PADDY ROE

GULARABULU

STORIES FROM THE WEST KIMBERLEY
At Julirri, OTS law ground, Paddy Roe with his great grandsons Daniel, Jason and Errol Roe, and their mother Janice, about 1989.
“A challenge, a delight...no short sample could give an adequate sense of the vivacious, artful naturalness of Paddy Roe’s recitations...a deeply beguiling book” – Chris Wallace-Crabb, *Times Literary Supplement*.

“A remarkable book...a new tradition in Australian Literature has just been born” – Bob Hodge, *Westerly*.

“Recommended to all who are interested in how Aboriginal identity came to be what it is, and as a sensitive evocation of Aboriginality as it was” – Annette Schmidt, *Meanjin*.

“To read this book is to be always moving somewhere else, away from the confines of Western literature, of settlement, and of the edifice of colonial thought.” – Stuart Cooke, *The Conversation*.
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**Introduction**

*This is all public.*
*You know [it] is for everybody:*
*Children, women, anybody.*
*See, this is the thing they used to tell us:*
*Story, and we know.*

Paddy Roe

Paddy Roe is celebrated as a storyteller in the great tradition of literature on the Australian continent, where each of the two hundred or so language families has its traditions of oral literature that go back many millennia. But what is generally recognised as ‘Australian literature’ is a recent branch of *written* English literature brought in by the colonists. So while Indigenous communities have maintained their ancient heritage in various types of song, performances, and epic narratives, it is overlaid by this new thin layer. Many Indigenous artists of the word continue their oral traditions as best they can under conditions of continued occupation of their lands, while others, educated in white schools, have taken up writing in English and making an impact in Australian literature.

The murmur of one of those great traditions has continued to sing through Paddy Roe, a Nyigina man
from Broome in Western Australia. He has recomposed these stories beautifully in English, taking up the challenges of a rapidly-changing world. Born in about 1912, he had seen the colonisers taking over his country, and his people losing direction and hope. So not only did he begin to guide his people by telling these stories, but he took the next step of getting me to write them down to reach an even wider audience.

Colonisation came a bit later to North-West Australia. At the end of the 19th century, people saw the newcomers arrive with their own animals and technologies, and aggressively impose them. They had their own stories to tell, and one was about modernisation and the power of the written word. They assumed oral literature and the experiences it recorded, some going back thousands of years, was weak and on the point of disappearance. They were not aware of the volume of material – hundreds of stories, songs and performances in every community, many of them now lost. They assumed, as they had in Europe, that ancient legends and superstitions would have to give way to modernity, even as they celebrated the myths of the ancient Greeks, continued to worship their Christian god, and – here’s the main paradox – continued to cherish most the values they had learnt in the intimacy and warmth of family and friends, values always expressed and transmitted orally.

So storytelling is not a dying art, in anybody’s language. But in traditional Aboriginal societies it had more jobs to do. Knowledge was not extracted from experience and
put on the shelf in books, it had to be maintained by
telling the stories over and over, often in conjunction with
work, like making a boomerang. This is why you will see
sounds like ‘rasping’ indicated in the stories here, as Paddy
makes an ancient artifact with new tools. Storytelling
patterns rise and fall with the rhythmic breathing of the
body, and with the to and fro movements of working
arms. Listeners chip in with a phrase or two; laughter
regularly punctuates the narration, and this pleasure is our
reward for following the storyteller as he takes us on his
errant pathways.

The title of this book, the first one I did with Paddy
Roe, was chosen by the author.¹ It refers to an area of
country along the coast of the West Kimberley of Western
Australia. This coastline is characterised by sandy beaches,
mangrove swamps, plentiful seafood and dramatic tides
and currents. Gularabulu, ‘the coast where the sun goes
down’, stretches from Bidyadanga (La Grange) in the south,
through Broome, and north up Dampier peninsula as far as
Ardyaloon (One Arm Point). Goolarabooloo encompasses
a song-line or dreaming track and Aboriginal people from
the various communities meet up at least once a year or so
to initiate their boys into the life of the country and the
sacred culture.

In the 1960s, Paddy Roe and other senior law bosses set
about reviving ceremonial culture that had suffered under
the impact of colonialism, and they used ‘goolarabooloo’ as
the most appropriate way to express their united effort. It
was no new term. The earliest appearance in the European
record is in Daisy Bates who did research around Broome from 1901. One of her main informants was a Ngumbal man, Billingee, from Jajal (on the coast north of Broome, south of Quondong Point) and he and his countrymen identified as ‘Koolarrabulloo’ leading her to think it was a tribal name for the Broome area. In *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, she elaborates: ‘…Kularrabulu (*kularra* – west or seacoast; *bulu* – people). Some of their principal watering places were Jajjala, Jirr-ngin-ngan (Broome), Wirraginmarri (creek) …’

This history indicates the longevity of the interesting phenomenon that I want to call a *cultural confederacy of language groups* along this coast. According to Paddy Roe, Goolarabooloo includes the following language and dialect groups: Karajarri, Yawuru, Jugun, Ngumbal, Jabirr Jabirr, Nyul-nyul and Bardi, dialects that shade into one another, sharing about half their vocabulary from one end of the peninsula to the other.³ ‘We should be all one,’ he used to say.⁴ Goolarabooloo culture is underpinned by the Dreaming (called *Bugarrigarra* in the West Kimberley) that gives the practice of ceremony the authority to pass on culture and law through initiation. Only those who are made into law bosses (*maja*) can draw down on this *Bugarrigarra* authority. By way of analogy, I could compare this ‘cultural confederacy’ to something like the European Union, an area where each ancient language or dialect merges into the neighbouring one; where there is, broadly speaking, a common culture and value set, and, importantly, the nations are politically unified in the interests of maintaining the
peace. Similarly around Broome, where having a common sacred identity, requiring peaceful collaboration, avoids the dangers of inward-looking tribalism centered on particular language groups. Paddy Roe’s ancestors, in their wisdom, created this system that Paddy and the other maja managed to perpetuate as the proper way to help the survival of traditional Aboriginal culture in the West Kimberley. He extended his survival strategies by making a book with me, calling it *Gularabulu*, and stressing that the stories are for everybody, including white people, thinking that ‘they might be able to see us better than before’.

When Paddy Roe was born, in about 1912, Broome’s famous pearling industry was in full swing. He was born at Jarmanggunan on Roebuck Plains Station in Yawuru country, a day’s walk south-east of Broome. He was brought up there and learnt all the skills of working sheep and cattle stations. As a drover he travelled quite widely in the Kimberleys, then he was contracted for some years as a windmill repairer. As a young man, he eloped from Roebuck Plains with another man’s wife, Mary Pikalili, and they stayed at various places along the coast north of Broome. The old Jabirr Jabirr people still living there knew his family and made him custodian of that part of the country, where they had two daughters, Margaret and Teresa. Thelma, Mary’s daughter, had come with them from Roebuck Plains.5

In his last days he lived in Broome and on a small lease, Milibinyarri (Coconut Wells) just up the coast to the north of Broome. He is now the ancestor of a large family,
about 140 people, extending down to great-great-great grandchildren. By chance, initially, and later by dedicated effort, he was able to retain a good deal of knowledge of West Kimberley culture. He tells the story that his mother nearly killed him at birth because his skin-colour revealed white paternity. However his tribesman, Nangan, then a young boy, came to the rescue and took special care of him. If Paddy was to remain with his family, then the police and missionaries from Beagle Bay had to be avoided. In those days the policy was to collect part-Aboriginal children for assimilation in the mission environment, a practice which effectively blocked their traditional Aboriginal education. On one occasion Paddy’s mother hid him under a blanket as the people from the mission came looking for suitable subjects.6

In consequence Paddy Roe grew up to become fully initiated as a member of the Nyigina. I met him as I was researching storytelling techniques and found him to be a masterful storyteller in the way he combined the story with the context and knowledge of traditional cultures, based on fluency in several traditional languages and their ritual practices, for which he was a senior *maja*. He also knew a huge number of songs, from restricted ceremonial ones to public ones, *jabi* and *lilyin* which are more ‘for fun’. His knowledge and power were such that some people feared him as a *maban*, but he was such a gentle and wise person that it is hard to imagine him doing anyone harm, and I never heard of him being anything but respectful and kind to everyone.
This book came to be made through research I was doing for my PhD on story-telling in Aboriginal English in the Kimberley. Most of the work was done with Paddy Roe, so I selected some of the stories he told me for this book, while others later appeared in *Reading the Country*. There is a complex of factors that brought us together to do this work; these are the conditions which made this kind of text possible. Not only was Paddy very welcoming to me as a shy young man, but he took the opportunity to teach me, as he did for many of the other people who came to visit him over the years under his Tamarind Tree (his ‘office’) at the Old Native Hospital site on Dora St. Doing this kind of work meant I had to half exit the academic structure deriving from the University of Western Australia anthropology department where I was a student. This is one of the great virtues of fieldwork. Academics might feel confident as they are sent out to ‘the field’ armed with money and a knowledge structure which works to amass a specific kind of knowledge in specific ways. But as they cross the line of difference separating this academic culture (its economy, its organization, its concerns and beliefs) from that of another culture, they find that what they think they know is tested, and they then realize how little they know. A kind of trade then occurs across this line of difference. One tries to figure out how much of the new material can be returned to the store of knowledge in the universities, by being assimilated to what is already known there, and how much can be retained in a recognisable form for the people being researched, then returned to their store of
knowledge. As with all translations, careful compromises are involved, and the best one can hope for is being useful to both.

Then there is the technological input into the assemblage of humans and other things under the Tamarind Tree, or out on country. There I am, writing with pen and notebook; Paddy is talking, sometimes working on an artifact and sometimes drawing in the sand. But a crucial piece of technology is the cassette tape-recorder, which became more available and of better quality by the late 1970s when I recorded these stories. I had been trained in linguistics, and knew how to carefully transcribe from tape-recordings. So the cassette recorder was a device for precise listening, even as the transcription to paper left out aspects of context, like sand drawing.

As word for word, line by line, transcriptions, the stories presented here include deliberately rhythmic pauses and the occasional listener interventions. I have edited the texts to the extent of normalising spellings (the few variations that do exist represent variations in Paddy Roe’s pronunciation) and creating unitary texts by closing the transcription at what I consider to be the appropriate point. This was the first time that Indigenous Australian texts had been presented as narrative art in this way; a follow-up using this technique was Bill Neidjie’s 1989 Story About Feeling. Prior to that, most editions of Aboriginal stories (originally told orally) were written by Europeans, most often without the precision of the tape-recorder. The translation from speech to writing, especially writing considered suitable for public
consumption, then involved editing that was massive in its proportions and implications.

Presenting the stories as narrative art is a way of justifying a writing which tries to imitate the spoken word. When language is read as poetic, it is the form of the language itself, as well as its underlying content, which is important. Just as it would be unjustifiable to rewrite a poet’s work into ‘correct’ English (in other words to take away the poets ‘license’), so it would be unjustifiable to rewrite the words of Paddy Roe’s stories. They are organized according to the conventions of oral narrative and can profitably be compared, at the level of narrative technique, with the stories of other cultures, such as Jugoslav epic songs and Polynesian oral traditions. There is a scholarly tradition of working on oral literature that takes its cue from Homer himself, and borrows his time-honoured prestige. It was in reference to this tradition that I was carrying out my work with Kimberley storytellers.\(^8\) The scholars talk about Homeric techniques like cross-parallelism, and I was delighted to find instances of this in Roe’s stories, for example:

    so he went fishing -
    he come back from fishing -
    got all the fish comeback – (pp. 24–5)

Such techniques and figures of speech are what is specific about oral narrative in general and Aboriginal narrative style in particular. To take one example of over-editing:
Hugh Edwards wrote in his introduction to *Joe Nangan’s Dreaming* about the difficulties he and Nangan had in communicating. The text resulting is loosely based on the content of Nangan’s story, but its form and style is mostly Edwards’:

… and still the eagle flew, her cruel shadow a black cross and a curse over the land below her soaring pinions.¹

This version does more than remove any linguistic or cultural difficulty which would have been present in Nangan’s communication to Edwards; it *adds* words Nangan would never have heard of (‘pinions’) and even the Christian symbol of the cross.

There’s a trade-off in these attempts to make the texts in this collection true to the Aboriginal oral narrative style. Reading is a little more difficult for those who have never sat down with such a storyteller. If you have heard stories like this, reading it from the page will be easier. Otherwise, work on the part of the reader is probably a necessary part of gaining a better understanding of Aboriginal cultures. In his culture, Paddy Roe distinguishes between three types of story: *trustori* (true stories), *Bugarrigarra* (stories from the dreaming) and *devil stori* (stories about devils, spirits, etc.). *Trustori* and *devil stori* are only produced as spoken narrative, while the *Bugarrigarra* also refers to the whole body of law and culture (traditional songs, ceremonials and rituals) that is handed down unchanged from the ancestors. *Bugarrigarra* stories are sometimes called myths; they are about
supernatural beings who created landmarks, stars, rocks and rivers and gave mankind language and laws for conduct. Trustori is the equivalent of the English word ‘legend’ – the characters of the story are human and can be located in time and space, within the memory of the narrator. The heroes of these stories, as you will see, can also perform fantastic acts, often of magical self-transformation. Devil stori may be about quite recent events as well as distant ones. Here something inexplicable or anomalous happens which can only be explained by the presence of some spirit being. As Paddy Roe says, in connection with the alluring Wurrawurra spirit woman:

*Sometimes we see a woman pass but, when you look again you might say: ‘Oh I’ve only seen a grass’. But it is the woman Wurrawurra, she still lives today.*

What Europeans would call a perceptive illusion or hallucination is, for Paddy Roe’s people, a glimpse into the world of spirits or ghosts who live very close by. Spirits can be seen all the time and manipulated by maban, who have enough power not to get disturbed by what they see, ‘clever men’ who take a leadership role in the community.

Independently of the tripartite division of story-types which I have just made is another distinction, perhaps more important, between those stories which are secret and those which are public. Secret stories may only be told in the presence of initiated men of the tribe (this is in Paddy Roe’s case; women have their own law from which he is
excluded). In regard to the stories presented here, Paddy Roe made it clear in the epigraph that they are ‘all public’. Five are devil stori – the Donkey Devil and Living Ghost stories; Jaringgalong and Langgur are Bugarrigarra and the rest are trustori.

It might be argued that traditional myths or even more recent legends might be better presented as translations of the Aboriginal language in which they would have been told in the past. In that case, as with any translation, the reader would have to suffer the consequences of inexactitudes of translation where Aboriginal words, concepts, and linguistic structures did not match those of English. Aboriginal English is a vital communicative link between Aboriginal speakers of different language backgrounds. It also links blacks and whites in Australia, so, as it is used in these stories, it could be said to represent the bridging language between several different European and Aboriginal cultures. It is therefore in this language that aspects of a new Aboriginality have been emerging for some generations. The fact that it might be playing this important and interesting communicative role makes it seem purist and unnecessary to take traditional languages as a starting point.

There is another more circumstantial reason for presenting the stories in this form. Paddy Roe and I were in the habit of working with English as our means of communication, since I was not competent in any of the traditional languages which he speaks. When storytelling time came around it was still important for us that I should understand him and play the role of listener. The performance of the narratives
depended in part on this listener response. Of course, in my case, this listener response was of a special sort. As a white person, I represented for Paddy Roe a kind of generalized representative of white Australia. Accordingly I came to influence the texts to the extent that Paddy Roe addresses the ‘White Reader’ at some points; he constructs scenes and characters in ways that show he is aware of European representations of scenes and characters. The texts are thus a message for a white audience, even if only at certain points. And as a listener I had a further role, that of transmitting this message.

These stories represent, then, the continuation and reassertion of an Indigenous oral narrative tradition. Most would have originally been told in one of the traditional languages, and I am not sure at what point Paddy Roe started to artfully recompose them in Aboriginal English. The stories are definitely passed on from one person to another. Strict copyright sanctions exist for secret or sacred stories; the passing on of such narratives or songs must be announced publicly. These sanctions are relaxed for ‘public’ stories. Other people apart from myself were present at Paddy Roe’s storytelling sessions. Even very young people were familiar with the stories and responded as active listeners when not inhibited by my presence. However, it is perhaps more likely that the narratives would be retained and retold by interested adults than by children.

The stories combine entertainment – the pleasure of listening – with more serious meaning-making as they interact with and make coherent the present-day social
context. Problems of law, alcohol, and European presence are presented in such a way that they are resolved in a dynamic of alternating reference between traditional values, physical aspects of the environment and the actual story-telling situation. Story-telling is a way of dramatically presenting real problems, problems that have to be slowly built up, staged, with a skillful alternation of narration and imitation of the voices of the characters. Events cannot be transmitted in any raw state, the problems are thus approached obliquely, with glimpses of kinds of morality sliding in and out of the picture. It would be too easy to say all problems derive from colonisation; the stories retain some of that complexity that is in the original historical events, for trustori, or in spirituality for the Bugarrigarra ones. The texts in this book are thus the means by which Paddy Roe has attempted to communicate a picture of the life of his people. He has attempted to give you pleasure in reading, a reading which is more like listening. In listening to him speak, you should listen for the techniques he uses to tell a story; nothing is deliberately hidden.

And in listening you should also try to hear what he is saying: that things have always been the same, but that they are different now; that as long as his people can speak out clearly, their culture will live on.

Notes
1 For the first edition, I used a phonetic spelling, Gularabulu. Orthography of traditional languages in the area has yet to
be standardized and made accepted practice. In the meantime, Broome people continue to use the Goolarabooloo spelling, a spelling that may well remain through common usage. The second book I did with Krim Benterrak and Paddy Roe was *Reading the Country*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984.


4 ‘no matter where they come from all these language--but we should be all one--like in early days people used to live--’ (Paddy Roe, in Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, University of NSW Press, 1992, p. 104.)

5 This story is told in Paddy’s own words in *Reading the Country*, 3rd edition, Melbourne: Re.Press, 2014, pp. 122–142.

6 See ‘But I Was Just Like a Swag, Too’ in *Reading the Country*, pp. 51–53.


expanded edition of Jerome Rothenburg’s 1968 *Technicians of the Sacred*.


Notes on the Transcription

The texts are divided into lines whenever the narrator pauses. The length of these pauses is indicated by one dash per second of pause. Hesitations in mid-line, at which points the breath is held at the glottis, are indicated by commas. Extended vowels, ‘growls’ or breathy expressions are indicated by adding more letters to the extent of one per second. The texts are also broken up into episodes. The change from one episode to the next is indicated largely in changes of content: a change of character, place or time.
Aboriginal English

Some description of this variety of English should help readers be aware of linguistic features not present in standard English. Kimberley Aboriginal English often does not distinguish gender in pronouns (females are referred to as ‘he’ or ‘him’) and at the same time introduces dual pronouns which may explicitly include or exclude the person speaking or the person spoken to. Paddy Roe uses, though rarely in these texts, ‘yunmi’ (you, and me) for himself and his addressee, ‘yuntupella’ (you two fellas) for two people spoken to, excluding himself, and ‘mintupella’ (me and two fellas) for himself and someone else excluding the addressee. Paddy Roe has partially adopted plurals for nouns, but alternates this with the Aboriginal English lack of plural marking on nouns.