



Karalundi Gates, c. 2017
Photo courtesy of Stephen Piez.

Karalundi Aboriginal Education Centre, Australia

STEVE PIEZ

Steve Piez, M.Prof. (Hons), is the former director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries for the Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Melbourne Australia. Pastor Piez was born in Papua New Guinea to missionary parents and is a naturalised Australian. He has served the Church as a pastor, administrator and teacher. Piez has authored several significant publications and over 50 magazine articles. He is an accomplished guitarist who currently resides in Port Fairy, Victoria with his wife Kym and has two daughters and two sons.

Karalundi Aboriginal Education Centre is located in the desert, northeast of Meekathara, Western Australia. It commenced classes in September 1954.

Antecedents to Aboriginal Mission work in Western Australia

In the early 20th Century, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia turned its attention to reaching Aboriginal people with the gospel message. The early successes at Mona Mona Mission in North Queensland caught the attention of the Western Australian Conference, and in November 1914 it placed a formal request with the Australasian Union Conference to begin native mission work as soon as practicable.² Two years later, at the 1916 session, the request was repeated.³

While there is no surviving record of a response to these requests, the time was not right for an Adventist Aboriginal mission program in Western Australia. With the appointment of A. O. Neville as Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines, things became increasingly difficult for church-run missions. Initially, Neville cooperated with the churches, but in a short time, he became opposed to church involvement in Aboriginal affairs.⁴ He argued that they had done little to improve the situation of Aboriginal people in their charge.⁵ Neville is remembered for championing the segregation of Aboriginal people of mixed descent in order to "breed out the colour," - the infamous government policy of biological assimilation which had as its ultimate goal the merging and eventual disappearance of the Aboriginal race.⁶

Neville was replaced by Francis Bray, who maintained his predecessor's negative attitude towards church involvement. In official correspondence with the superintendent of the successful United Aboriginal Mission at Mt. Margaret, Bray declared that education for the 'natives' was unnecessary and that they were better off without Christianity.⁷

This attitude lasted until the appointment of Stanley Middleton as Commissioner for Native Affairs in 1948. Due to his experiences in the territory of Papua New Guinea, Middleton was convinced of the value of mission programs, particularly when adequately funded.⁸ As a result, by the end of the 1950s he transferred many government settlements to church control.⁹

Middleton was progressive and lobbied the State government to increase subsidies paid for Aboriginal children. Equality was achieved in 1954 when subsidies paid for Aboriginal children matched those paid for non-Aboriginal children in similar circumstances.¹⁰ It would appear Middleton recognised the inherent bias in the system, which had prevented Aboriginal people from receiving an equitable share of resources and the provision of services such as education, healthcare, and improved housing arrangements.¹¹

It did not take long for Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders to recognise the change of approach, and in 1952, the Secretary-Treasurer of the Trans Commonwealth Union Conference¹² wrote to Middleton about the church's desire to establish an Aboriginal mission within the state.¹³

Middleton's response was positive. He confirmed that "on the station properties west of Meekatharra and in the general Wiluna district there are large numbers of native children who are receiving no education at all [and] that the scope for an active, progressive mission situated in the Meekatharra district is almost unlimited."¹⁴

Karalundi Mission

In the early 1950s, Pastor A. D. Vaughan had been ministering throughout this region. As he travelled across the country, what he saw in the towns and communities fuelled in him an urgent desire to do something practical to assist the Aboriginal people living in these locations.¹⁵ Avy Curley, an Aboriginal convert, challenged and encouraged Vaughan. Church leaders were enthusiastic and tasked him with finding a suitable location to establish an Aboriginal mission.¹⁶

It wasn't long before Vaughan discovered Crystal Brook, just 55 kilometers north of Meekatharra.¹⁷ The property was able to maintain a sizeable orchard and vegetable gardens because of an abundant supply of water provided by underground aquifers.¹⁸ It was also far enough away from town to be free from its social problems and "contaminating influences,"¹⁹ yet remained close enough for the provision of essential services. Church leaders were excited by the offer and saw in it an opportunity to fulfil their vision of an Adventist mission for Aboriginal people.²⁰

The Western Australian Conference took possession of Crystal Brook in January 1954. Pastor Vaughan was appointed as superintendent of the new mission, renamed Karalundi ("clear water" in a local dialect). The new name's Aboriginal origin and meaning struck a chord with church leaders, and soon caught on.²¹

The Native Affairs Department and Education Department provided the necessary funds to establish the mission, on the understanding that the Adventist Church would contribute the labor for the construction work. The building program began in April 1954 and was largely completed by volunteers. To supplement the workforce, the conference required all ministers in its employ to spend at least 2 weeks assisting with building, installing irrigation systems for food gardens, and planting a grove of citrus trees.

By September 1954, sufficient progress had been made and classes commenced with 14 children under the direction of Stan Louis.²² The school quickly outgrew its single classroom, and a disused three-room school building was sourced from Big Bell, a gold mining settlement west of Cue. Gordon Harders remembers dismantling the building in the middle of summer. Day-time temperatures were constant at around 45°C, and dropped to 38°C at night. In these extreme conditions, tradesmen and volunteers shifted the building from 220 kilometers north to Karalundi, where it was re-erected in time for students to vacate their make-shift classrooms early in the 1955 school year.²³

It was not just classrooms that needed to be built. Gordon Topperwien recalled that when he was employed, he had to leave his wife and family behind in Perth as there was no accommodation at the school. On arrival, he was shown two large piles of second-hand timber and told that in addition to his teaching load, he was expected to turn this stack of timber into his home. Topperwien had no building experience and “couldn’t even remember building a cubby as a kid.” Ron Baird, another co-worker, faced the same challenge.²⁴ These experiences provide an indication of the level of commitment and the kind of sacrifice mission pioneers were prepared to make to see the work of their church progress.

Wiluna Mission

As Karalundi became established and enrolments increased, the Department of Native Affairs suggested that the SDA Church establish a “village community” near Wiluna. This village would be a place where traditional Aboriginal people who had migrated to Wiluna out of the vast Western Desert could settle and begin a new life.²⁵ Church leaders once again asked Pastor Vaughan to travel to Wiluna to see what could be done. As he visited the area, Vaughan’s heart went out to these people in desperate need of support. He quickly found a suitable site for the proposed village community, which was subsequently secured by the Church.

The Department of Native Affairs proposed a partnership arrangement, whereby it provided rations, clothing, and basic accommodation, and the church provided a superintendent who would live nearby and manage the operation. Church leaders agreed, and in August 1955, Vaughan was appointed to pioneer the establishment of Wiluna Mission and superintend its operation. Vaughan was instructed to provide a positive influence over the residents, to provide whatever medical attention and supervision was required, and offer spiritual guidance and pastoral care.²⁶

The founding of Wiluna Mission, along with its preschool and small lower primary class, was significant as it became an important feeder school for Karalundi. With this second outreach program established, Karalundi was reserved as a “mission training school.”²⁷ The Church envisaged that Karalundi would ultimately be a place where Aboriginal young people could secure an education that would fit them for service to their people.²⁸

A Government School

With the departure of Vaughan to Wiluna, Stan Louis became both mission superintendent and school principal. This burden proved intolerable, and at the recommendation of the Education Department, church leaders appointed Pastor David Ferris as superintendent in 1957.²⁹ A popular leader, Ferris worked well with both Louis and Roy Sodeman, who replaced Louis as principal in 1959. Ferris was forward thinking and, in an attempt to improve the administration of Karalundi, he established a Mission Advisory Board in 1958. This committee was responsible for managing the relationship between Karalundi and relevant government departments.

The Education Department commended Ferris on the establishment of the “new committee” but reminded him that it had no authority over departmental teaching staff, including the principal, who was wholly responsible to the Director of Education.³⁰ This attitude did not sit well with church leaders, who felt that it compromised their vision and authority.

Karalundi had begun as a three-way partnership between the SDA Church, Native Affairs, and the Education Departments of Western Australia. While the church owned the property, along with its mission and vision, its work was overseen and partially funded by the Department of Native Affairs. In addition, the mission school was financed, and the teachers employed, by the Education Department.

While the arrangement worked well, it was not without its difficulties. The Education Department allowed the church to recommend Seventh-day Adventist teachers suitable for employment at Karalundi school. However, although these teachers were government employees, in another sense they were also working for the church. This created some confusion. For example, Adventist systemic teachers stood to lose their accrued entitlements as the appointment to Karalundi (a government school) constituted a break in years-of-service. To preserve their entitlements, the church took action to recognise Karalundi teaching staff as ‘church employees.’³¹ The upshot of this decision was that while entitlements were preserved, Karalundi teachers only received the church award equivalent of their government salaries. The difference was used to supplement the mission budget.

This arrangement benefited those who had been in church service long enough to accrue substantial entitlements. Unfortunately, it meant that earnings for younger teachers were significantly reduced. One young teacher complained, “I had to give my cheque to the conference, and they gave me the pennies back.”³² Time off and leave entitlements were also impacted by the arrangement. However, staff accepted the unorthodox arrangements because they believed they were doing the “Lord’s work” and the Lord needed the money.³³

Despite these hiccups, Karalundi was proving a great success. In his report to the conference constituency meeting in 1959, Ferris shared that Karalundi was operating within budget, the operation was as self-sufficient as possible, enrolments exceeded 90 children, and ten young people had been baptized in the Karalundi pool. Pastor Vaughan concluded that the secret to ongoing success was the “demonstration of Christian love.” This, he said, was a “tremendous influence in winning [souls] for the kingdom of God.”³⁴

Further Training

With the dawn of a new decade, it was decided that more focus should be given to improving the mission's practical education program, so that students would be better equipped for the kind of life they would lead after leaving school. As a result, half of each school day was set aside for the study of practical skills, including manual arts and home science. Work experience was secured for students in the surrounding area, and the Karalundi groundsman, Jackson Stevens, organised groups of older students to do occasional contract mustering for nearby pastoral stations.³⁵

This was a positive direction, and at the end of 1961, Assistant Superintendent for Manual Training, E. P. Miller, wrote to the Director of Primary Education, saying, "This school appeared to be a most efficient establishment; I was very impressed with the tidiness and cleanliness of the grounds, the behaviour of the children and relatively high standard of attainment compared with other native schools." Miller also commended Karalundi on its home science program for the girls, and encouraged their plans to extend the manual training program for the boys.³⁶

As more students graduated from Karalundi, the church recognised the need to include further educational opportunities and a system of work placements for older youth. Scholarships for further study at Carmel College were sourced, along with work placement opportunities with Adventist employers across Western Australia.³⁷ This course of action provided many Aboriginal youth with skills they valued. A number of these ex-students have shared that the education they received at Karalundi during the 1950s and 1960s was superior to the ones their children received at government schools in the 1970s and 1980s following Karalundi's closure.³⁸

Things were going very well. In 1961, the conference president reported to constituency members that eleven more students had been baptised at Karalundi, and both missions had operated within their budgets. He concluded, "amid the heat and desolation and frustration and flies of the lonely north, our missionaries have done exploits in extending the Kingdom of God... Much more will be accomplished as a result of their sacrifice."³⁹

An Independent School

The church's optimism and vision for its Aboriginal mission work caused it to become increasingly disillusioned with the level of control imposed by the Education Department. The matter came to a head in 1962 when the headmaster received a letter from the Deputy Director of Primary Education questioning the amount of time students spent in religious instruction.⁴⁰

From the church's perspective, religious instruction was a kingdom-of-heaven imperative and the letter confirmed the assumption that government control of the school compromised the purpose of the operation.⁴¹ While the Department had done its best to work with Karalundi,⁴² the church's concerns were real, and as a result, it was decided that the conference would take full responsibility for Karalundi school from the beginning of the 1967 school year.⁴³

With the decision that Karalundi was to become a systemic Seventh-day Adventist school, the church was faced with the task of finding additional funds to balance the budget. After some deliberation, it was agreed that the best solution lay with turning Karalundi Farm into a commercial operation.⁴⁴ John Stanley, an experienced farmer from Merredin, was appointed to manage the enterprise. Stanley was instructed to produce "an income that will offset the cost of running the mission and the school".⁴⁵

While the farm initially performed reasonably well,⁴⁶ it was not able to make up the shortfall created by the loss of teacher's wages income, and by the end of the year, Karalundi was in severe financial difficulty. Church leaders approached the government requesting a grant to offset the operating deficit of \$14,622.06.⁴⁷ The Education Department responded by offering to place the teachers back on its payroll.⁴⁸ However, the Western Australia Conference had no appetite for this solution, and managed to secure some additional income from the Department of Native Welfare.⁴⁹ It also convinced the Trans Commonwealth Union Conference and the Australasian Division to increase their recurrent contributions.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, this assistance did not resolve the problems, and the net deficit continued to climb each year. By the end of 1970, it was discovered that even with the \$11,500 contribution made by the Trans Commonwealth Union Conference and the Australasian Division, there remained a net deficit of \$13,590 borne by the Western Australian Conference. This growing deficit was a major source of concern, and was a contributing factor to the closure of Karalundi in 1974.

On a positive note, although the farming enterprise was not the 'solution' to Karalundi's financial woes, it was a great initiative that gave the school's practical education program a shot in the arm. It provided employment opportunities for students⁵¹ and refocused education on the acquisition of employable skills.

A Changing Social Context

The late 1960s and early 1970s were years of great change for Aboriginal people and those working with them in Western Australia. Strict government controls dating back to 1905 were lifted and the people began to exercise their new-found freedoms. One of these freedoms was drinking rights. Alcohol was first legalized for Aboriginal people in the southwest in 1964, and in the northwest in 1971.⁵² While paternalistic laws needed to be repealed, the timing of the changes and their impact was disastrous for many Aboriginal people living in the north of the state. The

combination of direct payment of pensions, the introduction of drinking rights⁵³ and the decision to pay award wages to Aboriginal pastoral workers at a time when the rural sector was failing⁵⁴ created a crisis, the legacy of which is still evident today. Suddenly, a group of people, many of whom were unused to a cash economy and without budgeting skills, had cash in their hands.⁵⁵ In addition, they were then given unrestricted access to alcohol, a substance which they had long been denied and for which they had no traditional equivalent.

The 1968 Federal Courts decision that all Aboriginal employees in the pastoral industry should receive “the same wages as other workers”⁵⁶ compounded the problem. Although the decision was long overdue, it came at a time when rural industries in Western Australia were struggling because of poor seasons and a reduction in overseas export prices. The result was that many Aboriginal people lost their jobs and were unable to find new ones. They were subsequently forced to leave the pastoral stations where they had lived to take up residence on the fringes of towns and reserves. This increased the unemployed fringe-dwelling population and those in receipt of social security payments.⁵⁷

The combination of these factors caused horrific social problems in various Aboriginal centers in the northwest. It was reported that “fights were frequent and liquor stimulated trouble”.⁵⁸ By 1974, when the federal minister for Aboriginal affairs visited Wiluna, he was told of an unofficial curfew imposed on the Aboriginals because of problems associated with liquor and violence.⁵⁹ A few years later, there was an outcry in the *West Australian* about the “Wiluna tragedy” where “a once proud bush people” had become the victims of the “amber demon”.⁶⁰

Wiluna particularly suffered from alcohol-related problems because of the high proportion of Aboriginal residents affected by the struggling pastoral industry. Unfortunately for Karalundi, as many its students came from Wiluna, the social problems in that location had a follow-on effect and impacted the running of the school.

Closing the School

In response to these major challenges, a review of the Karalundi and Wiluna missions was undertaken in 1973. However, the recommendations made did not improve things, and in 1974 another review was undertaken by conference leaders, who were tasked with assessing the viability of the institutions.

The 1974 report stated that multiple problems beset Karalundi and Wiluna.⁶¹ There was the issue of reduced enrolments, which church leaders believed was unlikely to improve as some parents had “indicated their intention not to support the school in the future.” There was also competition in the form of a government sponsored preschool in Wiluna, which was offering a free bus service for students who lived out of town. The report also outlined that the mission’s welfare program was being made obsolete because the government Department of Welfare was “geared to care for the temporal needs of the Aboriginal people.” And finally, there was the issue that only a few senior students had not become involved in the problems associated with drinking alcohol.

These findings, coupled with the challenges of acquiring suitably qualified staff and a ballooning deficit, led the executive committee to take action to close its Aboriginal mission programs at the end of 1974. It was an extremely painful decision and the wording of the action captured the heartbreak and sense of failure. It stated that due to “the apparent failure of the mission during the past twenty years in producing members who will take a stand for the truth and to assist their people to do likewise the schools at Karalundi and Wiluna [will] be closed down at the end of the current school year.”⁶²

The president, Pastor Cyrus Adams, in his “An Explanation” written for the *Australasian Record*, shared that “up until about three years ago we felt that we were really breaking through and lifting the people to a better way of life; at the same time bringing a good number to a knowledge of salvation through Christ”. However, with the introduction of alcohol, there “has been a complete decline and collapse of the good behaviour of the large majority of these people.” Pastor Adams also indicated that the government seemed to have a “plan to eliminate missions”.

Karalundi did not survive until the year-end. Following the resignation of the principal, the mission was closed in September 1974. This was a terrible loss for regional Aboriginal people, and within twelve months, the welfare officer caring for Wiluna and Meekatharra appealed to the church to reverse its decision, as the Aboriginal youth of the area had been left with nothing.

However, the decision had been made, and Karalundi was placed in the hands of an auctioneer with the expectation that the property would realise a sale price of \$125,000. While there was initial interest, all potential sales eventually fell through. Finally, in September 1976 the church accepted an offer of \$50,000 for the estate from an Adventist church member by the name of T. L. Barrett. While it was much less than had been hoped for, time has proved that this sale was God-led.

Reopening Karalundi School

It was intended that the proceeds of the property sale would help fund church-based pastoral ministry in the region. The people were left with nothing, and their sense of abandonment was complete. Up until that time, their lives had revolved around the mission and its schools, and they were suddenly on their own. No worker or minister remained to assist them to make the transition to a new life.⁶³ One person explained that with the closure of the missions, some believed that God did not love them anymore.⁶⁴

In the early 1980s, David and Isabel Dyson, a retired ex-Karalundi principal and his wife, recognized that something

needed to be done. In consultation with conference leaders, they agreed to make four pastoral visits to the region each year. The response to their visits was overwhelming, and the Dysons invited Pastor Eric Davey, a conference departmental director, to come along and see the progress they were making. Davey was enthusiastic, and after consulting with the new property owner, it was agreed that an Aboriginal camp meeting would be held at Karalundi in September 1982.⁶⁵

This was the first significant outreach event for Aboriginal people since the closure of the missions. The meetings were very well attended. The people were excited; “their church was back”⁶⁶ The following year, the Dysons were killed in a tragic airplane accident. However, they had provided the impetus to get the work started again, and the church appointed Stan Armstrong, another ex-Karalundi principal, to continue the Dysons’ work on a full-time basis. Armstrong, along with his wife Nell and their family, travelled up to 100,000 kilometers each year, providing pastoral care to Aboriginal parishioners across the upper Murchison, Gascoyne, Western Desert, and Great Sandy Desert regions.

As soon as the Aboriginal people saw the faces of their former teachers, they began talking about re-opening Karalundi School.⁶⁷ They were convinced that the schools attended by their children were inferior to the mission school where they had been educated.⁶⁸ They also complained that mainstream schools tended to marginalise their children, and failed to equip them with employable skills.⁶⁹ Many families were also concerned about the ongoing impact of alcohol abuse on community children. Unfortunately, many these children were drinking at an early age, and families saw Karalundi as a safe haven away from these problems.⁷⁰

Initially the Aboriginal people requested that the Adventist Church reopen and run Karalundi. However, after discussing the matter with conference leaders and the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries director, it was agreed that Karalundi would begin as an independent parent-controlled school. As part of this arrangement, the Adventist church would mentor the operation, providing professional advice and trained staff to maintain its Seventh-day Adventist ethos.

The desire to reopen Karalundi had an empowering effect on those involved. Meetings were held at Wiluna, Meekatharra, Cue, Mt. Magnet, and Jigalong communities. All who attended expressed their willingness to work together to achieve the goal.⁷¹ Discussions were held with government stakeholders, and a lease agreement was negotiated with the property owner, with the view of purchasing the property at a later stage once sufficient government funds were secured and the school proved viable.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal volunteers helped get the site ready. Some stayed on-site while others attended regular working bees held two Sundays a month. This initial work program created good memories and forged strong bonds.⁷² Karalundi Aboriginal Education Centre began classes in August 1986.⁷³ The first group of teachers were Stan Armstrong (principal), Nell Armstrong, Glennie Ainsworth, and Leanne Brighton, along with Robina Kyanga and Marjorie Cowled (nee Seghi).

The school was not officially opened until 8 October 1987. In his opening speech, Ross Lightfoot, MLA, and Federal member for the Murchison-Eyre region, commented, “It is not often that one witnesses the rebirth of an important center of learning for Aboriginal people and their children”. Another visiting member of the National Aboriginal Education Committee claimed, “The students’ work here is equal to any I have seen throughout the state”⁷⁴

Conclusion

Karalundi has continued to serve the mission of the church. It has had its triumphs and challenges. Through it all, generations of young people have gained skills to guide them through life and an understanding of God’s saving love for them. The achievements of the school speak for themselves. Graduates are found in positions of trust and leadership all over the upper Murchison, Gascoyne, Mid-West, Pilbara, and Western Desert regions. These people have made a difference in their respective communities, and many of them declare that they have become what they are today because of the education they received at Karalundi.⁷⁵

The legacy of Avy Curley, an Aboriginal activist from the upper Murchison who became a Seventh-day Adventist at a series of meetings run by Pastor Dudley Vaughan in the early 1950s, looms large. It was Curley’s challenge to Vaughan, “What are you doing for us Aboriginal people?” that led him to encourage the conference to establish a mission school and dedicate the rest of his working life in service to these same people.

Aboriginal people loved Pastor Vaughan because he demonstrated the love of Jesus in all he did. His advice to fellow workers was to “Always put your trust in these guys,” treat them with respect, and entrust them with responsibility.⁷⁶ He also counselled, “Never ever think about your losses; always remember your wins.”⁷⁷ Those who took his advice went on to have a successful experience working among Aboriginal people.

One ex-student and work colleague named Clarry Cameron reminisced about Dudley Vaughan at Karalundi’s 50th Anniversary. He told those present that back in the 1950s the general attitude among most white people was “have no faith in blackfellas, they are useless”. He went on to say that “there was one old white bloke, an ex-shearer and boxer, who didn’t believe that. This fellow’s name was Albert Dudley Vaughan, a modern-day Moses who worked for Aboriginal people to lift the yoke of their oppression. Because of him, his faith in the future, and his belief that Aboriginal people were not useless, Karalundi came into existence.”⁷⁸

Another ex-student and long-term Karalundi board chairman, John Kyanga, remembers his mother telling him that at Karalundi he would learn about Jesus and many other practical things, so along with his sisters he made the decision

to attend the school, a decision he has never regretted. Kyanga concluded by saying “God has been good to me... I couldn’t wish for anything more and it’s all because of Karalundi ... God is right here all the time.”⁷⁹

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NOTES

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3. Western Australian Conference Executive Committee Minutes, October 11, 1916.?
4. A. Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800 – 2000*. Perth: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000, 266.?
5. A. Haebich, “On the Inside: Moore River Native Settlement in the 1930s,” in *All that Dirt*, ed. B. Gammage & A. Markus, (An Australia 1938 Monograph, Canberra History Project Incorporated, 1982), 48.?
6. Q. Beresford and P. Omaji, *Our State of Mind: Racial Planning and the Stolen Generation*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, 1998), 52.?
7. S. R. Marks, “Mission Policy in Western Australia 1846 – 1959,” in *University Studies in Western Australian History*, 1960, 96.?
8. *Ibid.*, 97.?
9. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home*, (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney,

- 1997), 110-111.?
10. S. R. Marks, 1960, 95-97.?
 11. *The West Australian* March 15, 1962, 5.?
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 17. Barbara Reynolds, interview with author, Wahrenonga, NSW, May 15, 2002.?
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 19. Glynn Litster, 1988, 192.?
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 22. Stephen Piez, *What Are You Doing for Us: The Untold Story of Karalundi 1954-2004*, 2006, 18.?
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