *Aborigines and Activism: Race, Aborigines and the Coming of the Sixties to Australia*. Perth, WA, Australia: UWA Press.

[ii] A number of Aboriginal people interviewed refer to former Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen as 'Bjelke Joh'.

[iii] In Moree in November 1982, a young man, Ronald McIntosh ('Cheeky'), was shot and killed by two white Moree residents in Endeavour Lane following a brawl between Aboriginal and white community members at the Ned Kelly Bar at the Imperial Hotel. Two other members of the Aboriginal community were also shot. The two men were eventually convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to fourteen years' jail (*The Canberra Times*, 'Court told of Moree shootings', Friday January 21, 1983, p3; *The Canberra Times*, '14 year jail sentences for Moree shooting', November 23, 1983, p10). The convicted men had admitted to firing at least eighteen shots from the back of a utility at the group of Aboriginal people gathered in Endeavour Lane. *The Canberra Times* reported that Lyall Munro Jr drove the injured to Moree hospital. A doctor told the court that Ronald McIntosh had died immediately in Endeavour Lane following a single shot that had pierced his heart and lungs.

[iv] Lyall's wife is Jenny Munro [nee Coe], another important figure in the land rights movement since the late 1960s and also interviewed for this project. She is currently a key figure in the campaign to stop residential developments at Redfern's The Block

[v] H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs was instrumental in the establishment of *Identity*, launched in July 1971. The first editor was non-Indigenous journalist Barrie Ovenden; Newfong took over as editor in mid-1972 and *Identity* gained significant reach as the voice of the land rights movement. After a period away from the magazine, Newfong became editor again in 1979.

[vi] Selwyn Johnson, now deceased, and part of a large family that also includes brothers Norman Johnson, Duncan Johnson (deceased) and Hedley Johnson. Norm and Duncan were activists; Hedley was also an activist but primarily a musician and an original band member of the well-known Brisbane group *Mop and the Dropouts* who penned the song 'Brisbane Blacks' which became an anthem for the 1982 Commonwealth Games protests. Their father, Bowman Johnson, established the *Born Free* club at West End for Aboriginal people around South Brisbane who had nowhere to live

Note: Some sections of this story were amended for clarity Monday, 25 March 2019 at the request of the interviewee.