

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Durack Homestead Museum – Argyle & unrolling of the updated Durack Family Tree

### SPEECH of WELCOME

Mr Lawford Benning

Executive Chair

Miriuwung Aboriginal Corporation

You are all welcome today on this, our country, the land of the Miriuwung peoples. You will be traditionally welcomed in a moment; however, my happy task is to first formally welcome you all.

Naturally, we start by acknowledging all the Miriuwung peoples, my mob; my family; on whose land we stand. And I acknowledge my elders, past and present.

I welcome our distinguished Guest of Honour, WA State Treasurer and Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Lands, the Honourable Ben Wyatt.

I also welcome all the other distinguished guests:

- the Shire President of the Wyndham East Kimberley Council (David Menzel);
- and his fellow Councillors;
- the other local leaders of our town community, in particular those from the Committee who run the Kununurra Visitors Centre, who have a responsibility for this Argyle Homestead Museum.

Most especially we welcome the members of the Durack family who are with us here today. They have come from far and wide. You are all most welcome. And we acknowledge their elders; those present and those past. In particular: Dame Mary Durack

and her sister Elizabeth Durack, and their brother Reg Durack; all of whom are held in high regard.

The Miriuwung families and the Durack families have a special relationship: something that stands out as quite unique across Australia.

We, the Miriuwung people, are the original peoples of this land.

We have links and stories and history all the way back into the Dreamtime. White-fella scientists have so far provided archaeological evidence that we have been here for at least 40,000 years.... but they are still counting!

With links like ours you will understand our strong emotional attachment to our lands.

We know the songs of this land; we know the stories; we know the dances; we know the language of this land; we know the local names of all the birds, the plants, the trees and the animals.

In this area where we are today there are important song-cycles and dances that tell the dreaming of the Grasshopper; and not far away we have the dreaming track of the Dingo; and the Flying Fox; and nearby is that of the White Cockatoo. Above us at night we have the stars with their own songs that connect our dreamtime people with the nightlights; including the famous songs about the Seven Sisters. These are just some. We have many, many more.

(Although we don't have a Miriuwung word nor a song nor a corroboree for the "Cane Toad"!) )

In very recent times, we - the Miriuwung people - gave our evidence to the Federal Court that established AT LAW our native title rights to these lands.

Our elders shared our stories with the Judge, even giving evidence from a boat, floating out on Lake Argyle, as my mothers spoke to the Court about the landscape below the water, and traced the river systems of the Ord and the Behn River and the Negri and the little creeks that used to flow in from the hills on either side. All now drowned.

What was NOT lost with the damming of the Ord was our native title; our cultural authority; our role and responsibility as the first people of this country.

That is a responsibility that we carry through from ancient times all the way into the present and into the future.

We, the Miriuwung people, know that for our people to have a secure future we have to build onto our traditional native title rights a commercial and economic base. We are more than ready now for utilising our land holdings, in ways that look after the country and simultaneously creates training and job opportunities, especially for our young people.

A lot of our focus as the Prescribed Body Corporate, with the support of the MG Aboriginal Corporation team, is to develop agricultural and pastoral operations that will do just that. And we are particularly pleased today to have our friend the Minister for Lands who – together with his colleague the Minister for Regional Development (Alannah MacTiernan) - has taken great efforts to secure those opportunities. We sincerely thank him for that; and for his support and his friendship.

It was back in August/September of 1882 – nearly 137 years ago – that the first of the Duracks stumbled into our lands. As you all know, the first lot came by boat into Cambridge Gulf; they nearly got lost on their way in from Wyndham; they first went up the wrong river! When they realised that they were lost they called that River the Durack River and then they scrambled over the ranges (chased out of that country by the Balangarra mob there)

until they got to what they called the Bow River and from there found their way to the Ord. They pegged our country, and then went on down to Perth and secured their claims for the pastoral leases over our lands, before returning to the East; they collected their mob of cattle from there and then trekked back overland this time to set up camp here in 1885. If you say all of that quickly you can make it all sound easy.

Skilfully, and no doubt apprehensively, our Miriuwung people soon found ways to largely co-exist with the Durack family who soon spread out across this country.

The stories that link us are told and retold by the Miriuwung people; and some of these same stories have been written up by the late Dame Mary Durack (the mum of JOHNNY MILLER; Johnny is here with us today) and illustrated by her sister ELIZABETH (PERPETUA'S MOTHER).

Amongst those illustrated books is one that is of GREAT interest to me: it is called "ALL-About" – and sub-titled: "The Story of a Black Community on Argyle Station Kimberley". It was first published in 1935, just 50 years after the Duracks had first settled here.

This book, through the eyes of the Duracks, records stories about our families, our peoples; including stories about and sketches of my great-grandmother, NUBBUDAH and of her son, Jimmy, who is my grandfather: Jim Ward.

We know from what our own old people told us, and from what Mary and others have written, that the relationship was not idyllic; it was complex. But all of us can cope with a bit of complexity.

We don't need to hide the fact that the relationship between the Duracks and the Miriuwung had both its good sides and it had serious bad-sides. Remarkably: the relationship has continued all the way through to the present.

We at MG are proud to have members of the extended Durack family working now for us: we have Brad Durack who has worked with us to build up the MG building company; we recently have welcomed the arrival of Mary Durack, down from Darwin, to come and live and work with us here in Kununurra; and we have Will Durack working with the Kimberley Land Council; and of course Tom Stephens – who has long worked for and with our family and is married-in to the Durack clan, but is also an independent Director sitting with us on the MG Board.

We know that over the years our family members have enjoyed many other connections with the Duracks: with visits to Durack homes in Perth; and visits from Duracks to various hospital beds; including to Ben Ward, when he was down in Shenton Rehabilitation Hospital after his car accident.

There might be an Aboriginal mob like ours elsewhere in Australia who have managed to maintain unbroken good connection with the white family who first settled on their land, but I have never heard of another with a relationship like ours. So I am going to claim that it is unique, until someone proves otherwise!

With our shared history – which is a short history by Miriuwung standards, but long by the standards of non-Aboriginal Australia – it is only right and fit and proper that I welcome the Duracks back here today to this reconstructed Durack homestead from Argyle.

While you are here you will naturally think of your family and the trials and tribulations and the successes that you have experienced and the benefits that you have gained from your family connection with our land.

You will, I hope, also think of our Miriuwung families, who are still on country, enjoying what we have, and at the same time still working towards making our lives, all of our lives, better. We

know from history that success comes from working positively; together.

For that to happen it has to be based on mutual respect and on a reconciliation based on a genuine understanding of each other's story; as well as an appreciation of our shared history.

Today we celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reconstruction of this old Durack Homestead. We are also celebrating the presentation of a unique updated Durack family tree that documents, as best as it can, some of the many links that this family has. We are very happy to see acknowledged in this family tree the Skeen family who have their own particular links with the Duracks; dating originally from the Northern Territory, out Auvergne Station/Timber Creek way. Later, so I'm told that these Skeens set up a station of their own at Sophie Downs, near Halls Creek, and they are now spread around the Kimberley and beyond. I acknowledge the Skeen family as special visitors today. And I congratulate Perpetua Durack and all the others who have worked on this project and who are today going to share with us what that work reveals.

Thank you.