

## 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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# Rabbit-Proof Fence

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*“We followed that fence, the rabbit-proof fence,  
all the way home from the settlement to Jigalong.  
Long way, alright. We stay in the bush  
hiding there for a long time.”*

Molly Kelly (born Molly Craig), aged about 79

*To all of my mother’s and aunty’s children  
and their descendants  
for inspiration, encouragement and determination.*

Doris Pilkington Garimara,  
daughter of Molly Kelly

DORIS PILKINGTON GARIMARA

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# Rabbit-Proof Fence

*Retold by*  
Jennifer Bassett



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*Map by Gareth Riddiford*

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## NOTE ON THE LANGUAGE

There are many varieties of English spoken in the world, and the people in this story speak a variety of Australian English that sometimes uses non-standard forms (for example, *gunna* for *going to*, and leaving out auxiliary verbs such as *are* and *is*). This is how Doris Pilkington Garimara, the author of the original book, represented the spoken language that her mother and her aunties actually used.

# THE FENCE

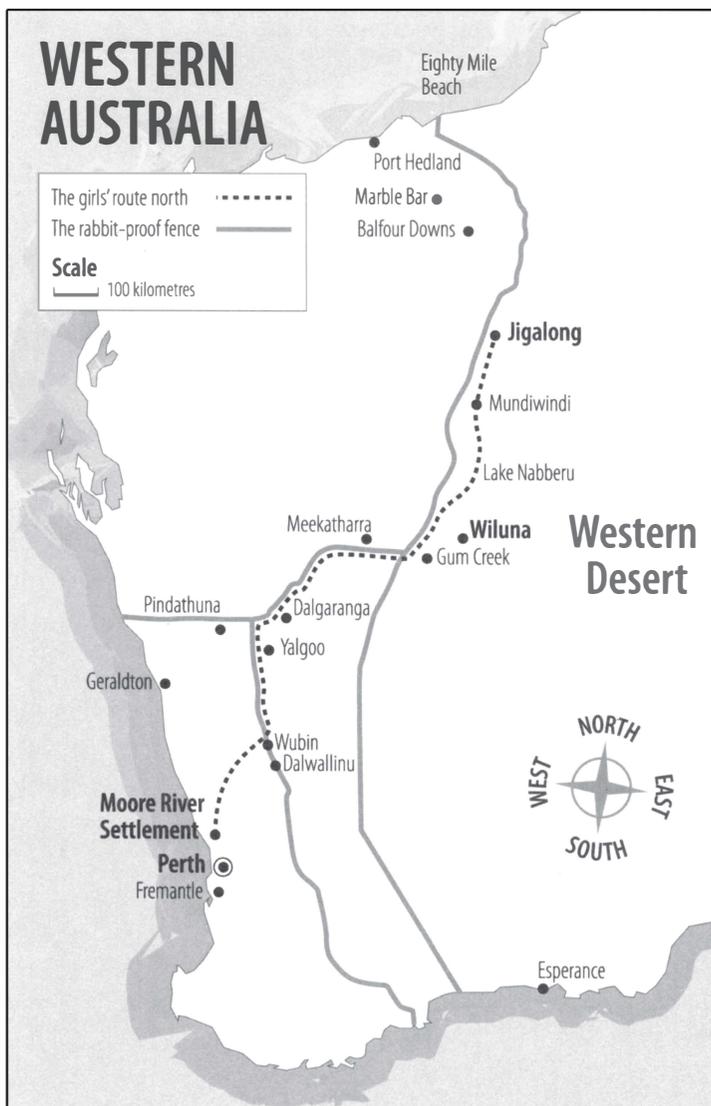


**IT WAS 1,834** kilometres long, and ran from the Southern Ocean near Esperance in the south, to Eighty Mile Beach north of Port Hedland on the north coast.

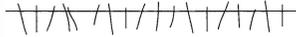
It was built in 1907, to keep the rabbits out of Western Australia. When the white man first arrived in the country, he brought strange new animals with him – horses, cows, sheep . . . and rabbits. Before long there were thousands and thousands of rabbits, eating all the grass meant for the cows and 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.

## Rabbit-Proof Fence



## 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.

‘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 . . .



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

*Growing up at Jigalong*

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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

*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



*'Find the three half-caste girls at Jigalong and bring them in.'*

## Leaving Jigalong



IN JULY 1931 the rainy season was a good one. For the Mardu people in the Western Desert, this was the time for taking long walks in the bush, hunting for bush food, and cooking it over fires at night.

Molly and her two cousins enjoyed living in the bush. They picked yellow flowers from the trees, and put them in buckets of water to make a sweet drink. They ate girdi-girdi, a kind of kangaroo, and damper, a flat bread cooked in the hot ashes of the fire. The weather was beautiful – warm, but not too hot, with a deep blue sky behind the shiny, grey-green leaves of the trees. When the rains were over, the heat of the sun would burn the land brown and dry, but for now everything was bright and new and green. It was a good time.

Early one morning everybody was having a breakfast of damper and tea when the dogs began to bark.

‘Shut up!’ shouted Maude, throwing a stick at one of them.

The dogs went quiet, but soon began to bark again. All eyes turned to look through the trees, and there, on a low hill behind them, stood a tall white man, looking down at them. He wore a uniform, with a wide brown hat.

‘Who’s that?’ said Granny Frinda, the girls’ grandmother.

‘It’s that policeman from Marble Bar,’ said Maude, staring at him. ‘Riggs . . . Constable Riggs.’

*Rabbit-Proof Fence*

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The policeman began to walk down the hill towards them. He was holding a piece of paper in his hand.

Maude stood up, suddenly afraid. She knew what was going to happen. The last time she was at Jigalong Depot, Mr Hungerford the superintendent had warned her that the police were looking for the half-caste girls.

‘I’ve come to take Molly, Gracie, and Daisy, the half-caste girls,’ Riggs called out. He held the piece of paper higher in his hand, to show them. ‘They have to go to school, at the Moore River Native Settlement. The law says so.’

The oldest man in the family, the grandfather, nodded to



*‘Get in the back,’ said Riggs. ‘Hurry up!  
We’ve got a long way to go.’*

show that he understood what Riggs was saying. Maude held Molly close to her, and began to cry.

‘Come on, you girls,’ Riggs ordered. ‘Don’t worry about taking anything. We’ll pick up what you need at Jigalong.’

The three girls stood up, scared and miserable. They followed Riggs back up the hill, through the trees, to his car. Behind them they could hear their family crying, calling out the Mardu words of pain and grief.

When they reached the car, Riggs got in. The girls stood silently, too frightened to speak.

‘Come on,’ Riggs said. ‘Get in the back. Hurry up! I want to get started. We’ve got a long way to go.’

He drove away slowly over the rocky ground. The family left the camp at once, and began walking back to Jigalong. They went quickly, but Riggs was already driving away when they came near the depot.

Mr Hungerford came out to talk to them.

‘Why they take our girls away?’ Maude shouted. ‘Why? Why? Why?’ She was angry and crying at the same time.

‘It’s the law, Maude, you know that,’ said Mr Hungerford. ‘It’s to give the girls a better chance, send them to school, so they can make a good life for themselves.’

Alf Fields, Gracie’s white father, was standing silently near the side of the depot building. Gracie’s mother Lilly saw him and ran over to him. She screamed at him in two languages, and beat his chest with her small hands.

‘Why didn’t you stop them?’ she cried out.

‘I couldn’t,’ said Alf Fields. ‘The policeman was just doing

his job – doing what the law tells him to do. If I try to stop him, they’ll put me in prison.’

Lilly wasn’t listening. ‘You’re a white man too,’ she cried. ‘They’ll listen to you. Go and talk to them.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said sadly. ‘There’s nothing I can do. I can’t stop the government taking our daughter away from us.’

Lilly turned away. Then she fell to the ground, and began to shout and cry. ‘Worrah! Worrah! Worrah!’

Old Granny Frinda and the other women joined in.

‘Aieee, aieee! They have taken our little ones away! Aieee, aieee, aieee . . .’

Long after the car had disappeared, the cries of the Mardu women rang out over the desert, calling for their daughters and their granddaughters to come back to them.

+++++

The journey took several days. First they went north, a long day driving on dirt roads full of holes. Once or twice Constable Riggs shouted over the noise of the car engine:

‘You girls alright back there?’

But those were the only words he spoke. He did not tell them where they were going, or what would happen next. By the end of the day the girls were too tired to cry, and they spoke only in whispers to each other, sitting close together on the back seat. Sometimes they slept, then woke again, to stare out of the car windows, full of fear for the future.

When they arrived at Marble Bar, it was late and the sky was black with rain clouds. They slept the night in the police station there, and the next day a different policeman took

## *Leaving Jigalong*

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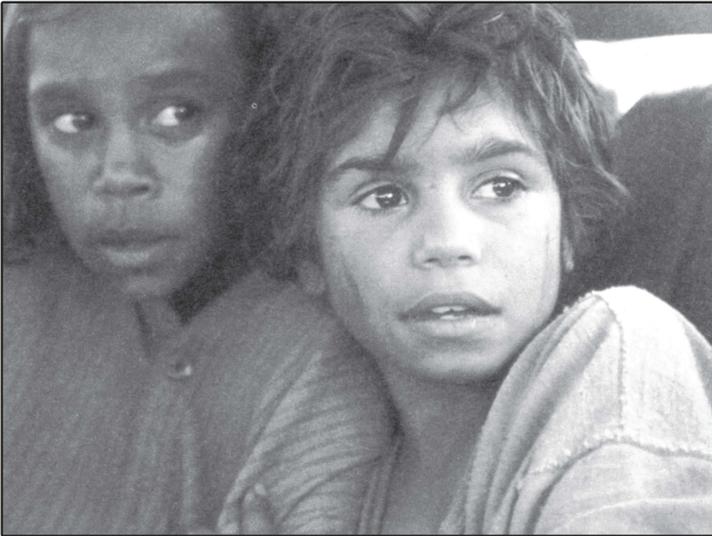
them by train to Port Hedland on the north coast. They went by car from the railway station down to the ship.

Children who have lived all their lives in the Western Desert have never seen the sea. Gracie and Daisy stared out of the car window at the ship.

‘We going on that?’ whispered Gracie.

The policeman laughed at their scared faces. ‘Yes, you’re going down to Fremantle by ship. You’ll like it, you’ll see.’

For five days they sailed down the coast of Western Australia, and when they stopped being scared by the movement of the sea, the girls did enjoy it. It was warm and sunny, and the people on the ship were kind to them. One of



*Gracie and Daisy stared at the ship.  
‘We going on that?’ whispered Gracie.*

the women took care of them, and they became friendly with George, a sailor, who taught them the English names of the stars and told them about his travels in far-away countries.

As they sailed south, the weather changed, and when they landed in Fremantle, it was wet and cold and grey.

Fremantle frightened them. It was so big, so noisy, so crowded. They had never seen so many white men in one place before. They were driven to Perth, which was bigger and noisier and even more frightening. And all the time there were new people meeting them, taking them here, taking them there, talking to them, asking questions.

‘We’re from Jigalong,’ Molly would say to all these strange new faces looking down at them.

Jigalong was home. Jigalong was where their mothers were. Jigalong was a long, long way away . . .

†††††

At last they arrived at Moore River Native Settlement. In the government plan, this was going to be their home for several years. Here they would learn to be European, learn the white man’s ways, learn to forget their own people and the wide, empty, beautiful Western Desert where they were born.

It was dark when the car stopped. They got out, and a woman came towards them through the rain.

‘Come with me,’ she said. ‘I’m Miss Evans, I take care of the girls here. I’ll take you to your dormitory. This way.’

They followed her to a wooden building, and watched as she unlocked the big padlocks on the door. Inside they saw a long room, full of beds with shapes under grey blankets.