

## Foreword

Eighteen thousand years ago the sea rose to engulf the coastal plain that extended to what are now Stradbroke and Moreton Islands in south-east Queensland. As a result of this cataclysmic event, the Brisbane River and the bay as we know them today came into being. According to archaeological evidence, Aboriginal people were present along the coast for approximately fourteen thousand years prior to the flooding of the coastal plain.

The Aboriginal people saw themselves as integral to, and responsible for, the land they inhabited. They knew their country intimately—their survival depended on their knowledge of flora, fauna, landscape and weather. Country, for want of a better word, encompasses the spiritual world where the landscape comes alive through spiritual beings and ancestors; it embraces all aspects of the Aboriginal people's relationship to the physical nature of their environment. Country is perpetuated through every aspect of daily life and particularly in ritual, dance, song, stories and art. The Australian Indigenous peoples considered themselves as custodians of the earth and its creatures. They were an integral and vital part of a multitude of interdependent bonds within the universe, and their attachment to where they lived was their essence. They believed that those who destroy country, destroy themselves. However, the English colonisers saw the world differently and had no time for what they dismissed as superstition. To them, there was only one law—their own. And they could not understand, or chose not to, that the people they had invaded might also have their rules and regulations.

This is the story of Tom Petrie, an early Queensland settler who arrived at the Moreton Bay Penal Colony in 1837 at the age of six. Tom was unusual in that

he learnt the language of the local Turrbal people and was accepted as one of their own. Tom acted as guide, messenger, interpreter, explorer, timber cutter and surveyor for the white settlement. With the help of Dalaipi, a Turrbal clan leader, he established the property of Murrumba in the North Pine area where the town of Petrie was later named after him. The Petrie family played an important part in the development of south-east Queensland. Tom's father Andrew was the superintendent of works for the penal colony, the first free settler and a major builder in the new town, while Tom's elder brother John became the first mayor of Brisbane in 1859.

The land that our white ancestors conquered was not an empty wasteland. Australia was inhabited by peoples who had lived and developed on our island continent since time immemorial. Through the reconciliation process we have come to recognise this heritage but there is still much to be done. Relations between black and white on Queensland's early frontier were complex, with misunderstandings on both sides. *Turrwan* recounts those troubled times in an attempt to foster discussion and hopefully contribute in some way to the emergence of a balanced view of the events that forged this state.

I now once More hoisted English Colours, and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern coast from the above Latitude down to this place by the Name of New South Wales together with all the Bays, Harbours, Rivers, and Islands, situated upon the said Coast.

*Captain James Cook, 22 August 1770*

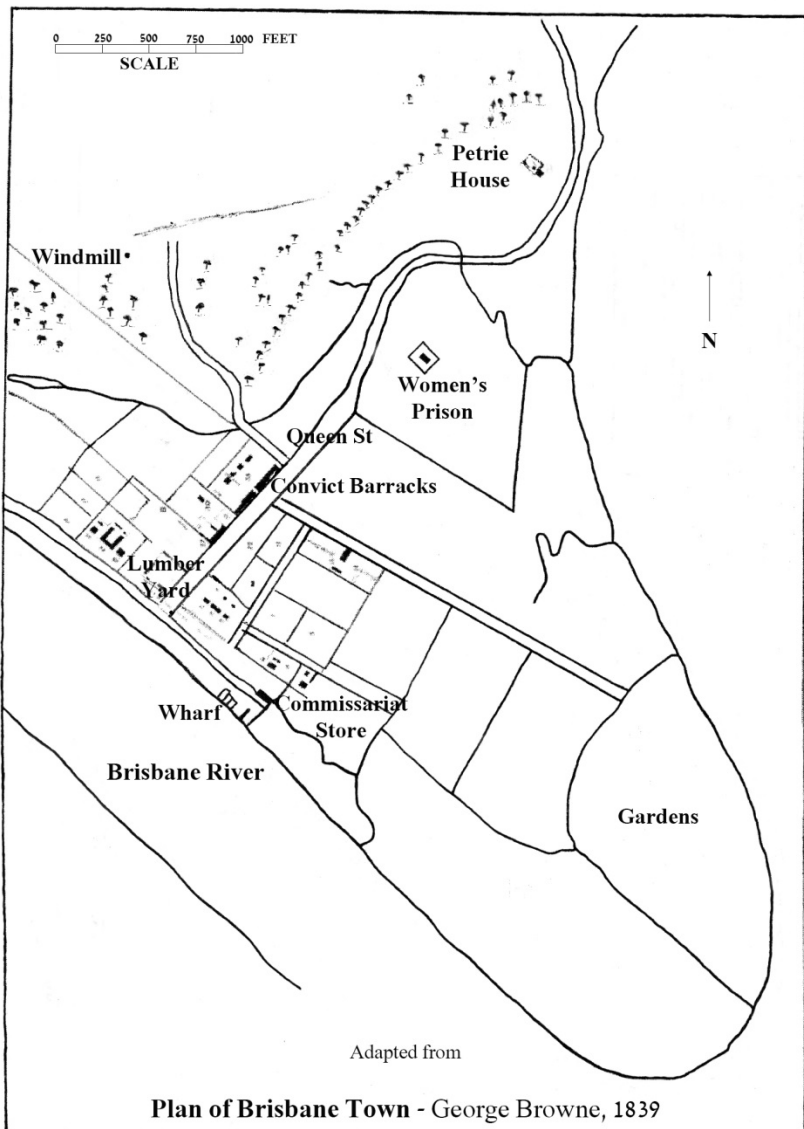
January 26 is a day that commemorates the armed invasion of our lands. In 1788, the British fleet landed on our soil and laid claim to land that was sovereign to 500 indigenous tribes. Every inch of our land had its own name and own Dreaming story. In 1901, The Australian nation was proclaimed on land that had not been ceded or surrendered by the traditional owners. The so called “Australian” flag means nothing to Aboriginal people. In fact, it is a symbol of oppression.

*Sam Watson, ‘The Courier Mail’ January, 2006*

The frontier is never  
somewhere else. And no stockades  
can keep the midnight out.

*Norman MacCaig, ‘Hotel Room, 12<sup>th</sup> Floor’*

\*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are respectfully advised that this work contains the names of deceased people



# ONE

## 1909 Murrumba

The old chair groans with my weight, the greying wood still solid beneath the scars of a long life overlooking the garden, and before that, in the house in Brisbane. Grandmother's chair has held bodies of all shapes and sizes, often more than one at a time. The children were the ones who inflicted the most damage; myself more than the rest. I used the chair as a prop in games that ended with this piece of furniture a victim of attack by spear, waddy, boomerang, musket and pistol. Not when my father was around. Such acts of mistreatment would have called forth the strap if my father ever caught me.

Lining the road that climbs the rise to the house are the hoop, bunya and kauri pines I planted as seeds over forty years ago, now magnificent giants. Clumps of tall bamboo rustle and sway in the breeze, a stark contrast to their neighbours. They provide an exotic background to the bougainvillea, the rich purples and violets etched on their trunks. A family of quails bobs across the lawn, suddenly skittering for cover beneath the bushes as a grey goshawk swoops down to perch in a silky oak, its yellow talons clawing the branch. It seems that all the small birds in the vicinity have gathered to attack the hostile intruder; in a fury of chattering and chirping, the bravest dive-bomb the predator. The hawk disdains all attentions for some time, its eyes searching the bushes for a sign of the quails. A near miss from a clacking magpie rouses him from his perch. He flies languorously off, the feathered mob chasing him across the river until they disappear and peace is restored.

I built the house on a low knoll overlooking the North Pine River to the south, with Brisbane some sixteen miles in the distance. "Murrumba," I had named it, "a good place" in the local dialect. The surrounding countryside is mostly open timbered land dominated by tall eucalypts and hoop pine. The aboriginal people used to regularly burn the area to make it easier to catch the kangaroos and other animals that came to feed on the rich grasses that sprang up after the fire. The river itself is clothed in dense scrub where ferns and vines abound amongst the she-oaks and black bean trees.

My younger sister Isa sits beside me, a blanket covering her lower body, despite the heat. We both know we have little time left. We often sit together for hours, remembering old times. My wife Elizabeth pampers us with tea and fresh-baked scones.

It was hard work: I built this homestead, the barns and sheds, the fences, the gardens. I could never have done it, though, without all my willing workers: my brothers Andrew and George, and my friends—Wanangga, Dalaipi, Mindi-Mindi, King Sandy. They are all long gone, only Dal-ngang is left.

## TWO

1858

My friends Dal-ngang and his father Dalaipi helped me choose the best place to settle. Dalaipi was head man and rainmaker of the North Pine clan. He had rejected the white man's temptations of grog and tobacco when he had seen the effect they had on his people. He could see that resistance was futile. The whites were too many and too powerful; they would take his land whether he liked it or not.

"Before the whitefellow came," Dalaipi once told me, "we wore no dress, but knew no shame, and were all free and happy. There was plenty to eat and it was a pleasure to hunt for food. Then, when the white man came among us, we were hunted from our ground, shot, poisoned, and had our daughters, sisters, and wives taken from us. Could you blame us if we killed the white man? If we had done likewise to them, would they not have murdered us?" he asked. "But you are different, Tommy. You are one of the people. If you are looking for land to raise cattle and to provide a home for your family, this is where you must come," he was solemn as he said this. "I know you will respect our sacred sites and our way of life."

With Dal-ngang, I spent days riding the country looking for a likely place. I had listened to Dalaipi's discourses about the virtues of his land and had guessed the old man's ploy. I knew he wanted me to take up the land where the clan lived—it was common sense. However, it was then part of the Whiteside run owned by the Griffins. Would they let me move in? As chance would have it, we came across John Griffin accompanying a dray loaded with timber at the North Pine upper crossing. He was an impressive figure, sitting on his horse, Terra, like a monument. The aboriginals kept well away from this horse, as it seemed to have a great dislike for their race and would kick and bite anyone with a black skin. I remember Griffin's face was shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat. He had a rifle by his side and two pistols across his saddle. We got to talking about the land and I said I would like to graze some cattle in the area.

John looked at Dal-ngang, who had backed away from the vicious horse, and drew me aside. "You should talk to Mother about this," he said. "We can't make a go of this place because of the blacks. The buggers keep spearing our cattle, and no one is safe." His hands tightened on the rifle.

"Why not go and see her now, then," I said, turning my horse to the west where the Whiteside station lay. I left John where he stood. "You're mad, Petrie," I thought I heard him shout as we left.

Mrs Griffin said she was more than willing to leave me the land that stretched from Sideling Creek to the coast. It was too dangerous to run cattle there, she told me. If I thought I could do it, good luck to me. We sorted out the details of our agreement, then Mrs Griffin invited me to stay for lunch. I declined, as I was in a hurry to get back to Brisbane to tell Elizabeth the news that I had managed to secure some of the best land in the colony.

## THREE

### 1837 Moreton Bay

I stood on the deck of a paddle steamer as it threaded its way through the narrow, deep channel between two large islands where the shifting sands awaited the unwary mariner. I closed my eyes and inhaled the scent of vegetation and land mixed with the brine of the sea. The trip from Sydney had been long and rough and I was looking forward to being on solid ground again. I felt the breeze on my face as I listened to the gulls squabbling for scraps in the ship's wake. When I opened my eyes I saw we were entering the calmer waters of a sheltered bay.

I made my way to where my father was talking to the captain in his cabin, studying a map on the desk. Father was a big man and known for his energy. He disliked those he called fools. Now he waited for Captain Griffin, who would later set up the Whiteside run, to explain their situation.

"We'll be arriving at Dunwich on Stradbroke Island shortly. The pilot boat is waiting to take you up the river tomorrow," he said.

I turned back towards the water where I spotted two triangular black fins not far from the boat. "Father, come quick," I called.

"That's enough," he said. "You know better than to interrupt. Wait until I'm finished."

I sulked at the door and Father returned to the map. "You were saying we have to take the pilot boat up the river to the town, Mr Griffin."

The captain tapped his finger on the map. "That's right. There's too much sand in the river mouth here for a steamer this size. We'll transfer your luggage at Dunwich, where you'll spend the night. The boat will leave first thing in the morning and you'll be at the settlement in no time."

"Good. Thank you, Captain."

Father turned towards me, raising an eyebrow. I spun around and ran. I was jumping up and down, clinging to the ship's rails when Father emerged on deck. My brothers John and Walter were standing beside me. Isa was below with Mother. I saw my father arriving and pointed at the water. "Look father. Look. Sharks," I shouted.

John and Walter grabbed me and hoisted me off my feet. "How about a swim, eh?"

I let out a yell, struggling.

"Act your age John. And you Thomas, come down from there. Now!" Father was not amused.

My brothers released me, and I jumped down to the deck. Father turned towards the bow. We were approaching Dunwich wharf, a narrow jetty that thrust some one hundred and fifty yards out from the shore. Built out of rocks by convicts some years before, the jetty allowed big ships to dock and offload their cargo. Where it met the shore, the structure was flanked on the left by stone-strewn mud. To the right, a narrow beach of yellow sand disappeared around a rocky point. A small hut at the end of the causeway stored tools and acted as a shelter. Further back in a cleared area stood a larger slab hut. Beyond the camp, thick scrub lay on the hillsides like a worn, shredded blanket.

"Go fetch your mother and sister, Thomas. And be quick about it, we're almost there," Father ordered.

I disappeared inside, glad for something to do. My excitement carried me towards the family's cabin. "Mother!" I shouted. "We've arrived. Father says to come on deck." I would say I was my mother's favourite. Her soft heart saved me many times. She straightened her bonnet, taking one last look at the cabin the family had shared from Sydney. Seven berths had been crammed into the tiny cabin, but it did have modern conveniences. The wash stand provided fresh water from a cistern on the wall. You could turn the water on with a small brass cock and then the waste was piped overboard.

Mother particularly liked the bells hanging outside the doors of the cabins. When rung, each had a distinctive sound so that the steward in his pantry would know who required his services. She turned and followed me above.

Soldiers and convicts milled about on the wharf, waiting to unload the cargo. The prisoners wore the standard convict attire of grey calico trousers with buttons on the side, which allowed them to be worn over leg irons; plus a shirt, grey jacket and leather cap. The clothes were stamped with broad arrowheads indicating they were government property; the word 'felon' was printed on the jacket. The captain edged the *James Watt* towards the end of the wharf. Two sailors threw ropes to waiting convicts and the captain ordered the engines stopped as the boat was secured at its berth.

I wanted to be first ashore. I shot off the boat onto the stone jetty, nearly knocking one of the convicts into the water. It was Grayson, though I didn't know his name at the time. He was a big man, even bigger than Father. Caught off balance he stumbled backwards towards the edge of the wharf. He twisted his head around and saw the dark water beneath him. He was afraid; he couldn't swim and he knew the sea was infested with man-eating sharks. At the last moment, he managed to grab a post to stop himself falling.

"You little bugger," he muttered. He recovered quickly and leapt at me, but I ducked out of his way.

"Lay off, Grayson," called one of the soldiers, "or you'll feel the bite of the whip!"

The soldier need not have struck Grayson, but he thrust the butt of his rifle in his rib. The convict grunted with the pain, rubbed his bruised flesh through the rough tissue of his prison garb. He glared at me, but kept his distance.

I was shaken, and as quickly as I could I joined the rest of the family as they disembarked, and watched the convicts transfer our luggage to the much smaller pilot boat. Father's eyes were drawn to a sizeable stack of timber which he said was red cedar, a valuable cargo. He would supervise its loading on the *James Watt* for its return trip to Sydney. We hadn't properly arrived yet and he was already at work.

"Get back to your job," said the soldier, once again pushing Grayson with his rifle. The convict cursed and then he made his way onto the boat to help unload. I could see he was hampered by a pain where the rifle butt had struck. He looked at Father. "Petrie," he said. His eyes swung from Father to me and back, then he was gone.

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The following morning, the family made their way down to the wharf. Stars were still visible as the eastern sky brightened, the dull grey of night gradually transmuting into a rust-flecked dawn. It was August and the air was brisk.

Convicts, Grayson among them, sat waiting at the oars. The pilot boat headed into the bay and we were soon passing islands of mud and coral covered in low scrub. Gulls, gannets, sea eagles and cormorants, amongst others, rent the morning air with their cries and dove into schools of fish that flashed below the sun-burnished water. As we crossed a broad swathe of ocean grass in a shallow area, I saw a strange creature in the crystal-clear water. "Look at that thing," I cried. "What is it?" I asked nobody in particular. The huge, slate-grey fish was many times bigger than myself. It swam lazily, feeding on the lush green grass which it chewed with its large rough lips. It propelled itself through the water with its fluked tail and used the flippers just behind and below its head to manoeuvre. Cow-like eyes presided over a snout shaped like that of a mournful bulldog.

"The blackfellas call them dugong," said the pilot. "Some of them are huge, up to ten feet long, but they're mostly harmless. They're good eating, if you ever get the chance."

The mood on the boat sobered as we approached the low-lying, dense green shore. In the distance to the north, small, spikey hills poked at the sky. We glided smoothly between sand and mud banks where numerous birds waded in the shallow water looking for a meal. A pelican landed with a flutter of its huge wings, a fish tail sticking out of its distended bill. We passed an island on our left where I saw a number of aboriginal people sitting around a fire just up from the beach.

At last, we turned into the river proper where mangroves stood like strange creatures anchored to the mud by a tangle of sinewy legs. As the sharp blue of the sky narrowed above us, the dank odour



of decay exuded by the vegetation and mud permeated the air. Beyond the thick river growth, ancient eucalypts and tall pines lined the horizon.

Father recognised one tree and pointed it out to me. “That’s the hoop pine,” he said. “It’s used extensively for ships’ spars, houses and furniture.” The widespread stands of pine in the area had been a major factor in the decision to settle, first at Red Cliff Point on the bay and then the present site further inland. As he embraced the scene around him, Father remembered a convict he had met in Sydney. The man had been at the original settlement and had told him of his trip up the river to the new site at Brisbane. He had described it as a “veritable garden of Eden.”

The river and surrounding bush teemed with life; I heard whistles, hoots, chirps and many other unknown sounds that filled the air around us. I watched spellbound as long-beaked kingfishers darted and swooped, their scarlet breasts flashing. A family of black swans sailed gracefully by, while a flock of noisy, multi-coloured lorikeets squawked overhead. Occasionally, I caught glimpses of dark figures in the areas where the bush was thinner; smoke drifted in lazy columns from hidden campfires. Every now and then, a burst of golden incandescence broke the verdant monotony—a winter-flowering wattle tree, father informed me. Its perfume wafted across the water.

Progress was slow and tedious as sand bars and the tides delayed the boat’s passage. “At this rate it will be night before we reach the town,” I complained to no one in particular. At the start of the trip, I had been fascinated by each new vista. I had watched my three brothers take their place at the oars—in later years, they would be quite good at rowing and winning races on this same river. But as the day dragged on, I grew weary and bored.

It seems cruel to me now, but behind my parents’ backs, safe in the knowledge he couldn’t touch me, I made faces at Grayson, the man whose injury I had helped to cause. The rest of the family was absorbed by the scenery. I was six, and it seems I had already forgotten how frightened Grayson had made me feel at the wharf.

Suddenly, a black man appeared at the edge of a clearing on the bank, watching the boat advance along the river. The soldiers tightened their grip on their rifles and kept their eyes on the figure, ready to fire at the least provocation. There could be more of them hiding in the trees, I thought with apprehension, but also I was glad of the diversion.

I focused Father’s telescope on the aboriginal who stood motionless, as though planted in the ground; he was a young man and well-built, his head covered in ebony curls. The dark eyes that stared back at me. I can remember that his probing gaze made me uneasy, as though it was the black man holding the telescope and looking inside my head. I examined the strong face, the broad forehead and nose, the heavy lips encased in a beard; his chest was beaded with horizontal lines of scars.

Through the telescope I could see two vicious-looking spears the black man was holding in his right hand. A band of string made from kangaroo hair (as I would later learn) encircled the man’s waist, holding a long, curved piece of wood in place; otherwise, he was naked. I glanced at my mother who had raised her hand to her face as though to block out the sight. He must be a warrior, I thought. I instinctively moved closer to Mother as the boat pulled slowly past him.

The man on the shore was Dundalli, whose name means “wonga pigeon.” Many years later, he laughed when he told me of his detailed assessment of our craft and its passengers. First, he had carefully scrutinised the red and white-clothed soldiers holding their muskets in readiness. He then examined the rowers leaning into their oars and sweeping them back for another stroke that propelled us. He could see by their dress that most of them were convicts.

He noticed me looking at him. The big man at the front, three youths, a young girl and a woman who was probably their mother, were the only other passengers. More and more whites were coming to his traditional land and Dundalli was not happy. Some of his people thought they were the *magui*, ghosts of ancestors returning to the heart of their family, but he did not believe it. The discussions around the campfires had been long on this subject, but he knew the ancestors would never act the way these strangers did, with no respect for the law. The elders had told him to observe and do nothing. For the moment, he did as ordered.

For once, I sat quietly. I had seen blacks before in the streets of Sydney, but no one like the man on the shore. I looked to see what my father was doing. By the time I returned my gaze to the shore, the man was gone.

As the boat pulled out of range of where the black man had been, everyone relaxed a little, but all eyes surveyed the scrub on the banks with some trepidation. Then the river began to twist and turn upon itself. The sun was low in the western sky when we passed cultivated land on the bank to our right and high brown cliffs lined the water to the left. We rounded yet another bend to the welcome sight of the settlement. A number of small craft were plying back and forth across the river.

My tiredness vanished as we drew towards the river bank. Before me stood the town of Brisbane, a harsh prison, miles from any other form of civilisation, inhabited by some of the worst criminals England had produced. I appraised the buildings and the layout of my new home. To the right of the wharf lay a long narrow shed my father told me was the boat house. A substantial two-storey building made from stone stood about fifty yards further back, huddling into the hill that wrapped it on three sides. I listened as my father explained that it had taken ten convicts, working in irons it must be said, four months to dig out the rock and to lay the foundations for what was the Commissariat Store where the colony's provisions were jealously guarded. A road ran away to the left up the slight grade. Above it on the rise stood a magnificent fig tree that I imagined climbing. With its massive buttress roots and trunk, it towered like a sentinel, dwarfing the one-storied building that housed the chaplain. The commandant's house was along the ridge to the right of the Commissariat. I had watched Father study crude plans of the town in Sydney before we left and the layout of the colony was sketched in his mind. He pointed out and named each of the buildings. Sounds of hammering and sawing came from our left where the road from the wharf ran past the military barracks and the lumber yard. This would be the focus of Father's attention for some time to come. Further along the river bank were the hospitals for the soldiers and convicts and then the surgeon's house. In the distance behind the lumber yard, the convict barracks loomed, a forbidding stone structure some three stories high and about one hundred yards long, surrounded by a high wall.

A team of oxen hauling a huge load of timber crawled down towards the wharf, their hooves churning the dust. The bullock driver cracked his whip above the heads of his beasts and whistled at them to keep moving. On the top of a ridge just beyond the settlement stood the squat conical shape of a windmill, the giant sails immobile despite the fresh breeze. Gangs of convicts guarded by soldiers—the aboriginals called them 'diamonds' because of their red and white uniform—toiled in the vegetable gardens to the rear of the buildings.

I had conjured up visions of the settlement as a smaller version of Sydney, but that was definitely not the case. Our new home was tiny in comparison, no more than a scratch on the sub-tropical landscape where luxuriant forests and scrub pressed in upon the township, threatening to swallow it. Despite a sense of mild disappointment, I was eager to explore and to get to know this place.

Father had warned that strict rules would apply. There was to be no fraternising with the convicts or aboriginal people and we were never to go about the colony alone or leave its confines. Father had reassured Mother that the large garrison of soldiers would guarantee our safety. As I was to learn, Brisbane had been, and still was, a harsh, cruel place for the convicts.