

Making history: Torres Strait Islander railway workers and the 1968 Mt Newman track-laying record

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On 8 May 1968, in the red desert of Western Australia's Pilbara region, workers on the Mt Newman railway construction project, contracted to Morrison-Knudsen-Mannix-Oman (MKMO), broke the world record in track laying. In one day they laid, spiked, and anchored 4.35 miles (about 7 kilometres) of track, breaking the previous record of 2.88 miles (4.6 kilometres) set in the United States in 1962.¹ The *Hedland Times* reported that this historic event was due to 'the talents of [MKMO's] engineers in developing new machines and techniques with the best skills of its rail laying crew'. Most significantly, the article pointed out that this crew was 'largely composed of Thursday Islanders'.²

While few Australians are aware of this historic event, within the Torres Strait Islander community the track-laying record is well remembered and celebrated. Stories are passed down to family members through anecdotes and songs, with memories triggered by precious photographs and mementoes. The telling and re-telling of the event draws from many first-hand accounts which have been passed from one generation to the next, with the stories augmented by family photographs and songs, both those sung by the railway workers and new songs commemorating their achievements. More recently, there have been a number of local, grass-root initiatives to celebrate the track-laying record through memorial, film and song. My own contribution is an oral history project entitled *Laying the Tracks: Torres Strait Islanders in the Northern Railways*, which will document the history of Torres Strait Islander involvement in the northern Australian railways between the 1950s and 1970s. This article explores the uses of memory in the construction of history, and traces the little-known history of the Torres Strait Islanders' track-laying record through the use of historical documents and an interview with a former railway worker, John Culear Kennell Snr.

Memory and history

The relationship between memory and history is complex and often contentious. While memory is dependent on *what can be remembered*, history's primary focus

1 'Rail laying breaks record', *BHP Review*, Spring 1968: 16-21.

2 'New World Record at Mt Newman', *The Hedland Times*, 16 May 1968.

is on *what happened* and the extent to which the past can be substantiated by documentary evidence. Where academic history is generated through extensive research and critical analysis, memory is reliant on the mind's recollections and as such, it is often cast as unreliable, selective, or faulty. While history is championed for its perceived objectivity and universal authority, memory has been castigated for its subjectivity and inability to deliver irrefutable factual knowledge. The development of the oral history method as a tool for the 'democratisation' of history and for recording 'history from below' has, however, contributed to a closer affiliation.³

In discussing the tensions between history and memory, social historian and oral history scholar Paul Thompson argues that instead of viewing memory and history as oppositional, it is far more productive to see them as 'doing the same things, perhaps with a different emphasis'.⁴ Thompson proposes that personal memory is 'the thread of every individual's life history', and as such is central to how individuals understand 'themselves and their own sense of both history and self'.⁵ Public history, he argues, is the modern version of this, 'the functional equivalent to the traditions passed down orally in non-literate societies but now transmitted in a much more complicated way'.⁶ While they may differ in their scope and sophistication, memory and history are both undeniable ways of relating to and relating the past.

Turning to the documentation of Indigenous history in Australia, the passing down of stories through the generations has played an extremely significant role. Whether documented in the form of oral histories, life stories or testimonials, memory has contributed to a considerable and growing body of work. Examples include Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle* (1987), Deborah Bird Rose's *Hidden Histories* (1991), Peter and Jay Read's *Long Time Olden Time* (1991), and Nonie Sharp's *Stars of Tagai* (1993). While scholars can and do take issue with each other over how oral histories are collected, interpreted and used, the publication of these studies contributed to an opening up of the academy to the rich potential of Indigenous memory and recollections of the past. Additionally, the burgeoning field of Indigenous life writing, such as autobiographies, family biographies, and memoirs, is a powerful indication that memory and oral history continue to provide a critical avenue for Indigenous people to speak about their own experiences. In Oliver Haag's examination of the development of Indigenous Australian autobiographies, he lists 177 published works between 1950 and 2004.⁷

The problem of how to establish truth in oral accounts can also beleaguer the work of historians. Thompson argues that since memory is prone to containing both facts and myths, it is important to both believe and doubt oral accounts. Historians should, he argues, 'make use of what we can believe and also of what

3 Attwood 2005; Portelli 1998.

4 Thompson 1994: 2.

5 Thompson 1994: 2.

6 Thompson 1994: 2.

7 Haag 2008.

we must doubt, and to bring the two together in a new interpretation which fuses both memory and history'.⁸ In a similar vein, in *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* Bain Attwood asserts that as historians began to grasp the complexity of the relationship of memory to the past, they have come to see that the greatest value of oral history lay in its capacity to provide 'something other than factual or documentary knowledge'.⁹ This, he goes on to argue, has allowed the development of works that are 'informed by the assumption that something of the truth of past events and/or their aftermath is evident in the manner in which they have been remembered'.¹⁰

Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose extends the discussion on truth in oral history by offering an example of how one Aboriginal community in northern Australia recognises truthfulness in oral accounts.¹¹ Drawing from her oral history research with the Yarralin people of the Northern Territory, Rose uses the term 'faithfulness' rather than truthfulness. She identifies three criteria for assessing the faithfulness of an account – place, presence, and genealogy. *Place* refers to knowledge of the location of the event, as this can determine who can speak about it and is also a form of proof. *Presence* refers to whether the speaker is giving an eyewitness account of an event. *Genealogy* denotes that if it is not an eyewitness account, the speaker can identify who told the story and whether or not that person was an eyewitness. Rose argues that in the conscious deployment of these criteria, Aboriginal standards for faithfulness are not 'inconsistent with the kinds of criteria Western historians bring to bear on historical sources'.¹²

Alessandro Portelli has argued for the capacity of oral histories to 'enlarge' historical knowledge.¹³ They can, he suggests, provide historians with new ways of thinking about the past; their underexploited value resides in their power 'to tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'.¹⁴ Viewing oral accounts in the ways suggested by Portelli encourages us to think beyond mere recollections, to explore people's motivations and the layers of meaning they attach to the events they witnessed or in which they participated.

The stories of the hundreds of Islander men who in the 1960s travelled to work on the railways in northern Australia are no doubt imbued with nostalgia and most certainly with pride for what they were able to achieve. If we take up Portelli's challenge, we are sure to find much, much more. The men were moving onto the Australian mainland at a time of tremendous social and political change for Indigenous people. They were also leaving behind a place where for decades government practices included, in Martin Nakata's words, the 'control of labour,

8 Thompson 1994: 12.

9 Attwood 2005: 174.

10 Attwood 2005: 175.

11 Rose 2003.

12 Rose 2003: 125.

13 Portelli 1998.

14 Portelli 1998: 67.

finances and freedom of movement and restrictions on consorting with others'.¹⁵ In the red dust of the Pilbara, far away from the Torres Strait, the men were part of the large multi-national workforce, pocketing their earnings and 'making a name' for themselves.

In the accounts of former railway workers and their families, little comes close to the 1968 track-laying record. This singular event has captured the imagination of Islanders and its memorialisation underscores Islanders' determination that it not be forgotten. The efforts of the many Islander men in railway construction and the celebrated 1968 record might also be read as a 'natural' progression, given their fathers, uncles and grandfathers before them had also been hard working manual labourers in the Strait's fishing and shelling or marine industry.

Torres Strait Islanders and labour

Incorporation of Torres Strait Islanders into the regional labour force began in the marine industry with the small-scale harvest of beche-de-mer or trepang. After the first pearling station was established on Tudu (Warrior Island) in 1868, Islander labour was increasingly sought after. As pearl and, later, trochus shell began to be harvested in commercial quantities, the industries became reliant on Islander labour, which was both local and cheap.¹⁶ In the main, Islanders were employed as crew on pearling and fishing boats, often working under South Pacific Islander skippers and from the late 1890s, with Japanese divers on the pearl luggers.

In an effort to promote Islander self-reliance, a former member of the London Missionary Society, FW Walker, established Papuan Industries Limited (PIL) on Badu Island in 1904.¹⁷ The company gave Islander families and clans the opportunity to purchase their own boats, paying them off as they sold their harvest. Looking to service those islands that PIL could not, the Queensland government established a parallel agency and before long Islanders from all over the Strait began to buy luggers and cutters. Known as 'Company boats', Islanders became owners working as equals alongside the private operators, the 'Master' pearlers for whom they had previously crewed. When PIL folded in 1930, the Queensland government took control over all Company boats, and Islanders were soon working to the stringent conditions set by the government.¹⁸ In early 1936, a general strike unfolded across the region as Islanders refused to work the government fishing boats. Protesting against the increased control over Islanders' lives, their demands included freedom of movement, the right to run their own affairs, choice over where and with whom they could work, and better pay rates.¹⁹ Jeremy Beckett described the strike as the 'first organised Islander challenge to European authority', and while the government made

15 Nakata 2007: 131.

16 See Beckett 1987; Sharp 1993; Shnukal et al 2004.

17 Beckett 1987; Nakata 2007; Sharp 1993.

18 Beckett 1987; Sharp 1993.

19 See Sharp 1993 for a detailed analysis of the 1936 strike.

changes, which included convening the first conference of Islander Councillors in 1937, they retained control of the Islanders' boats and wages.²⁰ By the late 1930s, the Director of Native Affairs reported that 510 men had been employed in the marine industry in the 12 months to December 1939, with 26 Company boats employing 378 men.²¹

The Second World War interrupted Islander employment in the marine industry. The Australian government requisitioned large vessels for defence purposes and immobilised smaller vessels for fear they may fall into the hands of enemy soldiers.²² With the war on their doorstep and no other job prospects, many of the men signed up with the defence forces. At the end 1942, 730 men had enlisted and during what became known as 'army time', Islander service men got to be part of a much bigger world, working alongside white soldiers and often doing the same work for less pay.²³

The end of the war would see many of the men return to work the fishing and pearling boats, but they had been exposed to a different world during 'army time', and this experience had changed them. Although Islanders were now 'allowed' to live on Thursday Island, and were being incorporated into a post-war version of colonialism in the region, rates of pay in the marine industry and for those who remained in the defence forces continued to be a source of discontent. Beckett argues that the recollections of 'army time' and of those who ventured to the mainland and experienced 'equal wages and freedom from supervision' added further to Islander dissatisfaction.²⁴ As a consequence, more and more Islander men sought permission to work on the mainland.

In 1948 approximately 80 Islander men were recruited to work as cane cutters in the Gordonvale area of north Queensland.²⁵ Others followed this initial group of cane cutters, as a decline in the marine-based economy in the 1950s saw a growing number of Islander men out of work and with few long-term local employment prospects. The Annual Reports of the Department of Native Affairs from the late 1950s to the early 1960s registered the governments' concern over the long-term sustainability of the trochus and pearling industry and the consequences for employment in the region.²⁶ In June 1955, the Director of Native

20 Beckett 1987: 54-55.

21 Queensland Home Secretary's Department 1940, 'Report upon the Operations of certain Sub-Departments of the Home Secretary's Department - Aboriginal Department, Information contained in Report for the year ended 31st December, 1939', RS 25.4/3, Online collections, Stolen Generations, To Remove and Protect [hereafter OC SG TRP], AIATSIS.

22 Queensland, Director of Native Affairs 1943, 'Native Affairs - Information contained in Report of Director of Native Affairs for the twelve months ended 30th June 1943', RS 25.4/3, OC SG TRP, AIATSIS; Hall 1995.

23 Hall 1995; Beckett 1987; Nakata 2007.

24 Beckett 1987: 84-85.

25 Queensland Department of Health and Home Affairs 1948, 'Native Affairs - Information contained in Report of Director of Native Affairs for the Twelve months ended 30th June 1948', RS 25.4/3, OC SG TRP, AIATSIS.

26 Queensland, Chief Protector of Aboriginals 1957, 'Native Affairs - Annual Report of Director of Native Affairs for the year ended 30th June 1957', RS 25.4/3, OC SG TRP, AIATSIS; Correspondence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Queensland State Archives, Item

Affairs reported that approximately 800 Islanders had moved onto the North Queensland mainland. The Department had reported that Islander men and their families had left their home islands 'of their own volition ... to seek work in the cane fields, the Railways Department's service and other vocations'.²⁷ By 1965, the same department reported that 200 men were employed in railway work on the Queensland mainland.²⁸

While the departmental reports cited above give some context for the movement of Islanders onto the mainland, they do so from the perspective of the Queensland government. They offer glimpses of bureaucratic processes for sourcing employment for Islanders on the mainland and for monitoring their movements once they left the Torres Strait region. Other documented sources include news stories, which in the main, painted a picture of Islander physical prowess and an imputed suitability for hard manual work under an unforgiving sun. Little has been documented about this history from the point of view of Islanders themselves.

Yet the collective memory of Islanders is replete with stories of adventure and achievement. Those interviewed for the *Laying the Tracks* project described how some of the men would adopt pseudonyms in an effort to evade detection by officials of the Queensland Department of Native Affairs. Young Islanders would also add a few years to their real ages, having learnt from others that some contractors wanted only adult workers. Venturing onto the mainland made for many exhilarating experiences, and the stories of these railway men continue to be told today. A recurring theme in these stories is the 1968 track-laying record.

Remembering Torres Strait Islander railway workers

The efforts of Islanders to commemorate the 8 May 1968 track-laying record reveal the esteem with which many Islanders view this event. While 1 July recognises the arrival of missionaries in the Torres Strait in 1871, and 3 June marks the anniversary of the *Mabo 2* Native Title decision in 1992, there is a nascent movement towards adding 8 May to the calendar of Islander celebrations.

To date, there have been two key attempts to memorialise officially the 8 May 1968 track-laying record. In mid 1992, in response to requests from a Port Hedland Torres Strait Islander organisation, BHP donated the Goodwin-Alco M 636 locomotive engine (No. 5499) as a commemorative gift, in recognition of the significant contribution of Torres Strait Islander men on the Port Hedland to Mt Newman railroad construction project. With the ongoing support of BHP, the Commonwealth's Department of Environment and Heritage, the Australian Railway Heritage Society, and a Perth-based Torres Strait Islander organisation,

ID715731.

27 Queensland Chief Protector of Aboriginals 1955, 'Native Affairs - Annual Report of Director of Native Affairs for the year ended 30th June 1955', RS 25.4/3, OC SG TRP, AIATSIS.

28 Department of Native Affairs, Correspondence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Annual Reports 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, Queensland State Archives, Item ID715731.

the engine was transported to Perth, restored, and is now housed at the Rail Transport Museum at Bassendean in Perth.²⁹ The second and related activity focused on the state's north coast. Port Hedland is at the shipping end of the Mt Newman railway line, and it is here that Islander community members in northern Western Australia requested that a sculpture be erected in recognition of Islander railway workers. Originally planned to mark the 40th anniversary of the track-laying record on 8 May 2008, budget constraints have delayed its construction and installation. Torres Strait Islanders in Western Australia remain determined, however, to see the statue erected in the near future.³⁰ Significantly, these memorials were initiated by Islanders, many of who are former railway workers or are the children of former railway workers. The permanent and public nature of the memorials are a powerful means of inserting the contributions of Torres Strait Islander railway workers into the public history of the development of the mining transport infrastructure in northern Western Australia.

Taking the story of Islander railway workers to a wider audience was also an objective for Indigenous filmmaker Kelrick Martin, who released *Island Fettleers* in 2006.³¹ The 25-minute documentary tells the story of Tom Saylor, who left Erub (Darnley Island) in the 1960s to work in the Pilbara. Saylor's story gives a sense of the challenges he and presumably many Islander men faced in coming to terms with the heat and isolation of the Pilbara. Unlike many of the Islander men who left at the end of the major construction jobs to 'chase' lucrative contract work, Saylor married a local woman and made his life in the Pilbara. His recollections of railway experiences are interspersed with comments about how he and his family were able to build and maintain a sense of 'islanderness' in the Pilbara. In making the documentary, Martin cited the importance of being able to tell an Indigenous story from an Indigenous point of view. Having grown up in Broome, about 600 kilometres north of Port Hedland, Martin recalled hearing fragments of stories of Islander railway workers in his youth, and hoped that after viewing the film, audiences walked away with a 'newfound respect for Torres Strait Islanders' and some sense of having 'learnt a previously hidden episode of Australian history'.³²

Adding to the numerous stories, there are also many songs that recall the experiences of the Islander railway workers. In 2005, Grail Films in Townsville produced *Eastern Torres Strait Islander Railway Songs*, which recorded some of these songs and several dances. The songs are performed by a group of Murray Islanders in Torres Strait *Broken* and the *Meriam* language of Mer (Murray Islands). With titles such as, 'Hammersley Iron', 'Mt Isa Line', 'Goods Train E', the songs identify the many places where the men worked and their work conditions. The singers include Elemo Tapim, who provides translations and comments on the songs, which he says acknowledge the hard times, but also celebrate the good times of railway life. Although the songs 'are not written in

29 G Pitt, pers comm, 25 August 2009.

30 G Pitt, pers comm, 25 August 2009.

31 *Island Fettleers* 2006.

32 Core Films Pty Ltd 2006.

a book', Tapim states, they are 'written in our minds'.³³ His participation in the recording also exemplifies the three criteria identified by Rose as being important for establishing truthfulness or faithfulness in oral histories. Having worked in the railways in Western Australia and Queensland for close to 25 years, Tapim is familiar with many of places that the songs relate to and he is able to identify the songwriters and the context for many of the songs. He also acknowledges that recording the songs contributes to the ongoing transmission of the history.

More recently, inspired by stories about the 1968 track-laying record, Thursday Island band Northern Xposure recorded the song 'Railway Kebele' as a tribute to the Mt Newman tracklayers. The lyrics include the following verses:

I pick 'em up and lay 'em down
I turn those sleepers around
We have lots of miles to go
But we cannot leave.
We have broken the world record,
In blood, sweat and tears
We salute those who have passed on
But their memories are here.³⁴

The song expresses a long-held and high regard for the 1968 tracklayers, and their perseverance and commitment to finishing what they had been contracted to do. Another project that draws inspiration from the 1968 track-laying record is a musical production being developed in Queensland. In 2007 a community-based arts group began working with Islander musicians, singers and actors, conducting workshops with Torres Strait Islander communities around the country. The group is developing a script and writing the music and lyrics for a musical production to be based around the record-breaking event.³⁵

These community-based initiatives proffer diverse ways of commemorating the efforts and achievements of Torres Strait Islander railway workers, contributing an added component to the memory and oral histories, what Bain Attwood calls 'memorial discourses'.³⁶ With the exception of the musical production, they were conceived by and continue to be directed by Indigenous people, predominantly Torres Strait Islanders. As Islander railway stories are told in songs or on film, these grassroots initiatives demonstrate that the memory of Islander involvement in northern Australian railways is very much alive in the minds of Islanders and is re-remembered and augmented in numerous ways. The projects described above reveal the profound admiration that many Islanders have for the 1968 track-laying record makers.

33 *Eastern Torres Strait Islander Railway Songs* 2005.

34 Northern Xposure 2008: 'Railway Kebele' track 2.

35 'Railway history', *Torres News*, 20 April 2007.

36 Attwood 2005: 172.

Breaking the record

In October 1967, the American-Canadian consortium, Morrison-Knudsen-Mannix-Oman (MKMO), began construction on the 427 kilometre (265 miles) rail link between Port Hedland and the Mt Newman iron ore mine at Mt Whaleback. The material, machinery and labour requirements of the project were enormous. The job required 870,000 sleepers and the first shipment was sourced from the south of the state, pre-cut to the 2.6 metre requirements and pre-drilled before being shipped to MKMO's Port Hedland storage yard. The total weight of the rail required was 62,100 tons and was transported by sea from Port Kembla in New South Wales. The 60kg/m lengths of rail were welded into strings of steel 440 metres long, stockpiled until required, and then loaded onto the steel carrying trains. The job also required 18,000 tons of anchor plates, spikes, rail anchors and other material. As the material requirements for the job were being organised, preparation of the rail bed was also being carried out. Six quarries adjacent to the railway sidings turned granite outcrops into the tons of ballast required to form the rail bed, the compacted base on which the rail is laid, as well as the material for bedding down the track once it has been laid. After watering and compacting, the surface is smooth and pavement-like and after being graded level, it was ready for track laying.³⁷

The workforce, which peaked at 1343 in June 1968, had a strong international constituency and included large numbers of Yugoslav, Greek, Italian and Portuguese workers. They were accommodated in air-conditioned pre-fabricated quarters in one of seven camps located along the length of the railroad. Torres Strait Islander tracklayers, who were invariably referred to as Thursday Islanders, comprised about one-third of the 137-man track laying team.³⁸ In March 1968, the tracklayers settled into a ten-hour day, working six days a week and the railway line snaked slowly out of Port Hedland and headed toward Mt Newman.

Local newspapers and popular magazines such as the *Australasian Post* documented the presence of Torres Strait Islander labourers in the railroad construction workforce in Western Australia. On 5 May 1966, the *Australasian Post* ran a story titled: 'Track layers from Thursday Island ... and they're the best'.³⁹ The story told of the movement of Islanders into Western Australia in early 1965 to work on the Perth to Kalgoorlie railroad construction and described the Islanders as 'tremendous workers, strong, willing, fast and efficient'. The previously cited *BHP Review* article described the Islander workers on the Mt Newman Project as 'the skill and brawn behind the operation', men who were 'fast becoming legendary figures of the Australian railroad construction scene'.⁴⁰ The article commended the workers for their 'skill in handling the heavy rail, their fitness, their rhythmic team work, their spiritedness and obvious pride in and enjoyment of their work'.⁴¹ For the Islanders, they took pride in their

37 *BHP Review* 1968; McIlwraith 1988; Mt Newman Mining Company 1969.

38 *BHP Review* 1968.

39 'Track-layers from Thursday Island... and they're the best', *Australasian Post*, 5 May 1966.

40 *BHP Review* 1968: 20.

41 *BHP Review* 1968: 20.

strength and ability. Many had made their way to Western Australia in 1965, capitalising on the reputation for physical strength and hard work forged on the Townsville to Mt Isa Rehabilitation Project with Hornibrook Construction in the early 1960s.

Of the Islander men who had worked on the Mt Newman Project, many are now in their sixties and seventies, and others have passed away. Despite the passage of time, a rich bank of knowledge about the Mt Newman job and the May 1968 track-laying record remains stored in the memories of former railway workers and their families. In 2008, John Culear Kennell was interviewed for the *Laying the Tracks* project. Mr Kennell has considerable experience in railway construction and was working for MKMO in the period that included the day of the track-laying record. It is his recollections about this event and other aspects of his railway experiences to which I now turn.⁴²



Fig 1. John Culear Kennell, Mackay, Queensland, January 2008.

Source: Reproduced with the permission of John Culear Kennell and Leah Lui-Chivizhe.



Fig 2. Islander track-layers positioning the 360 foot rail over sleepers on the standard-gauge railway line, Upper Swan, Western Australia, February 1965.

Source: © *The West Australian*.



Fig 3. Islander railway workers on the standard-gauge railway line, Western Australia, February 1965.

Source: © *The West Australian*.



Fig 4. Many Islander workers were flown by chartered planes between north Queensland and the Pilbara. There is little documentation on this image of workers in front on an ANSETT-ANA DC4. Based on the history of the aircraft, it is likely the image was taken between 1965 and 1966.

Source: Reproduced with the permission of the Shire of Roebourne, Local History Office, 2005.512.

John Culear Kennell remembers

Like many Islander men of his generation, John Kennell started working when he was in his teens. At 14, he became a deckhand on a pearling lugger in the Torres Strait and after several seasons joined the crew of a trochus boat skippered by his older brother, Jack. His brother's boat, owned by a Mackay businessman, worked the reefs adjacent to the Queensland coast usually as far south as Mackay, where Jack was living. When the shell price dropped in the mid 1950s, the Kennell brothers moved on to cutting cane on the Queensland mainland. Due primarily to the seasonal nature of the cane-cutting work, John Kennell took on other jobs. He worked building bridges for the main roads department before venturing into railway work in 1958. The short term contract work with the railway suited his circumstances, he said, enabling him to move between the railways and cane cutting. In a chance encounter with a cousin in Townsville in early 1961, Kennell got word that good money was being offered for labourers to work on the Townsville to Mt Isa re-laying project. He headed west and at Hughenden was signed-on by the contractors for the project, Hornibrook Construction.

His abilities and attitude to the work soon brought him to the attention of the bosses and he was quickly promoted to the level of gang supervisor. When the Hornibrook job ended in 1964, Kennell was instrumental in recruiting Islander men to work on the standard gauge project in southern Western Australia in 1965. He was one of the 100 or so men who travelled by train from north Queensland to Perth to work on the standard gauge project in the south of the state.

In early 1968, Kennell was recruited for the Mt Newman job and offered a position as a gang supervisor or foreman. Making his way to Port Hedland via Darwin, Kennell was astonished by the large numbers of Islander men he saw when he arrived in Darwin. Somewhere upwards of 50 men were waiting to be recruited for railway construction work in Western Australia. Kennell spent almost six weeks in Darwin, waiting out the wet season, before being flown to Port Hedland by MKMO.

The track laying for the Mt Newman job was undertaken by 137 men divided into a number of gangs according to the different stages of the track laying process. Of the gangs, the front steel gang, back steel gang and the ballast and surfacing gang included large numbers of Islanders and all three gangs were supervised by Islander men; Patrick Levi on front steel, John Kennell on back steel and Percy Mallie headed up the ballast and surfacing gang. Kennell recalled the track laying process in this way. As the 440 metre strings of steel were guided onto the sleepers, the front steel gang were responsible for manoeuvring the rail and sleepers into place before every fifth sleeper was fixed to the rail with spikes. The spikes, long heavy nails with an offset head, were driven into place manually or with a spiking machine. This allowed the train carrying the rails and other machinery to move forward and backward when required. The back steel gang had to ensure every sleeper was evenly spaced before completing the spiking and anchoring. Anchoring involved the use of machinery that clamped the rail to either side of the sleeper.

The final gang, the ballast and surfacing crew, were responsible for finishing off the job. A sledge machine was used to lift the track and distribute the ballast underneath the sleepers and additional ballast was spread between the sleepers. The rail was aligned and the ballast was tampered or packed down to give the track the most effective support and guard against buckling of the rail.

In the front steel gang, the crew of 12 or so Islanders had worked with Patrick Levi on the Dampier-Tom Price construction job that had finished around mid 1966. Levi's crew were as familiar with Levi's work approach, as he was with theirs. This would not be the case for John Kennell, however. When he first started on the Mt Newman job, Kennell was told that due to a fracas involving Islander workers on the Dampier-Tom Price project, no other Islanders, with the exception of Levi's gang and a few other men including his brother, would be employed by the firm. As a result, his gang of 30 was comprised predominantly of non-English speaking workers, many of whom he thought were Portuguese. Kennell knew from the outset that it would be an enormous challenge and the

gangs' inexperience was reflected in their performance. Over several days, Levi's front steel gang was setting the pace at 3.2 kilometres of track laying each day. At best, the back steel gang were managing to complete only half that.

One Friday afternoon a supervisor asked light-heartedly, 'John, couldn't you do your job'. Kennell quickly replied 'give me my Torres Strait Islanders, they know me and I know them'. About the pre-dominantly non-English speaking gang he supervised, Kennell said, 'they're good blokes, but they got no experience'. Experience aside, the language barrier, was also taking its toll. 'When I want a hammer, I have to draw it in the sand', Kennell said, adding 'I can't run back and forward, for 30 men'. After the brief exchange, the supervisor left, returning at around 5pm and said to Kennell, 'John, you win ... ring Darwin and bring them over ... the firm will pay the fares'. After the evening meal, Kennell rang a couple of the Islander men he knew in Darwin and told them: 'collect 30 boys, and go to the airport'. By Sunday afternoon, the newly recruited Islander workers were in camp and on Monday Kennell's back steel gang was reformed. The new gang was now a mix of Portuguese and Islander workers and to assist with his supervision duties, Kennell identified two leading hands, one of them Portuguese and the other, an Islander. With his new crew, the gang worked faster. 'By the time Patrick Levi reach the ballast pit', Kennell said, 'we right there, behind Patrick Levi'. With a different crew, Kennell had managed to significantly improve on the track laying time of the back steel gang.

An attempt at the world record had floated in and out of the conversations of the workers for some weeks, although no one was certain just where along the long stretch of line it would be attempted. Kennell had noticed that project supervisors were closely watching the work of the steel gangs. At one point he said, 'they swap us, put me on front steel and Patrick on my gang', believing that the supervisors did this to see whether the two gangs could work faster. Kennell later told the supervisor that the men in the front steel gang 'look forward to working for Patrick, just like mine look forward for me'. Clearly, there was some sense of loyalty among the men to the foremen they had signed on with. In terms of where the record might be attempted, Kennell was certain that the firm had long established the feasibility of such an attempt and in all likelihood had selected a stretch of track already.

On the day of the record, Kennell recalled being on site for the usual 6am start. As the track-laying crews readied themselves for the day, he noted the presence of several American and Canadian 'bosses'. One of the project supervisors approached Kennell and they talked about an attempt at the world record. When the supervisor said 'John, we have studied it, Patrick Levi will drop four mile of steel', Kennell's gut feeling that the crews were being readied for this day was confirmed. The supervisor went on to say that if the old record were to be broken, it would be almost totally reliant on Kennell's back steel gang. The supervisor told Kennell: 'because you've got so many thousand sleeper to be spaced, so many thousand sleeper to be plated, spiked and anchored ... the world record lays on the back, not the front'. Kennell knew this to be true. His crew of 30 men had more processes to complete compared with the front steel gang. With his

knowledge of the task and his experience of leading the back steel gang, Kennell knew that unless his crew were able to fasten the steel to the sleepers with both precision and speed, there could be no record.

Kennell was then asked if he required more men and was told to select whomever he needed. Kennell called for ten more men and said ““give me Mr Manaway” a South Sea Island man, he’s got this own men, bring them over, so when that ol fella come I tell him, “you look after anchoring, anchoring and spacing [in the] back””. After allocating tasks within his gang, he assembled his crew of 40 around him and said ‘the firm wants a world record today and it depends on us at the back’. With those words, the workers went to their work positions. As soon as the rail started being dropped by the front steel gang, Kennell recalled with pride, ‘you can see them boys move different, they move with one spirit’.

Buoyed by the prospect of setting a new record, the track-laying crews advanced quickly. By 11am, the front steel gang had managed to drop the first 3.2 kilometres of steel. Kennell had to move his men and machinery off the track to allow the empty rail wagons to be shunted back into the siding. His crew took a *smoko* break and the wagons containing the next load of steel were shunted into position. By 4.30 or 5 in the afternoon, Levi’s front steel gang had dropped the final quantity of rail and within an hour or so; Kennell’s back steel gang and then the ballast and surfacing gang completed their components of the job. At 5.50pm, close to 12 hours after they had started, 7 kilometres (4.35 miles) of heavy-duty standard gauge rail had been placed, spiked and anchored. A new record was set.

Back at their camp later in the day, the workers celebrated, the revelry lubricated by a keg of beer courtesy of the bosses. Kennell’s final comment about the track-laying performance of the men amounted to a quietly spoken, ‘it was a highlight for the boys’. He recalled that news of the new track-laying record was broadcast in the Western Australian press in the days following the event.

Conclusion: making history from memories

What is clear from news stories and the few official accounts of the Mt Newman Project is that Torres Strait Islander men played a critical role in the track-laying record in May 1968 and in the overall construction of the railroad. Using Kennell’s oral account, I have sought to show how his recollections can be used to construct a history of the Mt Newman Project and the track-laying record from the point of view of the Islander workers.

In terms of the veracity of his account, Kennell fulfils Rose’s criteria of *place* and *presence*. He is also named in magazine articles and several photographs of him appear in new stories and other accounts of the Mt Newman Project. Supplementary to Rose’s criteria, Kennell’s own efforts to record or perhaps remember the 1968 track-laying record included keeping lists of the Islander men in the track-laying crews, with details of the different roles of crew members. There is considerable overlap between Kennell’s list and another list

of Islander workers collected by the sister-in-law of one of men on the back steel gang. Kennell also provided numerous photographs taken during his time on the Mt Newman Project. While the lists of workers and the photographs provide avenues for corroborating particular aspects of Kennell's accounts, they are also rich sources of information that can be drawn on to flesh out and deepen our engagement with this little known history.

Over 45 Islander men worked on the track-laying gangs on the Mt Newman Project, and so it is to be expected that there will be multiple, potentially conflicting, narratives. Accounts may vary according to the ages of the men, the work they performed, and each individual's motivation for working on the Western Australian railroad. Yet it is possible to weave from their personal memories the beginnings of a collective history. Furthermore, the stories and recollections of the accompanying Islander spouses and children can position the men's stories in a familial, and potentially in a broader socio-cultural, context. For the men who have passed away, their stories, too, continue to be told by their children and other family members, instilling additional layers of meaning and complexity.

Within the personal memories and oral histories of Islander railway workers lies the potential for a powerful collective history of Islander migration and labour force participation. Writing this history is long overdue and a necessary act of recognition of the hundreds of Torres Strait Islander men, who for a time became railway workers, and who played an important if unrecognised part in the development of northern Australia.

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