

FIRE IN THE OUTBACK

JOHN BLACKET

FIRE IN THE OUTBACK

The untold story of the Aboriginal revival movement
that began on Elcho Island in 1979



A KHESED PUBLICATION

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Front cover photograph: Ron Williams and Geoff Stokes erect a cross in the desert near an Aboriginal site of spiritual significance

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To:

Kevin Dhurrkay

Pastor Ben Mason

Galikali (Dianne Buchanan)

Rev. Dr Djinyini and Gelung Gondarra

Rev. Ron and Diana Williams

Foreword

AS A CHRISTIAN ABORIGINAL, it's a great privilege for me to acknowledge in this book some of the great things that God has done in our time. In 1979, we had revival that began at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island and it affected the whole of Arnhem Land. It spread south-west to Warburton Ranges, and then north-west to the Kimberleys. We also had teams going to north Queensland to minister and spread the revival.

This has set a course for the church at Galiwin'ku to become an outreach church. Ever since that revival, we have been going to places and sharing what God has done and what he is still doing. I am one of the products of that revival and I'm not the only one. There are a few of us still on fire for the Lord. Every year, on March 14, we celebrate that spiritual awakening and pray for a fresh touch from God through the power of his Holy Spirit. These are exciting times for the church in Australia. We must *repent* more and more so that times of refreshing will come to our churches.

Since 1977-1978, I have had the privilege of working as community worker with John Blacket. He is one of the *Balanda* (white man) staff who witnessed that revival from the very beginning. My perception is that John is a different man now since the revival. John is one of those people who can

communicate to an Aboriginal person anywhere, because he has learned to listen and understand *Yolngu* (Aborigines), then takes the time to share with them. I admire him for this task and particularly for his endurance and patience with people. Now God has given him this important ministry of reconciliation and bridging of Christian *Balanda* and *Yolngu* in Australia. We want to see unity come to the church of God right across the land, then we will see revival come to the whole of this Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. This book is a milestone for that revival. I would like to commend John in his careful efforts in documenting and compiling these anointed stories. I'm sure you are going to enjoy reading this book and will be blessed by the Lord.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Maratja Dhamarrandji'. The signature is written in a cursive style with several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Alan Maratja Dhamarrandji
Galiwin'ku, Northern Territory, 1996

Preface

The Lord said, 'Ezekiel, son of man, turn towards the south and warn the forests that I, the Lord God, will start a fire that will burn up every tree, whether green and dry. Nothing will be able to put out the blaze of that fire as it spreads to the north and burns everything in its path. Everyone will know that I started it and that it cannot be stopped.'

But I complained, 'Lord God, I don't want to do that! People already say I confuse them with my messages.'

Ezekiel 20: 45-49

DURING A PRAYERTIME IN KHESED MINISTRIES' first council meeting on 10 August 1989, one of those present felt God was saying: 'There is a book that is to be written from what I show you to train others for this ministry, for many other labourers are needed in this work.' The idea had been raised a month earlier, but I didn't want to hear that!

I thought: 'There are plenty of books around that do that' and I deliberately pushed it right to the back of my mind, 'awaiting further enlightenment', which really meant, 'buried as deeply as possible'. But I knew God had spoken to me.

In January 1990, I was attending the Central Australian Christian Convention in Alice Springs. Some of the Elcho Island men told us what God had done in that powerful move of the Holy Spirit in their community around 1979.

After the meeting, a group of us were talking about it and Ben Mason, Aboriginal chairman of the convention, said: 'Someone needs to go around and collect all the stories and write them in a book.' I knew that this was the book which had been spoken about the previous August and that I was the person to write it.

I am greatly indebted to Ben Mason for that challenge and for his continued encouragement to me in this project. It really is a result of his vision and desire for reconciliation between black and white in this land, for the evangelisation of all people and for a mature discipleship.

This book has been written for:

- * Aborigines — it is *their* story of God at work among them;
- * those whose work among Aborigines involves receiving them and learning from them and letting them minister to them;
- * those who may never meet an Australian Aborigine, but whose heart cry to God will help his great work to happen through them — for it is not finished: it has hardly started yet!
- * All Australians who are looking for important clues for Australia and its people for the next ten years of development.

The book has taken me seven years of travelling around Australia, recording stories, asking questions, transcribing tapes, writing, editing, rewriting and sending letters to staff who were involved. I want to express my thanks to my family, who allowed me to be away from home for long periods during a time of heavy demands in our family life. I particularly want to thank my wife, June, who not only worked as a teacher to support the family so that I could work on this project, but also spent many hours encouraging me, praying for me, transcribing tapes, reading drafts and working with me on it.

My thanks also goes to all those who contributed to its production:

- * with stories of their own personal lives and struggles, and what they know of God's work in the renewal movement;
- * through hospitality to me;
- * by giving funds for travel and other expenses;
- * by transcribing tapes of interviews and manuscripts — spending many hours, sometimes on tapes of very poor sound quality, many of them being interviews with people who spoke limited English with very heavy Aboriginal accents, using many impossible-sounding names as well as words from their own language they believed I knew or they couldn't express in English; especially Alison Hill, whose contribution totalled hundreds of pages typed into the computer;
- * in editing and commenting on the many editions of the manuscript, especially Ken Goodlet at Albatross Books. This also includes many hours of discussions with anthropologist Dr John Rudder. His advice and comments have been invaluable.
- * in encouraging, advising, praying and contributing in any way: I believe you will hear the Master say to you, 'Thanks. Well done!'

Ultimately, all the credit for anything of value in this work belongs to God alone, and the failings are mine.

I have tried to let people tell their own stories in their own words as much as possible, but have taken the liberty to edit their words for clarity and flow of the story, sometimes without acknowledging the editing. In a few cases, I have changed names to save people from embarrassment, but this has not always been possible.

Some have sought to label this move of God with terms like 'charismatic'. Right from the beginning, I tried to stop such divisive and judgmental squeezing of God's work into human

categories. Unfortunately, some of the story tells the sad results of this sort of thing, which at times is nothing short of what Jesus spoke about in Mark 3, verse 29 — blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle John wrote at the end of his Gospel:

There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

John 21: 25; 20: 30-31

I am very conscious that there are many gaps: untold stories, people I have not quoted, places and issues I have not touched upon. . . Many people have drifted away from the Lord and were too ashamed to talk to me about what God did. I was surprised to find that even many Aborigines with a very strong oral tradition have forgotten important details over the intervening fifteen years.

Some may be disappointed that I have not dealt with issues like social justice, Aboriginal land rights, organisations like the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship, United Aborigines Mission or Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, or what happened at Amata or Halls Creek, or. . . There are many issues that I would love to have dealt with in some detail.

I have deliberately concentrated on Elcho Island and Warburton Ranges. As far as I know, it was not until 1979 at Galiwin'ku that a powerful community-changing move of Holy Spirit power occurred among Aborigines. It seems to me that most of the powerful moves of the Holy Spirit amongst the Australian Aborigines have stemmed from this in some way. I am also quite aware that a lot happened in the communities around Galiwin'ku and in Central Australia [such as Milingimbi, Yirrkala, Ernabella and Amata]. There have also been significant moves of the Holy Spirit in the Kimberley, Pilbara, the south-west of Western Australia and

other places which have been totally ignored in this story.

However, the scope of this book is quite large enough for one project. I believe it was defined by God as being the spiritual dimensions of a particular move of Holy Spirit power, and the things which I perceived to be directly involved in that. No doubt others will see it differently to me. I am very conscious that historians and others will criticise *my* efforts and those of my colleagues — God and time have already weighed some of our efforts! I have tried to write what God has been showing me *now*, with a deep sense of gratitude even to those whose actions I have criticised here who have persevered under incredible difficulties.

After studying the events involved in this revival, one thing stands out: it was *God* who prepared the way for this move of his Holy Spirit. . . in people like Harry Makarwala. . . in visions and dreams. . . in sacrifices and teaching. . . in signs and wonders. . . in healings and struggles. . . in personal relationships. . . in meetings when God's power was clearly evident, and many people's lives were changed — some permanently.

I constantly thank God for the privilege of being involved in this story and of bringing it to you, and I pray you will be able to enjoy the challenges and thrills of God's purposes in renewing this land of Australia as its indigenous 'host' people and all its migrants pool their skills to work together in God's wisdom and power.

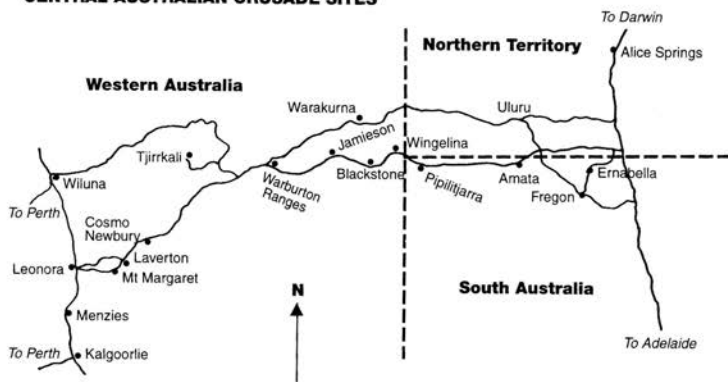
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John Blacket". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

John Blacket

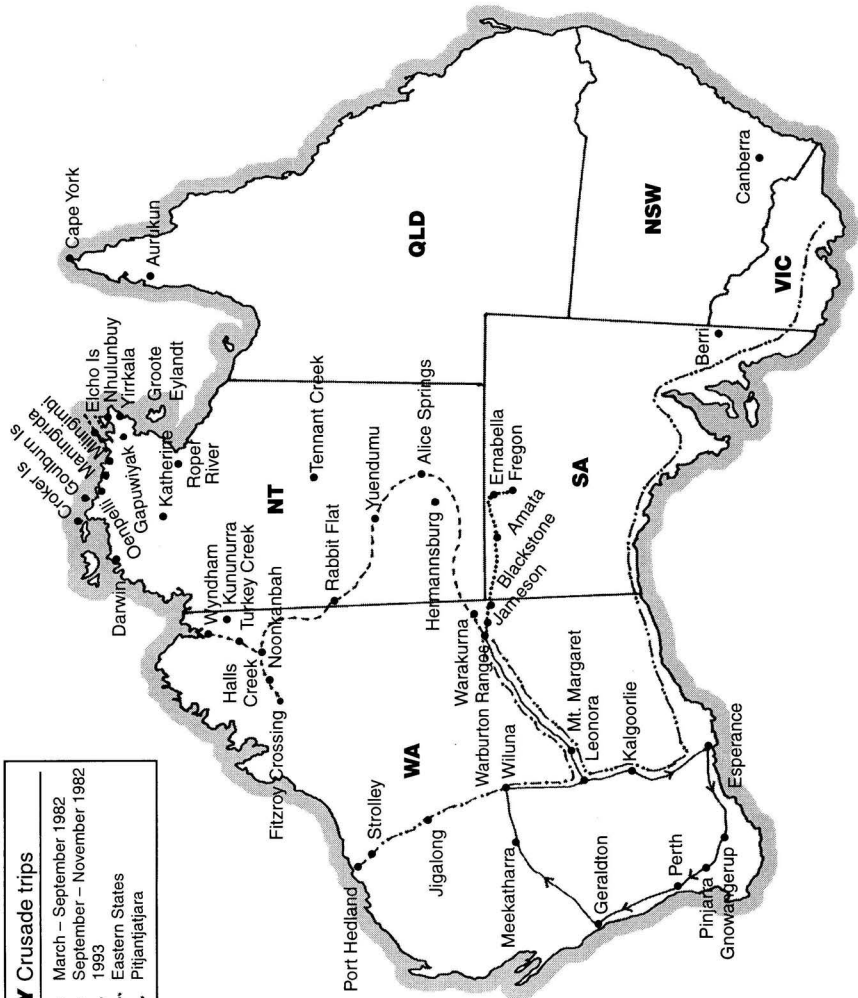
Perth, June 1997



CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN CRUSADE SITES



KEY Crusade trips	
—	March – September 1982
- - - -	September – November 1982
· · · · ·	1993
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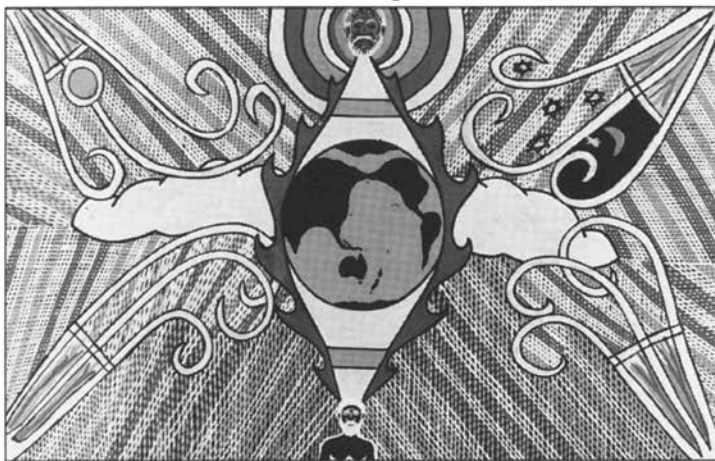


Introduction

AN OVERVIEW

ON 13 MARCH 1979, WIRRIYI, a quietly-spoken Aboriginal man from Elcho Island, had this vision:

A big fire came down at the other end of Galiwin'ku [Elcho] Island. The fire came down onto the land, set the dry grass ablaze on the sand dunes and immediately spread across to the north-east and north-west points of the island.



The painting by Gelung Gondarra shows the globe of the world (centre, with oceans in yellow ochre and land in black), God the Father (centre top) and the human race (centre bottom). In the corners are the four winds, top left is the sun and top right is the moon and stars, with the clouds across the centre.¹

Then, it started coming this way like a bushfire, very slowly. It was burning up everything — all the trees and plants — and moving south through the grasslands, mangroves, open bushland and jungles.

Everything fell down and was destroyed. It totally destroyed all the trees, even the largest of trees from which the dugout canoes are made. It destroyed all the rubbish and buildings and steel girders and sheets of iron. Everything was burnt up, leaving nothing but very hot sand — like ashes — after it.

Nothing else was left at all.

At the same time, following straight after the fire, the grass was coming up green and, straightaway, the trees were grown up with flowers and fruit. They were really beautiful, like I've never seen before, like the Garden of Eden or Heaven.

The fire came right down here and over to the next island between here and the mainland and stopped there. When it arrived at my house, I was asleep. The fire touched me like an electric shock and threw me over the sand dunes to Wolmangur.

At the same time, I heard God's words coming from the tongues of the fire: his message in the fire. He said: 'That fire is the life of *Yolngu* [Aborigines]. That is for the end, for the future. If the *Yolngu* live like that fire — if your life is like the fire, burnt up — then, after it grows new life, it will be really good.'

In my spirit, I was there with the fire. It was like I was looking down at the fire and the island and I could see myself in there and I heard the voice. I wanted to run away from the fire back to the ocean, but I heard God's voice and I don't want to run away from God, so I stopped there.

The fire came and I fell down dead — my body was burnt to ashes. Inside, in the depths of my spirit, God was saying, 'That fire is my word! Anybody who believes my word will do that.'

As I stood there looking at myself burned to ashes, I saw the new life coming to me with the green grass and God's new life.²

◆ **Fire as the essential symbol of
the Elcho Island revival**

The day following Wirriyi's vision, the church at Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island saw such a powerful expression of God's presence that they have celebrated 14 March every year since then as the day God brought revival.

Many others had dreams and visions around that time, some of which also included the image of fire. Buthimang, also from Elcho Island, told me of some of them and then he explained what he saw as its purpose: 'It was to encourage the people and give us excitement to keep singing praise to God, singing a new song in our own language to praise him.'³

I was one of those people who were encouraged in a similar way in a vision. I was a white missionary at Elcho Island in 1978, when the church asked me to move to Alice Springs to do a seemingly impossible task. I felt powerless and cried out to God. Then, God spoke to me in January 1979 and said:

I will renew the land from the beginning!⁴ I have lit a fire at Elcho! That's what I did last year. . . the straggles. . . that night of prayer. . . I have lit a spark there that will light fires all over the land! It will go from black to black all over the land and from black to white. I will renew the whole land and it will go beyond Australia to other lands.

That vision gave me a sense of expectancy and direction for my new work in Central Australia. This helped prepare Aborigines, missionaries and others for the move of God's Holy Spirit which followed there as well.

Fire has an essential role in regeneration in Australia. It breaks open the seedpods, allowing the rain to generate new life. It is also an image used in the Bible for the Holy Spirit. Australia, and the South Pacific, has been called *Terra Australis Espiritu Santo* — the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit.

The fire and the Holy Spirit, then, are essentially linked with Australia.

This new move of the Holy Spirit began amongst Australia's Aboriginal people at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island in 1979 and spread across the land. This book tells the story of how that happened and some of its results.

◆ **The spread of revival from Elcho Island to Aboriginal communities throughout Australia**

As a result of the events at Galiwin'ku in 1979, people suddenly became more aware of God's presence: they wanted to be with God and with each other like never before. Long-standing fights between families were healed. There was a concern for other families and a deep desire to be with them and with God. There were miracles and there were healings but, probably much more significantly, there were healings of relationships.

At the end of 1978, there had been less than fifty Aborigines who went to church at Galiwin'ku. After the events of 14 March 1979, there were over two hundred meeting together and worshipping God for three or four hours or more every night of the week — and there were only around eleven hundred people living in the town, half of whom were children!

During 1978, evangelist Dan Armstrong had been invited to come from Canberra to Galiwin'ku for a mission. He arrived at the beginning of May 1979 with a small group from New South Wales, just six weeks after the revival started. They found that they had come, as they put it, 'on the crest of a wave'. During the time they were there, the numbers grew to over five hundred and every family on the island was touched in some way by the revival.

News started to spread to nearby islands and communities. People came to visit their relatives and experienced for themselves the renewing life. They went back to their

communities and shared what they had found, telling of a new dimension to their faith. Very soon the invitations began to pour in to the Galiwin'ku church: 'Come and share it with us!' As a result, groups of Elcho Christians moved out all over Arnhem Land and beyond to share their new understandings.

In August that year, the first Central Australian Christian Convention was to be held in Alice Springs and I had invited a group from Elcho Island to attend. About thirty of the Elcho Islanders joined hundreds of locals who began to discover from the Elcho Christians something of this new relationship with God. These desert people then went back to their communities and talked with others about what they had heard and experienced.

This was the beginning of the revival which had a transforming effect in a large number of Aboriginal communities spread over north Australia in 1979 and 1980.

Then, in 1981, a small group of Elcho Islanders went to Warburton Ranges community in the middle of the Western Australian Desert. That community had become known as one of the worst Aboriginal communities in Australia, but in one weekend it was radically transformed. The people from the Warburton Ranges began to share what they had received with others in Western Australia and, wherever they went, whole towns were transformed, leaving government officials puzzled and amazed. Teams travelled from Western Australia into South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, visiting mostly Aboriginal communities and bringing hope, release and new life.

◆ **The aftermath of the Aboriginal revival**

After experiencing God's power and miracles came learning to hear God's whispers. Listening came through facing up to criticism and diversion which began to come from within the church. New Aboriginal Christians and their leaders began to

feel intimidated, confused, overly cautious and distracted by temptations.

But Aboriginal Christians had to learn to listen to God in new ways. God's fire had begun doing a deeper work, dealing with lusts, distractions and demonic powers. The intimidation, confusion and temptation caused many to leave the church. Most of them, however, still believe in God and know that what they experienced at that time was real. Now, they are learning to hear and obey God's gentle whispers in the clamour of the world around them.

Today, there is a hunger for a greater understanding of God — for the spectacular and for things even greater than before, but also for a much deeper relationship with him than in the past.

In the years since the revival, most of the 'froth and bubble' and excitement has gone, replaced by a deepening of faith. They are seeing the gospel as something which affects the whole of life, requiring a new understanding of caring for the poor, of justice and of relationships. There has also been a struggle to work through the relationship between the gospel and Aboriginal culture.

They have struggled to see how they can use their own dance, music styles and instruments in Christian worship, wondering what changes *can* be made and what spiritual powers are involved. They have struggled over pastoring their churches effectively and consistently; over how to effectively evangelise their own people and the world; over finding their own authentic ways to worship God; and over reconciliation. Groups of Aborigines are now going to whites and asking forgiveness for their attitudes of resentment and hatred towards them — despite all the injustice, hatred and oppression they experienced from the whites.

A whole new Aboriginal church structure is also emerging out of the revival. The Uniting Church in Australia has responded to the vision and requests of Aboriginal leaders by

establishing the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, giving Aboriginal Christians the freedom and some of the resources needed to become the church of Jesus Christ in whatever way they feel God is leading them as Christians. Some other denominations are taking similar steps.

But there is something much deeper than structure that is emerging, something free of Western style and methods and world view.

There is a vibrant new Christian life in many of the 'outstations' or 'homelands', where family groups have moved away from the tensions of larger communities to their own clan land. At least one of these has been designated as a place of prayer and Christian renewal and many of them have a cleared area with a cross as a focal point in the community.

There is a vibrant new life among children and teenagers, especially in these outstations. The sense of the presence of God as they dance and worship is not found among many adults anywhere, but those who are present cannot help being drawn into God's joy and peace.

There is also a commitment to prayer for the whole nation among many, which is growing.

There have been many prophecies about Australia and about the Aborigines bringing revival. There have been prophecies about Aborigines having a key place in the revival — even that it would be tribal people from the desert who would bring such revival to Australia — that it cannot happen without them and will spread across the world from Australia. Similar words have been spoken in America, South Africa and other countries about Australian Aborigines.

There is an expectancy and excitement building. There is a developing unity and reconciliation across churches and races.

The story that follows is told to encourage you. I believe you will find that it is not just for people interested in

Australian Aborigines, revivals or church history, but is also important for you, whoever you are. It is told so that we can learn from the account of the way God prepared Aborigines for revival; learn from the stories of the quenching and inadequacies of the revival; and learn from the stories hope, expectancy and excitement as we discover more of God's nature and plans.