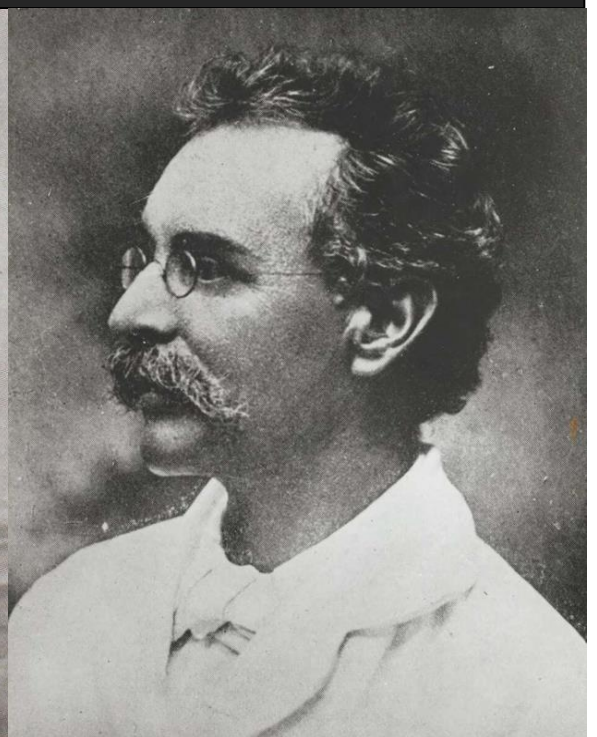
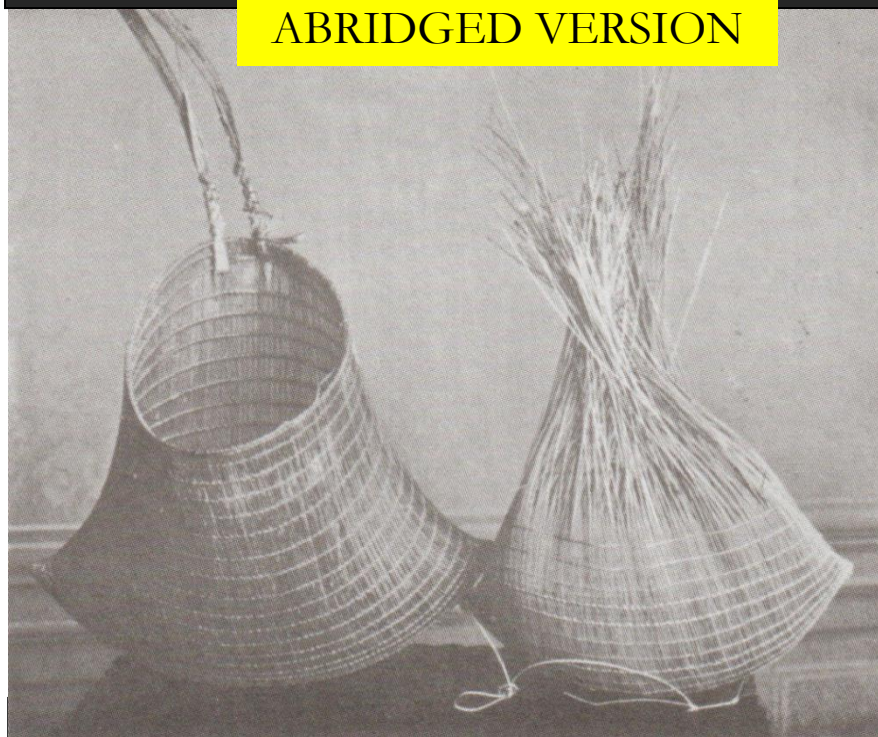


ACCORDING TO BANFIELD
ABORIGINAL LIFE
ON THE TROPICAL COAST

ABRIDGED VERSION



By HELEN PEDLEY

With FOREWORD and AFTERWORD by LEONARD ANDY,
DJIRU TRADITIONAL OWNER

Published by

Mission Beach Historical Society Inc.

Document AB31 Version 1.

Website: mbhs.com.au



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First published by MBHS Inc., in 2024.

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This is an abridged version of the story. The full story includes references, language lists and images as well as many of Banfield's observations of Indigenous life.

Cover Images

Upper images Left to Right: Nellie, "District picaninnies", Tom.

Lower images Left: from E.J. Banfield's "Confessions of a Beachcomber", Dilly Bags. Right: Edmund Banfield, 1901, aged forty-nine, National Library of Australia, 22946128.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The words *Aboriginal people* and *Aborigines* are used with no intended disrespect. These names are based on the Latin, *ab origine* “from the beginning”. Similarly, “Old People” (past traditional owners, especially of pre-colonial times) is a term of respect which their descendants often also use.

Occasionally, derogatory terminology is found in this work, in quotations from past writers. Terminology of the nineteenth century writers is not appropriate today. It has only been retained in direct quotations where they are useful. The thinking of the times is recognised; terminology is a reminder of this.



E.J. Banfield, in 1922



Leonard Andy, Djiru Traditional Owner, 2024.

FOREWORD by LEONARD ANDY DJIRU TRADITIONAL OWNER

It is called shared history, but there are two different stories and only one interpretation.

Statements of former authors are very seldom questioned and are being used and re-used over and over. Aboriginal people are a minority. The dominant majority doesn't need to recognise that people have the right to question that authority. They never had rights and why should they? What was written 100 years ago is still used today. It hasn't been questioned and why is it starting today? Banfield, for example, made many assumptions, which were never verified. At that time, there was no way to argue with white men.

Often not speaking, or agreeing with white people's perceived views was a way to protect traditional knowledge.

Many other Indigenous peoples were brought to the area. The information recorded was given by Indigenous peoples who were not from the area and kept being used without verification.

Being forcibly removed from our country and families, also discouraged from speaking our traditional language, deeply affected the retention of traditional knowledge.

THE NORTH QUEENSLAND TROPICAL COAST

Between Cairns and Townsville in Far North Queensland, lies a region where the tropical rainforests of the mainland and offshore islands meet tropical inshore waters. This ecologically rich environment includes the traditional home of the Djiru people, comprising coastal land and adjacent sea between Maria Creek to the north and Hull River to the south and extending inland westwards to the canefields of El Arish. Now known as the Mission Beach area, with islands such as Dunk and the Family Islands off the coast, it is located in the humid wet tropics of North Queensland and lies some 120 kilometres south of Cairns. This beautiful part of North Queensland saw the Aboriginal inhabitants dispossessed of their land by colonial settlers within a few decades during the second half of the nineteenth century.

One who observed some of this cultural depredation in later years was Edmund Banfield, a journalist who lived on Dunk Island from 1897 until his death in 1923. He recorded his observations in journals and wrote many articles that appeared in newspapers and books, throughout his life on the island. Calling himself the “Beachcomber”, he was especially interested in the natural world around him, and also took special note of the skills displayed and information given to him by the Aboriginal people who worked for him or visited the island.

His records of Aboriginal culture and life as he observed it are of interest as they describe aspects of the lifestyle and knowledge of the First People who lived in the region at that point in time. His books and articles were widely read and popular in his day and continue to be re-printed and digitally available today. However, it is not useful to accept his writing about Aboriginal people without looking carefully at underlying premises and historical context.

Badtjala woman, Fiona Foley, observed: “the power of history written down can be both lethal and deceptive... history recounted by non-aboriginal people can be fraught through the use of repetitive historical inaccuracies that are a whitewashed or sanitised version of events”.

Deeper examination of Banfield’s work can to some extent limit the dangers of unquestioning acceptance of the assumptions he made in a context of patronising colonialism. The dispossessed people Banfield observed were adapting their lifestyle in order to survive and had been doing so for many years.

EDMUND J. BANFIELD

Edmund James (Ted) Banfield was born in England in 1852 but grew up in Australia where he came with his family at the age of two. He became a journalist like his father and worked on newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney before moving to North Queensland to work on the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* in 1882. Due to illness, he sought a quiet life on an island retreat, so he and his wife, Bertha, took up a lease on Dunk Island in 1897 after visiting the island and adjacent coast the previous year.

On Dunk, he continued to write articles for newspapers including the *North Queensland Register* and the *Northern Miner* as well as the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*. Some of these appeared under the name of “Beachcomber” or as “Rural Homilies”. Subsequently, he published three books recounting the life on this tropical island, his most famous work being “The Confessions of a Beachcomber” published in 1908.

Officials visiting the region generally called on Banfield since Dunk Island was a significant landing point for this area. Banfield spoke of meeting the Chief Protector of Aboriginals on his yacht, *Melbidir*. He knew Protector W E Roth personally and was well aware of his ethnographic publications. Banfield also

knew and met with Roth's successor, Protector Howard, on his visits to assess where the site for the new Government Settlement for Aboriginals should be located. Howard took notice of Banfield's local knowledge when he selected the Hull River site (now South Mission Beach), and Banfield accompanied him in 1912 when he walked to the proposed site twice, once through floodwaters. Banfield loved solitude but was not a recluse.

Banfield was a product of his era and he wrote in florid Victorian style which was then much enjoyed by his readers. He wrote at a time, in the early 1900s, when the British Empire was a triumphant colonial power, and some might say his work was from a colonially tainted perspective. The Aboriginal people were considered to be a dying race and the White Australia policy was ascendant. To some extent, Banfield looked on the Aboriginal people as wayward children.

"It was common to welcome 'the passing of the Aborigines' as an indicator of colonial progress, a measure of achievement". The late nineteenth century interest in ethnography was nurtured by the expectation that the tribes were dying out and losing their culture. "The unique Stone Age culture was important because it was archaic, doomed and far removed from contemporary civilisation".

Banfield's books were popular. He became an established author of world renown. In 'Confessions of a Beachcomber' he expressed "as few men before him ever had done, a great love for [the Aboriginal people] and a delight in their humour, whims, fancies and their wildly imaginative explanations for such phenomena as the presence of the stars in the sky". His apparent "insight into the Aborigines" was "one of the main appeals of his books, and one of their greatest achievements".

His works include observations of "Stone Age" folks, the "dwindling race", "uncouth savages" and "barbarians". He wrote that in "Tropic Days," "again an attempt is made to describe – not as ethnological specimens, but as men and women – types of a crude race in ordinary habit as they live, though not without a tint of imagination to embolden better truths".

While Banfield thought the people were "generally unprogressive and uninventive," he also lamented their adoption of wire for fishhooks instead of continuing to craft pearl shell hooks as they had in the past. Yet he gained some insight into Aboriginal culture, philosophy and knowledge through his personal interaction with those he met on Dunk.

As pointed out above by Djiru Traditional Owner, Leonard Andy, Banfield's observations are limited.

By Banfield's time, the ravages of colonisation had decimated the local Djiru population. During Banfield's residence on the island, the Government Aboriginal Settlement at Hull River was established in 1914 as a result of the 1897 "Aboriginals Protection" Act. This Act ensured the control, segregation and punishment of First Nations People, and led to Aboriginal people from many other places also being forcibly brought there, and later taken to Palm Island. The loss of traditional knowledge, language and culture continued to be devastating.

The picture available from Banfield's work is not that of how society would have looked before 1788, but rather impressions of how a few people had coped with untenable brutality. A casual reader might assume, incorrectly, that Banfield's writings about traditional life here are definitive. He himself only claimed "the present purpose...is merely to relate commonplace incidents and the humours of today". He offered "a few side-shows and character sketches... in the attempt to interest and entertain".

A biography by Noonan (1983) tells Banfield's life story.

ABORIGINAL FRIENDS

A journalist, Banfield was not only a keen observer of every aspect of the natural world around him, but also had an awareness and interest in the activities and traditional skills of his Aboriginal workers on the island, and the stories they told. His diaries reveal the Banfields depended on a succession of male and female Aboriginal workers to clear the scrub for their home and garden, chop wood, and provide food by collecting shellfish, harpooning fish, dugong and turtle.

While Banfield had a benign curiosity about Aboriginal life, he was also a colonial product of his time. His impressions “could not help but be ‘tinged’ by the decidedly racist attitudes prevailing in Australian society at the turn of the century”. In the ‘Confessions’ he headed the final chapters, “Stone Age Folks”: a sure insight into his assessment of their culture. He wrote of their implements as “relics of a remote past elsewhere are here in everyday use and application. The Stone Age still exists”. He described some of the toys the people made under the heading “young barbarians at play”.

To an extent, his comments re-invested their material culture with European meanings. In presenting the people as “stone age” or primitive, he not only blurred the real conditions of their existence, but also effectively justified contemporary government policies of paternalistic regulation, where “Protectors”, white men who were their legal and moral guardians, were tasked with controlling native behaviour and life by force as required.

Banfield wrote that Tom was “but little blemished by contact with white civilization”, which might lead a casual reader to expect all Banfield wrote of Tom’s knowledge and skills to be so-called pristine ethnographic data. More careful reading reveals this is not correct.

From Banfield’s writings, a picture can be gleaned of cultural knowledge retained by certain Aboriginal people despite years of destructive white contact. Much of this picture came from Tom, who Banfield also says, was “as much at home on top of a bloodwood tree cutting a ‘bee nest’ as in a frail bark canoe fishing... All the ways and habits of fish, and their favourite feeding-grounds, are to him an open book”.

Tom was, according to Banfield, “one of the few survivors of the native population of the island,” while his wife, Nellie, was from the mainland. He had lived on the mainland for some years prior to the Banfields’ arrival, but he returned to Dunk to work for them.

Banfield believed that for several years prior to their arrival, no Aboriginal people had been resident on the Island; the visits of the descendants of the original owners had been irregular and brief. “Therefore... most of the evidences of the characteristics of the race had, in the course of nature, been obliterated. A few frescoes adorning remote rock shelters, a few pearl shell fishhooks, stone axes and hammers, a rude mortar or two... Shells on the site of camps, scars of stone axes on a few trees – those were the only relics of the departed race”. However, later, Ted also remarked that “a few of the original inhabitants preserved their uncontaminated ways”.

Tom met Banfield and his wife on their very first visit and when Ted and Bertha returned to take up their lease, Tom, with his wife, child and mother-in-law, again arrived to assist and be of service. Tom told Banfield how his father was “king of this realm”. He often pointed to a spot where a huge green turtle harpooned by his father had been “kummoaried” on the sand. Banfield noted that Nellie, Tom’s wife, was from a mainland tribe. Nellie was of the “oongle-bi” “totem”. Nellie’s country bordered

the beach of the mainland opposite Dunk. “Oongle-bi” was a rock on the summit of a hill on the mainland not far from her birthplace.

Banfield was saddened when Tom took up activities detrimental to his health. Banfield found Tom on the mainland near Mourilyan Harbour, where he had succumbed to a combination of rum and opium, the “intruders’ evils” but did not wish to return with Banfield. A few months later, in a drunken quarrel with a half-brother, Tom suffered a spear wound. Inspector Galbraith visited Clump Point and district at this time and heard about Tom from Mr Unsworth, who gave him “a splendid character” and informed him Tom lived with the Cuttens’ Aboriginal people but did not work for the Cuttens. Rather, he gained a living by catching and selling turtles but had been speared in “a fair fight” over a woman. Galbraith found Tom lying down in his “humpy”, very ill, and had him carried on board the steamer and taken to Townsville for medical treatment, but he died in Townsville.

When Tom died, Banfield wrote of him: “a citizen impossible to replace... a true lover of the sea, his knowledge of the plant life of the coast was remarkable. He was an Australian of the purest lineage and birth... a man of brains, a student of Nature, who had stored his mind with first-hand knowledge unprinted... a hunter of renown... by the flowering of trees and shrubs so he noted the time of the year”.

By the time Banfield was observing and talking with the Aboriginal people who came to Dunk, Cardwell had been settled for over 35 years. A troop of Native Police had patrolled the area for a similar time, carrying out reprisals and “dispersals” of Aboriginal people as they deemed appropriate after various confrontations. The Cuttens had been in residence for some 15 years, running their plantation at Bingil Bay. The Cuttens, the Porters and others used local Aboriginal labour allowing camps on their properties. The lifestyle of the local people had been totally disrupted and numbers decimated.

Banfield’s work could never be a full picture even had that been the intent. Perhaps it was too little, too late, yet treasures of knowledge can be found. To some extent Banfield failed to clarify what information pertained only to Dunk Island people and what pertained to mainland Djiru or other people, but by his time, the people had adapted to the incursions of the white intruders and inter-tribal marriages as well as residence outside of personal country was a more frequent and necessary occurrence than in traditional times, although interaction and socialising between tribal groups of the region regularly did take place in pre-contact days. Tom had spent a lot of time on the mainland and knew the ways of mainlanders. He had a mainlander wife, Nellie, as well as having knowledge of Dunk itself. While the mainland adjacent to Dunk is indisputably Djiru country, Tom was himself a Warrgamay man.

Banfield was told that Tom and Nellie spoke different languages, and he collected a list of words from each of them for some common English words. Linguist, Bob Dixon, studied both Dyirbal, from the 1960s on, and southern neighbouring language, Warrgamay, interviewing remaining speakers of the latter in 1981. He concluded that the people of Hinchinbrook Island, the Bandjin people, spoke the Biyay dialect of Warrgamay. While he was able to record passages and vocabulary from several people, he concluded the material he could provide on Warrgamay was “rather slim”.

Banfield wrote in 1908: “Five or six individuals with their sparse offspring represent the remnant of the considerable population which inhabited Hinchinbrook Island, the Brook Group, Goold Island, the Family Group and Dunk Island, and this deplorable loss has taken place within thirty years. As far as my knowledge goes, only one death of a Dunk island native has occurred within the last ten years”.

Tom had spent a lot of time on the mainland with Djiru and other Dyirbal dialect speakers and would have known several dialects. It is also known that neighbouring people all understood each other's dialects. They travelled to *brun* (ceremonial gatherings) in neighbouring country regularly from a young age and continued to hold *brun* when they could after the white incursions.

Tom provided Banfield with much cultural information and examples of activities. However, Banfield's diaries list other Aboriginal Informants: Nellie, Jinny, Mickie, Toby, Sambo, Willie, Charlie and others. Banfield praised the knowledge of these practitioners: their bushcraft, knowledge of habits of birds, insects and the ways of fish were enviable. It is important to keep in mind that some of the cultural information Banfield documents is not necessarily from Djiru people but may be from people with a heritage from elsewhere on the coast.

BANFIELD and the HULL RIVER SETTLEMENT

Banfield also watched when Aboriginal people were taken against their will to the Hull River Settlement from 1914 on. This Queensland Government Settlement was established subsequent to the 1897 Act which purported to "protect" Aboriginal people and prohibit the sale of opium.

Banfield had assisted Government officers with the choice of site for the settlement, which was supposed to bring protection and benefit to the Aboriginal people. He wrote that when the settlement was definitely known to be proceeding, "most of the blacks in the immediate neighbourhood disappeared". They had dreadful past experiences of measures by "big fella Gubberment" and heard rumours that it would be a prison (put about by the Chinese and others). Also, rum and opium would not be allowed at the settlement. A resident on the Tully River "calculated about 60 blacks fled, including picaninnies".

The Aboriginal people were shipped to the settlement from Cardwell via Dunk, and "it upset Ted deeply to see them coming ashore from ketches and steamers to be herded on the sand-spit before being taken across by smaller boats to the home none of them seemed to want" at the new settlement on the mainland across from Dunk.

On the other hand, Banfield subscribed very much to the theory of "smoothing the pillow of a dying race." As the "original lords of the soil have been badly treated by usurping and arbitrary whites, the establishment of an institution where the few remnants of local blacks and others from distant districts will be assembled for their own good and benefit seems an act of belated justice." The settlement, he thought, "may be said to represent a sort of chapel of ease wherein the public conscience is appeased by acts of consideration to a relic of a race soon to pass away".



People at the Hull River Settlement before the cyclone of 1918 (Annual Report of the Chief Protector, c.1916).

Nellie, Tom's spouse, was sent to the Hull River Settlement, having been "found under the protection of a coloured alien, sadly degenerated and saturated with opium. For her own salvation she was transported to the settlement" but this was not her country, so she determined to run away. She trudged and clambered through the jungle for miles until "B'mbi catch'm Liberfool Crik [Liverpool Creek]. Plenty fella sit down. He bin sing out, 'Hello! You come back from that place?' Me bin say, 'Yes, that country no good belongs me...". A month or so after, Nellie was again found in the service of a coloured alien, tugging away with another weak gin at what she calls a "two-fella saw." For her task of sleeper-cutting her reward would probably be a handful of rice and a dose of opium per day".

In the 1918 cyclone, the camp on the beach where most people lived was destroyed. "Before dark, huge seas began to sweep over the frontal ridge and before long raced with terrific fury four hundred yards to the foot of the hill on which the residence [of the Superintendent] stood. Nearly the whole of the huts and humpies were demolished, the blacks waist deep, being hustled by the surges until they struck sound and rising ground. One boy was at this stage of the cyclone drowned; one woman was swept to and fro, being carried almost to safety, and then back to the beach over the site of the burial place. The graves were scooped out or sunken, and the terrified shrieks of the living could be heard by those whose houses were falling about their ears mingling with the savage outcries of the storm. Several of the blacks were cut and bruised during this period... and all spent the night in hopeless misery and dejection".

In fact, we do not know how many people lost their lives in the cyclone here: official records differ. Banfield's account lists five; there were probably many more. Two days after the storm, Banfield wrote, "most of them seemed to have recovered from the shock ... in a casual aimless sort of way [they] repaired their humpies or sat idle in the sun or gathered in groups to talk... It was evident that the exposure had not done the denizens of the Settlement any great harm".

On the other hand, perhaps he did not perceive how the people were already thoroughly demoralised and so alienated by their past and recent history and experiences that this stoical front was the only response available to them.

DISAPPEARANCES

Banfield was aware that the numbers of Aboriginal people had greatly declined: "less than a couple of decades past they swarmed on the mainland opposite Dunk Island. Now the numbers are few." He also knew why.

"Within sight of Brammo Bay is the scene of an official "dispersal" of those alleged to have been responsible for the murder of some of the crew of a wrecked vessel, who drifted ashore on a raft. One boy bears to this day the mark of a bullet on his cheek, received when his mother fled for her life, and vainly, with an infant perched on her shoulders."

It was not only the Native Police and their white officers who accounted for diminishing numbers. Some white settlers had other methods. "In those days 'troublesome' blacks were disposed of with scant ceremony. An incident has been repeated to me several times. A mob of 'myalls' (wild blacks) – they were all myalls then – was employed by a selector to clear the jungle from his land. They worked but did not get the anticipated recompense, and thereupon helped themselves, spearing and eating a bullock, and disappeared. After a time, the selector professed forgiveness, and the fears of the blacks of punishment having been allayed, set to work again. One day a bucket of milk was brought to the camp at dinner-time and served out with pannikins. The milk had been poisoned. "One fella feel 'em here," said my informant,

clasping his stomach. “Run away; tumble down; finish. ‘Nother boy run away; finish. Just now plenty dead everywhere...”

Banfield mentioned it “as an instance from the bad old days when both blacks and whites were offhand in their relations with each other”. Ever hopeful, he wrote that “such episodes are of the past. The present is the age of official protection, with perhaps a trifle too much interference and meddlesomeness.”

However, he went on to cite two other cases. “Two blacks of the district confessed upon their trial that they had killed their master for so slight an offence as refusal to give them part of his own dinner of meat.” An instance of the callousness of the white man is then noted. “In a fit of the sulks one of the boys of the camp threw down some blankets he was carrying and made off into the scrub. It was considered necessary to impress the others... a strange and perfectly innocent boy appeared on the opposite bank of the creek. The ‘boss’ was a noted shot, and as the boy sauntered along he deliberately fired at him. The body fell into the water and drifted downstream. One of the boys for whose discipline the wanton murder was committed related the incident to me.”

In addition, Banfield connected another factor to the demise of the Aboriginal people. “Many have been hastened away from the world by a new and seductive vice. Chinese cultivators of bananas found the blacks useful and rewarded them with the ashes from their opium-pipes... its effects were terrible. The fiery liquors of mean whites, and diseases contracted from the depraved, killed off many of the original lords of the soil. Opium was supplying the finishing touches...”

“No doubt during the last ten or twelve years, the population has absolutely decreased – the increase of the Chinese corresponding with serious diminution on the part of the blacks. Where now one sees 3 or 4 blacks – all working for the Chinese – were scores of more or less happily fishing in their native state. The poor remnants – dull and depraved – are significant examples of the desolation of the race by contact with the Chinese”.

THE BEACHCOMBER

Banfield could be thought of as ahead of his time in his advocacy of preserving and conserving the unique environment in which he lived. He could be considered a colonialist intruder. He was certainly a keen observer and recorder of nature and of humankind at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Banfield’s works were widely read at the time and continue to be available. While in circulation they must have been somewhat effective in nurturing a certain view of indigenous lifestyle with white readers over the years. Yet with Dixon, it could be said: “that in reading colonial texts, it is a mistake only to read against them, denouncing their racism and misogyny from the high moral ground of the present”. From such works we can also recover other things: the sense of ‘captivity’, sense of wonder, fascination and enchantment”. Banfield’s descriptions of his island “paradise” certainly do this.

He and Bertha came to Dunk Island a number of years after the Aboriginal populations of the islands and mainland had been decimated by the diseases brought by white people and by the ruthless actions of the Native Police and others. They had been forced off their traditional country by the spread of white settlers, losing access to traditional foods, resources and their spiritual homelands and social networks. They had been driven to seek work with the interlopers as a survival strategy, although addiction to opium and alcohol then became another abhorrent factor in their demise.

Nevertheless, the treasures of information Banfield recorded are an indication of the vast store of knowledge and expertise that was the heritage of the Aboriginal people of the tropical coast. Despite their sad past, Banfield provides his personal snapshot at one point in time when the survivors struggled to maintain a determined resilience. It is an indication of a culture that had thrived and adapted for thousands of years.

AFTERWORD
by LEONARD ANDY
DJIRU TRADITIONAL OWNER

Information gathered in the past being used over the years without ever checking the facts is a potential source of error and bias in many fields and domains.

Collecting data is the first step and anyone needs to ensure the accuracy of the information. Inaccurate data can have far-reaching negative consequences.

People like Banfield are dangerous for our cultural security. The information he recorded and published is not questioned. He did it for himself, to show how he would be perceived in the Mother Land. He didn't do it for the Aboriginals, or for the environment.

It is so important to review and verify any information collected. In doing so, mistakes and misunderstandings can be avoided.

Information from multiple sources and perspectives need to be compared and experiments or tests need to be conducted to validate hypotheses or assumptions. Any information needs to get evaluated for accuracy, relevance, timeliness, and credibility.

A culture of truth and evidence must be supported and promoted.