

Darryl Kickett:

My own great grandfather Yombitch, James Kickett, who wrote a letter in 1907 about the police shooting his dogs.

So in terms of what the project might be called, I sort of felt that after reading the letter, you know, I had never heard my grandfather speak any words at all, because he was gone by the time I was born, and so I thought maybe we could call it Ancestors Words, you know, because I was able to - through reading the letters - tune in to my ancestor's words actually...

[music: 'Ancestors Words' by Sarah Tout]

... which was quite emotional. It was quite impactful on me but it was great to, you know, connect in to that.

Sarah Tout, host:

That is Darryl Kickett - Nyoongar Elder - talking about a letter, found in an archive, and discovered over one hundred years after its writing.

Darryl is one of the people behind an extraordinary project that has been finding letters in archives, that are historical examples of Aboriginal activism, and returning the letters to the author's family.

This is a project about healing disconnection, subverting traditional modes of working with pieces of history, and returning power to the powerless.

Hello, my name is Sarah Tout and I am incredibly proud to be bringing you this Geoffrey Bolton Lecture. This year, we are approaching the lecture a little bit differently and I bring you a yarning, a tapestry of voices and stories from this project which Darryl Kickett has explained is called Ancestors Words.

We will hear stories about dispossession, isolation, stories of dominance and power imbalances, and also surprising moments of resilience, and of the power that is inherent in knowing your story.

In many ways we can't see where we need to go, as individuals, but really as a country, if we don't know where we've come from.

And a warning, we will hear names of deceased persons, and some content that depicts the mistreatment of Aboriginal People. So please consider your wellbeing as you listen.

[music ends]

Sarah Tout:

Since 2016, historian Anna Haebich and her sensitive, compassionate, and respectful team have been combing through Western Australian archives, finding letters, petitions and telegrams.

They were written a long time ago, between 1860 and 1960, written by Nyoongar people to speak to power about their needs.

The letters are requests for fundamental rights, and to question the decisions of authorities.

These letters have been scattered throughout various files in archives, in the State Records Office, and it's only recently that Anna and her team have meticulously combed through hundreds of files, following little signs that a file might contain a letter, and then - once they find something - try to find other reports and responses to the letters.

The project is about building a context and a full story around each letter, to then return a complete picture to families and descendants of the letter writers: reconnecting them to the words of their ancestors and often with powerful results.

I visited Curtin University and sat down with Ancestors Words founder Anna Haebich, researcher Gabriel Maddock, Elders Darryl Kickett and Dean Collard, and historian Tiffany Shellam - to find out more about the project, some of the letters, and what we can learn by listening to the voices and the stories they tell.

This is Nyoongar Elder Dean Collard explaining what the Ancestors Words project is.

Dean Collard:

It's about the repatriation of letters that have been held in custody, dare I say that word, for, you know, a hundred plus years in a lot of these cases, where a lot of the pleadings were sent by letters to the administrator of the Native Welfare Department. So that was Mr Neville, and, you know, the words and the sentiments in those letters, when we read them, sort of caused a lot of feelings in your psyche and in your spirit about the way in which they worded these pleadings and requests to the department a hundred years ago. But it felt like the language they were speaking could be that they were talking about today as well.

Sarah Tout:

This idea of the timelessness and continued relevance of these letters is illustrated quite starkly in one of the letters that the team discovered.

It is, remarkably, a letter written by Darryl Kickett's own great grandfather, James Yombitch Kickett.

I sat with Darryl in Anna Haebich's office at Curtin University, surrounded by books about history and Nyoongar culture, and I ask Darryl to read Yombitch Kickett's letter to us.

Darryl Kickett:

Yombitch Kickett wrote on the fifth of May 1907 from Beverly:

'To Mr Princep, Aboriginal Protector, Perth,

Dear Sir, I am taking the liberty of writing to you, re police shooting dogs.

A certain gentleman laid information to the police to the effect that my dogs were killing his sheep. The police went out to my camp and shot two dogs that were chained up, one of which I was depending on for [a] living when I am in the bush. Now, Sir, I would like to know if the police are justified in coming in by a back way and going to our camp and shooting our dogs when we were absent, as I can prove the dogs were chained up, as one was dead on the chain when I came back and the other one broke loose when he shot at it. He shot three dogs altogether.

Also, I can prove that it wasn't my dogs that were in the gentleman's sheep.

Awaiting your reply.

I am, Sir, yours respectfully,

James Kickett (Native.)'

Darryl continues:

Wow, gee, it really - the words from the letter, when you read between the lines, sort of, and you get that feeling about perhaps the trauma and perhaps the grief that he might have felt when confronted with his dogs being shot, you know, having come home from, you know, an outing with his family, to walk into his place of residence, which was probably a rudimentary camp, you know, and to find his beloved dogs - he said three of them in fact - were shot dead and lying in pools of blood, you know. So what kind of human being would do that, you know, and what kind of police officer would do that without checking first? It just sounds a little bit insane. [*chuckles*]

I mean, the ripple effect of shooting those dogs, when you think about at least one of the dogs - probably all of them in fact - were able to find food, you know, meat, you know - we call 'darch' in Nyoongar language - to be able to find darch for my great-grandfather and his family, and to take that dog out and the others - the other two - would have left them struggling for their meat supply at the time.

And, you know, the trauma that the three little boys and their mother had, you know, when they came back into that household to find them dogs. My grandfather would have been ten years old at the time and his two brothers were a few years younger. What kind of impact would that have had on them, you know? They would have been terrified, you

know. They would have been asking their father and mother, you know, "Why do people do that?"

Sarah Tout:

Throughout this project the team were confronted by such stories, grim and harsh evidence of the conditions under which Aboriginal People were living in Western Australia.

And what becomes clear, is this treatment - and its impact - are not confined to history, nor the neat folders and shelves of archives. Indeed, the letters seem to reach through time, to be heard now, listened to now, their words echoing through the chains of trauma that still hold fast generations later.

Anna Haebich is Darryl Kickett's partner not only in the project, but in life. Anna shared with me what she saw in Darryl's reading his great grandfather's words, and how they both could see the patterns of generational trauma rooted in this letter.

Anna Haebich:

Oh, he was so - so many emotions - so many emotions. It's, like, just the sheer amazement to read these words, to hear them. You know, it's like hearing them, and to see the writing, touch where his ancestor had touched and written, and also to then be thinking about the injustice of what happened, and he felt - when he talked about, like, the little - the children, who were his uncles - they were little kids coming and seeing what had been done to their dogs.

And then we talked a bit about how dogs were and are in Aboriginal families. They're part of the family and it's much - they're much more than that. If I can say this, I know many people love their dogs so much, but they're really almost like, you know, a son, or they really are part of the family.

And so for something to happen like that to a dog in that situation wasn't - it was important in terms of getting food for the family, but it was also that emotional connection and that it kept happening. Darryl's cousin, who descended from James Yombitch - she said that she came home from school one day and her father wasn't there and "Mum," she said, "where is he?"

So she went round, found him round the corner. He was looking very glum and he said, "They're still doing it to us. They've come and killed our dogs." That was in the sixties. So it's these ongoing threads - threads of stories that go down the generations.

Sarah Tout:

After reading me his letter, Darryl shows me a photograph of his and Marion Kickett's family. In the photograph are a few men, including his father's first cousin. They are wearing hats, relaxing against the wall of a small hut, surrounded by several beautiful working dogs. They are a family, his family, on their property of small, modest, shack-like

buildings on some land, with patches out the back for veggies. You can hear him pointing and tapping at the photo on the table as he tells me -

Darryl Kickett:

That photo belonged to Marion, Professor Marion Kickett, my cousin, and she said her father used to say, "They're always killing our dogs," you know, talking about the police. Yeah. It's come down through the generations, that act way back in 1907, you know.

Sarah Tout:

'Cause it didn't end there.

Darryl Kickett:

No, it didn't end there, see. The transgenerational trauma, you know, would have somehow carried on through, you know, to that family's time there in the 1900s, you know - 1960s perhaps.

Sarah Tout:

Back to 1907, and the situation Darryl Kickett's great-grandfather found himself in was not unusual. It was the result of some pretty strict legislation that, at the time, had recently been passed into law, the 1905 Aborigines Act.

If we want to fully understand the context of the letters found in the Ancestors Words project, it is important to appreciate the widespread impact that this law began to have on Aboriginal People and their gradual realisation of what was happening to them. Here is Anna Haebich.

Anna Haebich:

Now, a lot of the people were writing in response to what had happened after the 1905 Aborigines Act was introduced, and which was a draconian, oppressive set of laws that were supposed to be protecting Aboriginal People but actually started a spiral of poverty, imprisonment, and breaking up families, starvation, no access to any, like, schooling, being pushed around, segregated - all of those things.

And I don't think that people... I'm sure people were never told about this. They weren't sent, you know, a little brochure about the 1905 Aborigines Act, "This is what you can expect."

What happened was that they bumped into something. They went to the hotel and the policeman was there and the policeman says, "You are not allowed to have alcohol, and you are not allowed to be present in this hotel. So you get out." Or they might have needed rations and they weren't sure where to go. So they go to the police, and of course the local police under the Act were the local protectors of Aboriginal People. So then they had to deal with these local policemen to get food for their families. So it was a

- or, you know, their child is suddenly taken away. What happens? So they might think, "Oh, well, I can go to the policeman and ask. Maybe [my child] was kidnapped? I don't know."

So then they're writing. Then they find out that there's this whole apparatus set up for implementing this Act. That's the local police, and then the letter - police would send the letters off to the head office in Perth.

And many people know of the name of Mr Neville. "Mr Neville the Devil" many people called him. He was the Chief Protector from 1915 to 1940, and his - the way he, in particular, implemented these laws in a very oppressive way and destructive way for families.

So people were finding out little bits and pieces here and there, but nobody really had a full idea about what this was all about, from what I can understand, but gradually piecing it together and realising that there is this - like, a cage of laws.

It wasn't the only laws. There were at least about 44 other laws that were operating, that had been passed since about 1844, right until the 1950s. So all these laws surrounding Aboriginal People, and so they realise that there were are all these things around them, and then they thought, well - they would have been thinking, "Well, what can I do? I wanna find out."

Darryl Kickett:

Going through the bushland one day, you know, next day there might be a fence up and then you're blocked. And so it had it all, and it was nothing new, you know. The British did it all in other countries as well. So it all came across on the tall ships when they came here: that attitude, that treatment, how to make a slave, you know [*pops his lips*].

'Cause when you take someone's country, you know, what do you do with them? You put 'em on reserves and you take their children and put them in the missions, you know, but first you kill them. You exterminate. It's all in the history books, you know.

And so it's good to see, you know, that I can get some understanding about my great-grandfather at that time in 1907, and have insight and access to the response of the government officers in what they wrote, not thinking that I, the great-grandson of Yombitch, would be one day reading their words too.

Sarah Tout:

Or that you would even ever exist?

Darryl Kickett:

Yes [*softly laughs*].

Sarah Tout:

The repression of Aboriginal People was systemic and deliberate.

This is Gabriel Maddock, a researcher and historian who worked for years, meticulously and methodically searching in the archives for the letters of the Ancestors Words project. It was her job to find letters, and then read all of the correspondence to, and the responses from, the government departments. She saw the way the rules were being applied and concludes:

Gabriel Maddock:

It was a very controlling system, and that comes through very clearly in the correspondence. And it was very clearly built on a lot of racist assumptions and beliefs about Aboriginal People.

And you can see that in the police officers who were writing reports and recommendations to the department, and also within the official department correspondence and the decisions that they're making when they receive these requests for help, and they just - they held so much power. I mean, to be able to decide if two people can marry, or if someone can travel, or whether they, you know, are going to support someone's request that unpaid wages be looked into or something like that. They had a lot of power.

Sarah Tout:

The laws dictated extremely narrow rights for Aboriginal People. As Gabriel says, if an Aboriginal person wanted to get married, or choose their own occupation, or even step foot inside a hotel, they needed to apply for an exemption to the rules. Anna Haebich explains that the letters they found are a reaction to these rules and an appeal to be treated fairly.

Anna Haebich:

Reading them today, from the point [of view] of today, they really are letters that were sent in by people demanding their rights, but they're always couched in those terms. So the thing was that, back then, Aboriginal People had a very - you know, we talk about citizenship and equal rights and everything today. Aboriginal People were in a sort of - bit of a no-man's-land in terms of their rights, and in fact they weren't just people with no rights. They were people with minus rights, even though under the proclamation of the Colony of Western Australia in 1829 they were deemed to be British subjects with the rights to protection from violence and injustice.

Well, we all know what happened over the 19th century and into the 20th century, and then in 1948 they were - as people born in Australia, when the Australian Citizenship Act was passed, they became Australian citizens, but they still didn't have rights. It wasn't, in WA, until 1964 that this cage of legislation started to be really repealed and they could vote in the State elections and all those sorts of things.

So people were writing in letters to the department saying, well, you know, "This happened to me," or it might have been, you know, that point of contact, "I went in to the hotel and the police told me to get out," and so then they say, "I want exemption from that Act. I want that to happen for me."

And so what happened then, that sort of set in motion a whole lot of letter writing. And of course the gift that we have, along with these letters by the Ancestors, is the rest of the file, where all of the administrators and the police are writing all sorts of statements about this application for exemptions and other matters that they think - they have no idea that, one day, someone like myself and yourself and the families will come along and read what they've written, and perhaps they wouldn't have really cared at that time.

So then the letter, the exemption request, goes to the local policeman, and the local policeman - and then it goes on to the head office, and it was supposed to get the approval of the Minister for Aboriginal People, but sometimes they forgot to do that. So the policemen and the department would have a little exchange of ideas and, inevitably, it didn't seem to matter what the person said they were. You know, they might have had a little bit of land or they might have had nothing, but it didn't matter, because what the department and the police just saw was - they called it a ticket to alcohol.

They said, "People only want to get these" - "They only want to get exemptions so they can go and get alcohol for themselves and, of course, then they will be providing all the rest of the local Aboriginal People with alcohol," and that is prohibited under the Act, drinking. And so they didn't interview the people. They didn't look to see if they were actually people who were, sort of, like, 'civilised enough' to be granted an exemption from the 1905 Aborigines Act and all of its provisions.

They just went ahead with this - just a flurry of letters that in the end - and one was sent back to the person, "Well, you can't get an exemption, because you'll be providing alcohol to people and yourself."

Sarah Tout:

So one of the jobs in this project was to read hundreds of police reports, and other documents in the files, that show the chain of events after the letters were received by authorities.

Back to Gabriel Maddock. Remember, this was her job. In reading all of the responses to the letters in this project, and creating a database of each letter, and each report and reply, Gabriel was in a position to have a very particular understanding of the situation for Aboriginal People. I asked her what it was like personally to have read through all of that material.

Gabriel Maddock:

It was an amazing experience.

In the end it's almost 2,000 pages of correspondence contained in our database, and that's not just letters by Nyoongar People. That's also all the responses from the government officials, and the police officers, and magistrates, and everything.

So it is a lot of correspondence. And yeah, it was quite profound, actually, reading through all of that very carefully, 'cause I really built up a very vivid picture of what the system was like, and what life was like for the letter writers. I got a glimpse into how hard their lives were, but also on the other side how the government officials sort of approached these people, and their responses, and their responses were often quite dismissive. And, you know, you got a very clear picture of how these people were treating Aboriginal People at the time.

Sarah Tout:

I asked Gabriel how it felt to read through the replies to the letters from the authorities.

Gabriel Maddock:

It was really difficult and disturbing, I think, how easily people's requests for help were dismissed, 'cause they weren't minor requests, you know. They were obviously having a really difficult time, and to see how the government officials didn't look into the personal circumstances of people in many instances, you know. They were enforcing a system and it didn't really matter how much distress someone was in if it didn't - if their request didn't align with, sort of, the vision of the department, then they were dismissed.

And, you know, a lot of the dismissals were backed up by the police officers in the country towns, who just held a lot of power. So it was disturbing to think that the people writing these requests had no other avenues to seek out the help that they needed.

Sarah Tout:

Okay. So by now we have heard a pretty clear picture of the oppression faced by these letter writers, and the power structures in place to keep Aboriginal People controlled in very challenging and often traumatic circumstances.

Project Elder Dean Collard reflects on this.

Dean Collard:

We could define a shape and how much struggle there would have been for our old people into a system they didn't understand, and we feel that today. We resonate with those words. Have we moved very far in a hundred years? So it causes some deep thinking about it.

And it's not all bad, mind you. There's a way in which we can use this as a platform to communicate at a different level to people in this country that want to learn, that want to know the history of the country - a proper history.

And we don't want to portray a 'poor fella me' response to this, 'cause we think that our Elders were powerful. We think they were advocating at a level with respect, and the problem was there was no reciprocal wisdom being expressed by Mr Neville or his system. I don't think they knew how to do it properly. So they were chained to their own history of a thousand-odd years coming out of England and whatever. Didn't do us any good, but I think we can use this material, you know, to make a better Australia.

Sarah Tout:

I am interested and moved by the idea that this project, and the letters, have the power to make change. They're not just evidence of powerlessness but in fact have great power within them. They reclaim it.

I asked Dean to talk about the power that he can hear in the letters.

Dean Collard:

Well, I believe there's a different type of power that exists within this type of communication, this interaction between a dominant system and those that are oppressed by it, and I think there's huge capacity to look at what's happening there and what's happening today to occupy the role of being a teacher. And there is power in that, because we're teaching something that the system doesn't know, really.

And it's not about the ordinary description of what power might be. I mean, that type of power is pretty toxic. It's not something that we would want to strive for and, in fact, that's the danger that we do. The more we interact with the system, the more we rub up against power and we replicate that system. We want to be part of it. We want to belong to something.

So I guess we need to be careful like our old fellas did. When they ran into territory they did not know, they experimented. They explored. What worked was good. What didn't they drew back from.

So it is a type of environment today that we're looking at. We don't know a lot of things in this system but we know it's dangerous in a lot of ways, in which an interaction occurs and we're affected by it. We become harsh and cynical. We lose our old ways of respect and giving and reciprocity, all those human values and traits that existed in our community naturally, and through our ceremonies and songs and the way in which our whole community was constructed - was based not on warfare, not on that type of power that existed in a European structure, framework. And that's always been the dilemma: how do we bring those old ways into a modern, contemporary, complex world?

Sarah Tout:

We will look soon at some of the impact of the ancestors' words - and of this project - both on the recipients of the letters, and in terms of the implications for how we keep archival material.

But first I want to introduce you to historian Tiffany Shellam to take a closer look at some of the letters that she has been working with in this project.

Dawn Gilchrist is the custodian of six letters written between 1888 and 1893 by her ancestor, Charles Mortimer. He was an Aboriginal shepherd who grew up in the late 19th century, in the New Norcia mission, before moving to Carnarvon and working as a stockman and shepherd.

Tiffany Shellam has been working with six letters he wrote to Benedictine monk Rosendo Salvado, the founder of the New Norcia Mission.

Tiffany Shellam:

So he's asking Salvado for religious books, for pictures in his - to put up on his wall and his cottages and different kinds of things from the mission, and in return he offers Salvado bird's eggs that he's been collecting or parrots, live parrots, that he sends down to Fremantle and then on to New Norcia. He also collects artefacts, Aboriginal artefacts, from around the Gascoyne region, and he sends them to Salvado. So it's this lovely kind of negotiated interaction over these six letters.

Sarah Tout:

Tiffany goes on to give a beautiful description of not only the strategy and intention of the letter, but the physical writing itself: what she can see in it, and what is invoked for her by reading it.

Tiffany Shellam:

They are really, I think, quite amazing letters. They're quite different to some of the other letters that we've been looking at in this project, because they are not written to government agents, so they're not in the State Records Office. They're actually in the New Norcia archive, but they have copies of them in the Records Office in WA, too.

But I think what really struck me about these letters is the kind of negotiating nature of them. Charles Mortimer has a good relationship to Salvado, but he also knows that writing these letters is going to bring him things that he needs and wants, and he can also give things to Salvado in return, which he does. The letters are really beautiful scripted writing - really interesting ways in which he structured the letters.

I think it's a really distinctively Aboriginal letter-writing structure, and they have their own, I think, special qualities if you can, kind of, loosen your ears to their rhythmic deliberations. They're really beautifully written. There's a kind of recitative repetition which is part of this kind of Aboriginal verbal communication at this time, of course, and in these letters there is a kind of reiteration by Charles Mortimer of a central request that he comes back to constantly, over and over again, to Salvado.

Yeah. I think the letters - you know, there's - you know, the spelling is tricky. The language is tricky. The structure of the sentences - it might be hard for our ears today to

understand, but I think they really reveal the ways in which Aboriginal letter writers in this era, the late 19th century, were grappling with the written form, and I think they evoke a really beautiful rhythm. Yeah. They allow us to hear Mortimer's way of speaking, I think.

So, for example, instead of punctuation breaks like full stops and commas, to begin a new sentence Mortimer uses the term "my Lord" to address Salvado, and you can kind of imagine him thinking of this as a conversation he's having with Salvado face-to-face. A phrase "my Lord" which begins and ends a sentence instead of a full stop - we can imagine Mortimer pausing for breath - I don't know - shifting the weight between his feet. As the conversation has the chance to move to another topic, his pen pausing before he makes another request.

Sarah Tout:

Project researcher Gabriel Maddock also shared with me her descriptions of how the letters in the project appear.

Gabriel Maddock:

Well, they were all really different, you know. As you can imagine, everyone had a very different style, different handwriting. Some people, you know, if they couldn't write, would have people writing on their behalf. Other people, you know, had beautiful handwriting and wrote very eloquently. So there was a real range, and it was interesting to see handwritten letters, but there were also a lot of petitions signed by multiple people and also telegrams as well, which were very short and succinct, but very interesting as well.

Sarah Tout:

Gabriel also reflects on the impact of seeing and holding the letters.

Gabriel Maddock:

When you see the actual files and you get this very strong feeling that, you know, these are the bits of paper that the people held and, you know, you see their handwriting and their signature, you certainly feel a lot closer to the letter writer, I think, when you're seeing the original, and the colour copies are beautiful and do give a real sense of what those original files are like.

Sarah Tout:

Anna Haebich expands on this idea of the preciousness of these letters, their specialness, their value and their meaning to the people to whom they were returned.

Anna Haebich:

They are treasures, first of all because in a lot of families they don't - they might have been living in tents. You know, it's only in the last, say, four decades, five decades that

people have all been getting housed. So way back then when these letters were being written, people often just camped in tents and people didn't have time for, you know, offices and filing cabinets to put all the letters in. You know, there was no time for that and so people didn't have anything much like, probably, you have, I have.

You know, letters that family, grandpa, great-grandpa wrote, you know - so there's nothing like that much in a lot of the families. Some families there are, but many there's not, and so to have something like this suddenly come back was like a jewel, you know, from the past, this treasured piece of paper. Even if it was just a small piece of paper, you know, it was something, because it's written, in their hands. It's their voices.

Now, some of the letters are really powerful just to look at them. So imagine you're not even a family member, and so you look at the letter and you can sometimes almost - this anger's scored the letters, you know, scored into the paper with this pen, you know, hastily written. And others are so carefully written and beautiful, careful writing and expression.

And I think that that might come from, first of all, a nervousness about writing a letter to this person who may have your child in their custody or you need rations to feed your family, but also because - from research I've done on Nyoongar performance, that when people who didn't know each other well and first met there was a process of great formal connection and introduction. That reminds me of these letters, you know, "Dear Sir, I beg your", blah blah blah. Yeah.

So there's something - they're not just letters of begging or anything like that. They're letters that are written in a way that fits with Nyoongar ways. And they're also letters - they're written for all sorts of reasons, often of survival, but they're letters that we see as letters of activism.

Sarah Tout:

And it is this - their status as letters of activism, their value, their power - this is what the Ancestors Words team recognised and sought to return to the families of the letter writer.

The return process was something the team crafted slowly, with particular emphasis on respect and sensitivity.

Darryl Kickett's role in the project was to lead the connection back to community, to gently and respectfully build a family tree of the letter writer, reach out to the Elders of the community of the descendants and begin a dialogue to support the return of the letter.

The process also included a careful follow up with the recipient, and you can hear the swish of Darryl's jacket as he gestures and explains.

Darryl Kickett:

You know, you couldn't just go once and just hand back the ancestor's letters. You had to go back and make sure the descendant, was okay and was able to be comfortable with what the letter said and to help them reflect on. And, you know, we had to even help some people conduct that appeal process against, you know, the way the letter was treated in the past by the government, by the police or whatever. And so we had to conduct that appeal process to help the emotions to settle down, you know. Very important.

Sarah Tout:

There's just so much in that repatriation process.

Darryl Kickett:

Yes.

Sarah Tout:

'Cause ultimately, well, is it fair to say it's about healing?

Darryl Kickett:

It is a healing - it's part of the healing process, 'cause a lot of our people are, perhaps, on their own healing journey, you know. We've got to understand that, that what we tell them doesn't become a burden, you know.

Sarah Tout:

Dean Collard.

Dean Collard:

What I can say, because Darryl Kickett was the one in the initial stages of the release of these letters, did tremendous work in going back to families and making known what was happening with these letters and the connection back to families. I wasn't part of that, but hearing from Darryl about the response that he received, I know that in some of these connections that were made by Darryl there was a bit of uncertainty and maybe even a bit of fear around what was happening.

And in our discussions, the small team that are working on this, is how do we make this connection something that can be a powerful advocate for their own growth, that family's growth, that connection to the possibilities that this letter or these letters, and the contents of those letters and the intent of those letters, the way we can dissect the meanings and the thoughts and respectfully place them in front of the family or the individual. And so we see that as a type of nation building, direct people connection.

Sarah Tout:

And there is power in that connection.

We see this in some of the reactions by family recipients of the letters. Whether it is in the form of inspiration, or indeed a recognition of where some of your own traits come from. Learning about your family, your ancestors, what they were like, what actions they took to use their power, use their voices and ask for what they wanted. It means a lot to people.

Anna Haebich offers this story of a woman who told them about her grandfather's request for an exemption.

Anna Haebich:

And he said, "I'm a footballer. I play football here and I want to go to the pub with my friends" - this is about 1907, '10 - "after the game." And so of course he didn't get it, but she, who we thought - she was a very activist woman herself, an Elder now, and she said she was so proud that he had written that letter. And then she could see how, as he became an Elder and he was working and setting up organisations and helping people - which she sort of did herself in her own life, and she could see this stream of connection. Meant so much to her.

Sarah Tout:

In some cases the return of a letter to family was an act of reconnecting something that felt lost or severed in that family's very identity.

Allowing people the opportunity to discover who their family is can be very powerful and, indeed, healing, particularly in families that have suffered the removal of children.

I asked Anna to tell me more about one particular man who'd expressed a sense that he now knew where he came from.

Anna Haebich:

Well, of course, there were so many children taken away over this period and, I mean, it's interesting there weren't so many letters about stolen generations. I think people over time realised that coming to the attention of the department and making any sort of trouble was trouble for everybody, the family left behind and maybe the child in the institution as well.

But he was sent away to an institution and he didn't know about his - a little bit - a few little bits of names, here and there. But from when - I went with Darryl and we sat down and he talked with this man. Lovely gentleman, and he could see Darryl had done the family tree. So we usually took a family tree as well, so show people where it fitted, and he said, "That's it." He said, "That's so wonderful. Thank you for the letter. Thank you. Now

I can go back and explain to my children, my grown-up children, where we all come from.”

And really the knowledge of family is everything, you know. I don't know. With Darryl, you know, he's always explaining this person is related to this person, and everyone - you start to think that all of Nyoongar People, if you traced everyone's family they would have a connection somewhere, and that's wonderful. And that's all part of - really, during these times of spiralling poverty and - it's being looked down on all the time by everyone on the outside, being not valued in any way. And that people found within families this love and support and, you know, sitting round - you didn't have much, but you could sit around the campfire and tell some good stories and have a good yarn and have a good laugh, you know. And so these letters gone back to that. They were captured in the archive all those years, some of them a hundred years, and now they're back in that context.

Sarah Tout:

The 25th of October 2021 is (or was, depending on when you're listening to this) the second anniversary of the Tandanya Declaration.

It's a document, presented in 2019, at an international Indigenous archival summit held in Adelaide.

It details the issues at play when archiving stories, voices, and material. It names the many problems of colonisation and advocates for changes in the way that material be archived.

Anna Haebich:

So I have very strong views about the archive and its importance, but also the many problems with these very colonial - well, they're just colonial archives. What they do, they buttress colonialism before, and still. So I have a lot to say about that [*chuckles*] if you like, and that was part of the reason I started the project, too, was to, you know - I don't know. We started using the word 'decolonising' archives then, but 'decolonise' is becoming so widely used it almost means nothing now.

But, you know, to take the letters out of the archive, to recognise their significance, to recognise the Nyoongar story that they told, which was being overlooked by many people or just not known, and also - except in the families - and also to bring those letters back to correct that, to return to the chains of stories that families had and all of the memories that people held about their ancestors and to say, "Listen to this. Read this. This is the voice of your ancestor speaking directly to you." And of course many tears, many tears when people were reading those letters for the first time.

Tiffany Shellam:

I think - and I've worked in archives, you know, for many years now, and I always knew that there was an uneven power balance in what I was doing as a historian, a non-

Indigenous historian, working in that kind of space. I, you know, did used to see more opportunities than limitations.

I think starting this project, and because of Anna's experience as well, and her guidance and the guidance of Darryl Kickett and Dean Collard and others, I've been able to really see the ways in which there are still opportunities in this space, the archive, even though the limitations are obviously there - clearly there, in terms of the power imbalance and issues around access and privacy and all of those issues. But I think the ways in which the archive still has opportunity today is in the kinds of model, I think, that this project sets up, in which we can liberate these letters by working closely with community and having the guidance of Darryl Kickett and Dean and others.

I think that kind of process, that model that we've set up here, I think, is really, yeah, exciting because it shows you, I think, a way in which to understand the context of the archive and the context in which these letters sit in the archive, which is vital in order to be able to return them as well and be able to explain the context to families, but also having the ability for families to add their own stories about these letters back to the archive. And I think that's really important to have that now returned to the archive, that interpretation, so the descendants of these letter writers are allowed to have their space for their own voices to return these living treasures to their own context, their family context, which is where they have not been for so long.

Sarah Tout:

Tiffany Shellam there. Darryl Kickett adds that we need to go a step further, and we hear him point repeatedly at the table as he speaks passionately.

Darryl Kickett:

I'd be creating these opportunities for Aboriginal People or Nyoongar People or whoever. I'd be creating these things. Because whilst Native Title and these other things are good, you know, if you don't have a place where you can store your historical and cultural material and to learn from that, you know, it's like there's a missing link, you know, and we need to have a keeping place.

So if I was a Minister, that's one of the first things I would do - is not only [*clears throat*] create a Nyoongar country, for example - not only create a central keeping place, but I'd set up satellite keeping places in various parts of Nyoongar country as well and be a conduit between the archives and other places and local families, so that they can access and learn from these historical and important Nyoongar stories and properties, you know, because they're quite powerful. They can be quite powerful in the development of our spirit, you know.

Sarah Tout:

Yeah, and identity.

Darryl Kickett:

And our identity, yes. To say, okay, you know, "I'm not ashamed to be Nyoongar. I'm proud to be a Nyoongar and I'm proud to read about my great-great-grandfather and what he did, and I'm proud about his brother, Billy Kickett, who rode on a horse for six months guiding John Forrest across to Adelaide to mark out the telegraph route from Perth to Adelaide to link them up to the eastern states. I'm proud of those things," but no one learns about it. We don't have capacity yet to establish our institutions so that people can learn.

Sarah Tout:

Tiffany Shellam.

Tiffany Shellam:

There are exciting moves, I think, in the world of archives right now, where I feel like there is - we're kind of really at the moment of change, and there's a lot of push by Indigenous archivists, Indigenous workers, writers and creative responders who are definitely making waves and making sure that archives change, and I think archives are listening. I think they really are. I think that's certainly been clear from our experience working with the State Records Office of WA. Working with the archivists the whole time has, I think, enabled for a real conversation to take place and to keep going, and it's just the beginning, really, of this journey of change and liberating these kinds of archival documents.

Sarah Tout:

Gabriel Maddock has created a new home for many copies of the files in a database.

Gabriel Maddock:

Yeah. So we saved copies of all the files, because, you know, at the archive they aren't all saved together. They're spread out through, you know, hundreds and hundreds of boxes, so we have saved copies of them all and created our own list that, you know, records all the details, including, you know, the areas that the letter writers were from and, you know, a summary of what's in each file, and that sort of allowed us to build up a bigger picture of these letters, and I think we found more than 200 letters by about 150 different Nyoongar letter writers. So, yeah, seeing that bigger picture was really interesting.

Sarah Tout:

Yes, and that's a lot of data *[laughs]* to start to formulate quite a clear picture.

Gabriel Maddock:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, and certainly when you consider that each letter sits within a much larger file of correspondence. Yeah. There's a lot of information in that database that I think is certainly incredibly important for families but has a lot of historical value and

adds a lot to our understanding of what was happening in Western Australia during that era and how Aboriginal People were being treated.

Sarah Tout:

Looking at the wider impact of Ancestors Words, Dean Collard sees the project as a form of - and an opportunity for - nation building. I'll let him define this term in his own words.

Dean Collard:

Nation building for us is about reforming who we were in a contemporary environment. We want to bring the whole values that we had, and because colonisation smashed our system to pieces mercilessly, we have to do a forensic search to go back and recover as much as we can. So this is a good opportunity...

[music: 'Ancestors Words' by Sarah Tout]

...to see this project as a mechanism of nation building, and that's a positive. It's a positive for all of us if we look at it in the right way, and we want to share that story. We want to share that for the benefit of all of us.

Sarah Tout:

Thank you listening to the Geoffrey Bolton Lecture 2021: Yarning Ancestors Words.

Thank you for considering the words of the speakers Darryl Kickett, Dean Collard, Anna Haebich, Gabriel Maddock, and Tiffany Shellam.

Enormous thanks to Darryl, Dean, Anna, Gabriel, and Tiffany for their time, their expertise and their wisdom. It was an extraordinary pleasure and privilege to listen to them share, and to create this space today for their knowledge.

If you'd like to know more about the Ancestors Words project, the team are currently creating a book about the letters, so keep an eye out.

This podcast was produced for the State Records Office of Western Australia by me, Sarah Tout.

It was recorded on location at Curtin University on Whadjuk Boodjar, and Tiffany Shellam joined us remotely from her home in Melbourne on Wurundjeri country.

This podcast was edited by me and Adrian Sardi, and mixed and mastered by Sardi at Sugarland Studios.

[music ends]