Marrngu men and women (local Aboriginal people in the Nyangumarta language) tell the story of their successful three-year strike to decolonise the Pilbara in this monumental history by Anne Scrimgeour. Oral history recordings, conducted by Scrimgeour and transcribed and translated into English by Barbara Hale and Mark Clendon, enable marrngu to speak truth to the deeply racist, violent, colonial power systems so well documented in the historical record. Extensive research, eloquent and nuanced analysis, new arguments and captivating story-telling make this a truly great historical work.

The opening chapters juxtapose marrngu experiences of European settler violence – mass killings that secured Aboriginal land and labour for sheep and cattle stations – with pastoralist and Department of Native Affairs (DPA) mythologies that depicted Aboriginal people as childlike and in need of paternal benevolence. Such mythologies were used to justify control over every aspect of Aboriginal people’s lives. Friendships were built between marrngu and walypila (white people) but relationships were ‘always framed by the structure and practice of power’ (38).

By the 1940s, marrngu station workers were subjected to exploitative informal labour relations: poor (or no) wages, overly-parsonimous rations, inadequate accommodation and severe restrictions on their movements and access to Country, underpinned by the Native Administration Act. Billy Thomas (Pitpit) explained: ‘We’re doing more work than whitefellas. He’s sitting down there and writing that he’s doing that, but we’re doing that, not him. We don’t get paid for that. We live on rough tucker and never treat us proper way (40).’ If marrngu complained, tried to leave, or stayed away too long, pastoralists called in the police who violently rounded workers up, often in chains, for jail. Thomas reflected: ‘They were the boss for us. Always, you know, frightened of them. Treat us like animal’ (41). Pastoralists were also required to notify the DPA of children born of mixed descent, who were then removed from their marrngu families by police to achieve ‘generational dilution of Aboriginality’ (31). These horrific conditions gave rise to the strike.

The idea for a strike was hatched in conversations between Kitchener (Nyiyaparli speaker), Clancy McKenna (Warntupungkarna) and their walypila workmate Don McLeod during the war. McLeod courted support from white campaigners in the south, especially the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). DNA racist assumptions held McLeod solely responsible for the strike and his links to the CPA were used to dismiss his representation of Aboriginal concerns. Scrimgeour respectfully (because he was a constant battler for Aboriginal rights) decentres McLeod from the historical narrative and returns the strike organisation to marrngu (78). As McKenna states: ‘McLeod gave us hint about the strike and we took it up’ (94). The strike, premised on demands of increased wages, better working conditions and the right to choose their own Protector (McLeod), was set for May Day 1946.

The limited success of isolated station strikes led marrngu to develop collective ways to strike. Pastoralists, police and DNA officials responded with the usual coercive measures – arrests, imprisonment and removal of strike leaders, but this galvanised a campaign spearheaded by the Committee for Defence of Native Rights (with support from the ACP), which led to their release. Dooley and McKenna led marrngu into a new strategy: walking off stations to join strike camps with non-violent strategies to resist police and NDA intimidation. ‘All got to be in one’, Crow said (185). When McLeod was arrested again, marrngu strikers marched into town and demanded his release. As Scrimgeour argues: this ‘represented a further transgression of spatial constraints that underpinned settler control and Aboriginal marginalisation’ (182). Scrimgeour examines the Twelve Mile and Moolyella strike camps, their organisation, leadership, economics and Tommy Sampie’s school. Arrests, imprisonment and removal continued to be the key response of the DNA, but legal challenges
and changes in DNA personal and policy (from ‘protection’ to ‘assimilation’) began to undermine these control systems.

In 1948, most strikers at Twelve Mile camp negotiated a return to station work for £2/10/- per week for men and £1/- per week for women, with written agreements, a significant victory. Local settlers and the DNA attempted to undermine Sampie’s Twelve Mile school. However, a trespass notice issued in January 1949 had to be withdrawn when further strikes were threatened.

The strike continued at Moolyella and leaders ‘insisted that prospective employers approach them to negotiate wages and conditions before engaging workers’ (390). When pastoralists ignored this, strikers collected workers from those stations, and police then arrested, chained up and jailed strikers. The horrific treatment of Aboriginal people attempting to negotiate collectively gained the support of the Seaman’s Union who threatened a black ban on wool. When another ten strikers were arrested, the DNA finally stepped in to try and diffuse the situation. Sydney Elliott-Smith and Dave Pullen met with strikers and McLeod, recognising them as a collective for the first time, and entered into an agreement: those arrested were dismissed without charge and strikers agreed to halt their actions for three months to enable Elliott-Smith to negotiate wages of 30/- to 70/- per week for Aboriginal workers with pastoralists. McLeod broke this agreement, which got Elliott-Smith offside, but marrngu proceeded to negotiate this wage rate themselves and returned to work in late 1949. As Scrimgeour concludes: ‘[t]he victors of the strike were the marrngu’ (455).

Not all returned to pastoral work, a large number from Moolyella joined McLeod in mining ventures across the Pilbarra that would earn enough to purchase Yandeyarra and two other stations in the 1950s. ‘From the strike would grow a confident, autonomous and, for a few years at least, prosperous Indigenous social and economic organisation developed by marrngu on the foundation of the continuation and adaptation of Aboriginal social, cultural and religious mores’ (463–4).

Anne Scrimgeour died in January 2020 in Heidelberg, Germany, after a year-long battle with leukemia. I am thankful to Anne’s husband Mark Clendon, who informed me that her passing is mourned by the Nyangumarta people with whom she worked as teacher and historian, and by her community of professional historians of Aboriginal Australia. Anne Scrimgeour’s historical works include: ‘Notions Of Civilisation and the Project to “Civilise” Aborigines in South Australia in the 1840s’, History of Education Review 35, no. 1 (2006); “‘Battlin’ for their rights’: Aboriginal Activism and the Leper Line’, Aboriginal History 36 (2012); ‘Leprosy, Labour and the “low wage line”’, History Australia 9, no. 3 (2012); ‘This Man’s Tracks: Laurie O’Neill and Postwar Changes in Aboriginal Administration in Western Australia’, Aboriginal History 38 (2014); “‘We only want our rights and freedom” The Pilbara pastoral workers strike, 1946–1949’, History Australia 11, no. 2 (2014); “‘Strike Strike, We Strike”: Making Aboriginal Domestic Labor Visible in the Pilbara Pastoral Workers’ Strike, Western Australia, 1946–1952’, International Labor & Working-Class History 88 (Fall 2015).

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