

Sarah Tout:

Hello and Welcome to Voices of the Archives: a podcast exploring Margaret Medcalf Award-winning stories, from the State Records Office of WA. My name is Sarah Tout. A content warning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders listeners, this episode does discuss historical mistreatment of Aboriginal people.

[music: 'Voices of the Archives' by Sarah Tout]

I want to take you in to the State Records Office of Western Australia where there's a 30-page file that includes a petition letter, scripted on behalf of two Nyungar men, Tommy Dower and Johnny Carroll, in November of 1886. The petition was signed by 47 settlers of the Swan River Colony. In the archive today, the petition is considered to be an "orphan letter," with no family to connect it to. That is the beginning of a paper by Tiffany Shellam, researcher, academic and author from her work: *The Collective Nyungar Heritage of an "Orphan Letter"*. It was published in 2019 and it won the State Record's Office's Margaret Medcalf Award in 2020. The paper is part of a collection curated by Anna Haebich, *Ancestors Words*.

Tiffany Shellam's work highlights the voices, the experiences, the perspectives and the stories of Aboriginal people that are often not documented or are missing from our records and therefore from our understanding. I began by asking Tiffany about Tommy Dower and Johnny Carroll and their petition in 1886 for land in WA. These men understood their right to land, and had been negotiating and requesting land before this petition, but what happened?

Tiffany Shellam:

Yes that's right. Well, Tommy Dower in particular had been working on petitions earlier in the years leading up to this particular petition. He had been working with John Forrest and had some really key connections in the Colonial settlement and he knew his rights, I think, in terms of what he was owed, particularly as he had guided Forrest on his expeditions, and, on the return to Perth after those expeditions had finished, he had been promised land that he had never received. And so he had this sense of his right to land. And he worked with Tommy Dower, sorry, Tommy Dower worked with Johnny Carroll on this particular petition, which was scripted on their behalf by some really senior, or key, Western Australian settlers who were very well connected in Government and across the municipalities of Fremantle and Perth. And they really knew their rights and what their community needed was land to live on and where they could also grow crops and have houses and that's what they were asking for in this petition.

Sarah Tout:

And now, the Chair of the Aboriginal Protection Board, at the time, offered them 320 acres – and then sent Dower to prison on Wadjemup – and then they were eventually awarded something more like 2,000 acres near Gnangara. Can you unpack that for us a little bit more? What happened?

Tiffany Shellam:

Yes, yeah, that's right. So, I think what I learnt from looking at this petition in the archive was that, actually, there's a lot more context to put together either side of these petition dates which was 1886 in September. So, by looking at the other files in the archives I realized that, in particular, Tommy Dower was under scrutiny by some of the people in what would become the Aborigines Protection Board, and also his friend, Sir John Forrest, was in Government at the time and he – everyone was wielding their own power really. Dower had been charged with drunkenness and been sent to Rottneest Island – Wadjemup – where he spent a month in prison. And when he returned this is when things started to change. And there a few different trigger points

I guess but I think he actually did have support, and there was a need with the set-up of the Aborigines Protection Board – a need to be doing something – for the settlers to be doing something – for the Government to be actually acting in accordance with Indigenous rights at this time. So, it wasn't until 1887 in June or July when the land grant was given to Dower and his community, but it was much more than the initial suggestion of 320 acres as you say – it was 2,000 acres and it was on country that they had requested themselves.

Sarah Tout:

Mm, it's a really fascinating unfolding of events, and you touched on a number of points there, including power and the importance of support. I was really intrigued to read in your paper that newspapers at the time were quite often supportive of Aboriginal People and you cite Chiara Gamboz's suggestion that they were "vehicles for Aboriginal activism." Tell us more.

Tiffany Shellam:

Yes, that's right. I think that's an argument that she puts forward, and I think that Geoffrey Bolton also used that argument too, and I think, it is absolutely right, that they were – that if, I think, if, particular newspaper editors, had views on Aboriginal people that were positive, they often got a very good rap in the newspaper, but of course, other newspaper editors, y'know, might not have been so sympathetic, and then had – would've possibly published something a little bit derogatory, or not supportive. And so I think they – that Aboriginal people also saw this power, and knew how to wield that, I think, in terms of getting what they needed, through those sort of actions of activism.

Sarah Tout:

Mm, I notice in your work, there is an intention to give representation to voices and stories outside of what is only represented in the archives. Tell me a little bit about the collaborative approach in your methodology and talk to us a bit about *Ancestors Words* as a project.

Tiffany Shellam:

Yes, yeah, absolutely. Well, yes, my work for this article comes from a larger project called *Ancestors Words: Nyungar Writing in Government Archives*, and it is led by Professor Anna Haebich at Curtin University and by Darryl Kickett, also at Curtin University, a Wiilman Nyungar Elder. And this project is a completely collaborative project working with the Nyungar community – with Nyungar families – to unearth letters that are held in the archives that were written by Nyungar letter-writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And we work together with the descendants of the letter-writers and Nyungar families and Elders with a working group of Elders to return these letters, and the context in which they were written, to the family, and we then work with families to unpack the letters and to recontextualise them beyond the archive, and within living family histories.

Sarah Tout:

Mm

Tiffany Shellam:

So it's a – yeah – it's a project which is very collaborative, and we're really guided by the Nyungar families and what their needs and wants are, and it's been a very enriching project and I've learnt a lot along the way.

Sarah Tout:

I'm sure. You write that few families that you met with even knew that their ancestors had written letters, or signed petitions. Were you the person to communicate that to some of the people you consulted with?

Tiffany Shellam:

In the group we were, yes, we did that in the groups together. We all spent time with families going through the files because these files obviously they – in some instances have positive outcomes, but not always. But also they're very emotional documents, because they are, as Darryl Kickett beautifully suggests, they're the voices of the ancestors on the page. We can see the writing and read the writing of these Nyungar men and women, very carefully and patiently scripted, and the voices are there right in the archive. And you also think of an archive as a non-Indigenous space, a space where there are bureaucratic writings *about* Aboriginal people, you don't often see words and letters and this kind of script in Nyungar writing. So they're very powerful but they are very emotional documents. Because they were letters to government agents at the time often, they did generate a response. So you get – even if a request for whatever it was – land or food or rations or exemptions – even if it was denied, the bureaucratic action had to respond. So there was – they did create action, they were – you can see them as documents of activism in that way.

Sarah Tout:

Mm, can I ask you to reflect on the importance of the State Records Office to your work, or the function of archiving and record keeping for you?

Tiffany Shellam:

As a historian working in an archive, I think my work is so enriched by conversations I've had with archivists, particularly at the State Records Office of WA. I couldn't have learnt the context and the kind of archival biography of this document, these petitions, without the conversations I had with the archivists there. So, working with Gerard Foley and Damien Hassan, I really got a sense of the ways in which this document was filed and archived, and the kind of ways in which those categorisations that were put onto the document changed the way that I would actually view that as a user of the archives, and my opinions that I might make about this particular document.

Sarah Tout:

That's interesting. Can you give us an example of the way that it had been archived forming your reading?

Tiffany Shellam:

Yes, okay, so, for example, even the title of the file is titled: *A petition by Tommy Dower and Other Aborigines for Land* etcetera. And the fact that it doesn't include Johnny Carroll's name who is also a petitioner that was erased from that category, I just couldn't quite understand what that was about. And so I, after the conversations with Gerard and others, I realised the removal of his name was because Tommy Dower was much more influential and well-known at the time, having travelled with Forrest, and so, in the bureaucratic institution in which it was first received, Carroll's name was not included because it wasn't seen to be an important part – so it's actually removal of someone's history and identity in an archival space by not including his name. And then, of course, when that document, which was changed from the bureaucratic site to the archive – when that file was sent over to the archive, it was archived without his name as well. So just those little changes I think make you realise how powerful the role is of an archivist.

Sarah Tout:

Indeed. I'm curious about your journey in choosing this letter and wanting to write about it. Why is this area of research and history important to you?

Tiffany Shellam:

Well I think it's very important. I think in particular, the letters project ... I have learnt so much being a part of this collaborative group. And I've been learning so much as I go, about the ways in which, as a non-Indigenous historian, I can and should be working in an archive and in what ways. And, I think we can't really do this kind of history without ... the archive is no longer enough. We must be working in collaboration with Indigenous communities whose histories we are researching. These are their ancestors. And, I think these letters speak so powerfully to that. The voices of the ancestors being so present in the letters, and also they are tangible heritage of Nyungar people, they are very very precious. They're the treasury of their precious histories, they are really really valuable to the Nyungar families and therefore we must tread very carefully when working in this way.

Sarah Tout:

I think it is incredibly important, and I'm so pleased that you are doing the work that you are doing, thank you.

Tiffany Shellam:

Thank you Sarah.

Sarah Tout:

Your paper won last year's Margaret Medcalf Award. Tell me why you nominated.

Tiffany Shellam:

Well actually, I didn't nominate. I was contacted by the Records Office and they had said that my article had been mysteriously nominated by somebody and I didn't – I still don't know who that was, so I'm not sure if I can answer that. Yeah, it was a very big surprise, a real thrill.

Sarah Tout:

Now that you've come through, and you have been awarded, you won, can you reflect on why people ought to put their work forward for such an award?

Tiffany Shellam:

Ah, yes, I think it's a really important award. I think archival research is actually highly skilled work, and I think in particular knowing how to draw things out of an archive, you need to actually have a lot of conversations with the archivists and build up relationships with them as well as with people in the community as I already mentioned before. I think acknowledging that that kind of work – the patient sort of sifting through the lonely – it can be very lonely work, and hard work – but it is incredibly worthwhile, in my opinion, and I think acknowledging that, and also allowing for the stories of people like Tommy Dower and Johnny Carroll to be broadcast in a way which celebrates their work and their activism and their lives, I think it's very worthy, so I think this kind of award is really great for that to be highlighted.

[music: 'Voices of the Archives' by Sarah Tout]

Sarah Tout:

Tiffany, thank you so much for your time today. It has been a pleasure to talk to you.

Tiffany Shellam:

Aww, thanks very much Sarah, thank you for talking to me too.

Sarah Tout:

And thank you for listening to *Voices of the Archives*: a podcast exploring Margaret Medcalf Award-winning stories, from the State Records Office of WA.

I'd like to thank Darryl Kickett and Anna Haebich for their guidance and contribution to this episode. Tiffany Shellam's paper is *The Collective Nyungar Heritage of an "Orphan Letter"*, and it is part of their *Ancestors Words* project.

This conversation was recorded on Whadjuk Boodjar, at RTRFM studios in Mt Lawley, by me – Sarah Tout.

This episode was produced by myself and the State Records Office of WA and mixed and mastered at Sugarland Studios by Adrian Sardi.

For more episodes, and more info about the Margaret Medcalf Award, head to the State Records Office of WA's website.