

## Heart of darkness: after 86 years, truth finally sees the light

*It was a dark secret that took decades to percolate to the surface. It involved an Indigenous skull; a cave at the foot of Uluru; and the recent discovery of documents in a garage in Brisbane.*

By Matthew Condon



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From space, Uluru appears as a rust-coloured shard of rock resting on a piece of deep green velvet cloth, the fabric smooth around the fragment's immediate perimeter, then fanning out in gentle rills and folds. And if you study that fragment long enough, in a now famous image taken from 400km above Earth by astronaut Thomas Pesquet aboard the International Space Station, your imagination can see things in it. Perhaps a clenched fist. Possibly a distorted face, tilted back and moaning in grief.

Back on terra firma, this sacred sandstone monolith sits 468km by road south-west of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Its "gravity of the archaic" has an almost magnetic pull, writes poet and author Barry Hill, and represents an "undeniable statement of the continent's

antiquity”. Tighten the focus to Uluru’s southern end and you’ll find the Mutitjulu waterhole. Here, in the Dreaming, the Kuniya (python) woman avenged her nephew who had been killed by a group of Liru, or brown snakes. She confronted one of the Liru, and in a rage bludgeoned him to death. He dropped his shield near the waterhole during the attack. A boulder remains where it fell.

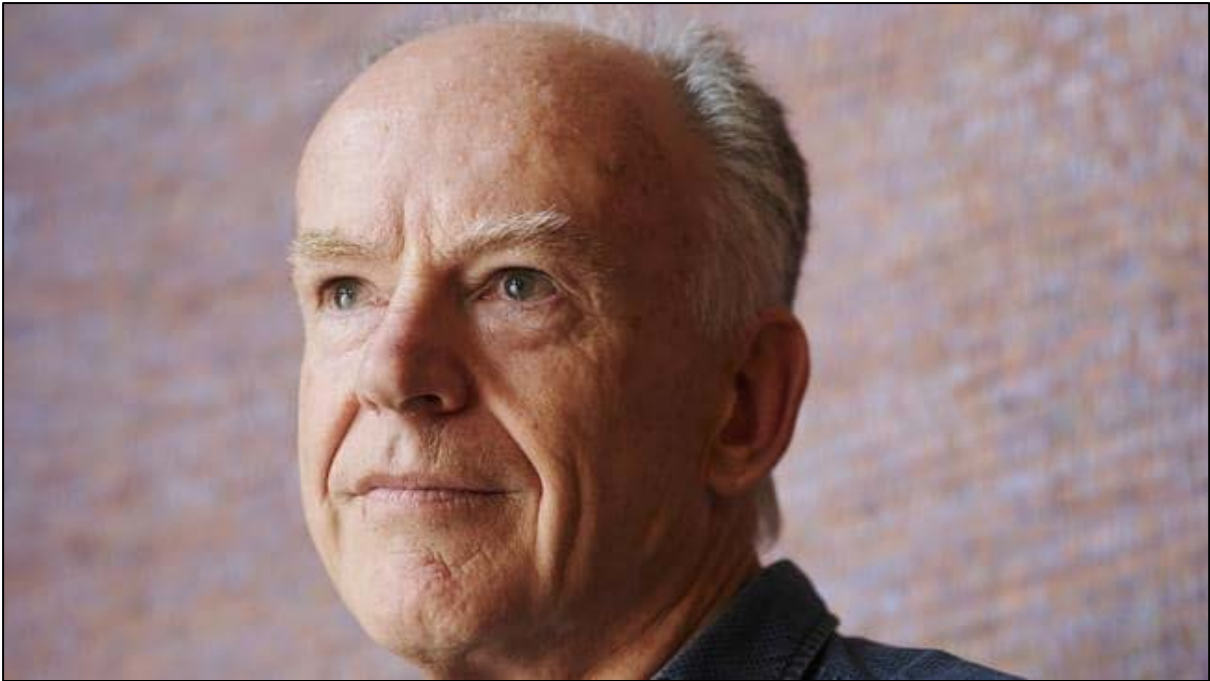
In 2013, historian Mark McKenna stepped into these ancient stories, the dizzying sacredness and myth and physical awe that for millennia has spun around this geological wonder of the world. Visiting Uluru for the first time, he thought he might write about “the Centre”. Many had come before him – explorers, writers, artists, historians – drawn to Central Australia, and to the rock, to this great immovable truth. What could it tell us about ourselves, as Australians?

McKenna, 61, professor of history at The University of Sydney, had been circling the notion of Uluru for years. He had a question: how had it been transfigured from a striking monolith to the spiritual centre of the country? That was a theoretical starting point, the sort of thing a writer or historian might kick around at the beginning of a project, looking for traction, searching for friction. At that point it was as if he were seeing Uluru from space, similar to Pesquet, and puzzling over that orange fragment on a stretch of baize cloth.

But McKenna’s mission inadvertently shifted. During his research he came upon a largely forgotten story. A murder. In a cave at the rock, near where Liru’s shield fell at the waterhole. And McKenna’s original question was replaced with another that was tangibly and painfully real. What really happened in that cave in late 1934, when young Indigenous man Yokununna was hunted down and killed by white policeman Bill McKinnon?

That investigation would take McKenna across the country and ultimately lead him to a non-descript house in suburban Brisbane, where he would find some crucial evidence packed away in an old trunk. Through the forensic examination of one incident, one moment, McKenna would expose what fellow historian James Boyce would call “the wounded heart of Australia”.

So in late winter last year, more than six years after he first thought of writing about the rock, and with his investigation largely complete, McKenna returned to Uluru to try to find the cave where Yokununna lost his life. At Mutitjulu waterhole, where Kuniya had killed the Liru, he met a relative of Yokununna, Sammy Wilson, and they searched for the death site. In the rocks above the waterhole they finally found the entrance to the cave. There, in that darkness, two stories – the tale of Yokununna’s demise 86 years ago, as passed down through generations of his family and friends, and a version of the same event from an official government inquiry into the shooting, along with white-man myth over time – finally came together. And with that marriage, the truth.



*Mark McKenna. Picture: Rohan Thomson*

Professor Mark McKenna is speaking via Zoom from a small room in the public library in Eden, on the far south coast of NSW. When he's not teaching at the University of Sydney, he lives on acreage on the Towamba River outside Eden with his partner Fiona and their daughters.

There's a youthful curiosity about McKenna that makes sense in the context of his award-winning books. While he has won several national prizes, including a Prime Minister's Literary Award for *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, it's his other works on Australian history that expose his passion for drawing out stories that, for whatever reason, have been neglected or lost to time or, in some instances, wilfully concealed. Tales that "lie on the edge of the continent and the edge of national consciousness".

As a student at the University of NSW, his mentor and teacher was Donald Horne, author of *The Lucky Country*. "Donald had a big influence on me," McKenna says. Horne's students would ask how they could change things, what they could do. "And Donald, in his classic matter-of-fact style, said you just get out there and you talk, you write, you talk, and you don't stop."

McKenna began his Uluru project as an elegiac meditation on the rock and its place in our imaginations but became drawn into a very real on-the-ground investigation into policeman Bill McKinnon and that moment in 1934 that changed so many lives. He does get out there. And he talks. "I really did have the sense with this one that I just had to go with this, and of course it got bigger and bigger... the story seemed to have a rhythm that was already there, that I just had to uncover. Ironically, it's got the potential to convey the bigger points of our history and the foundational violence of that history, than if you imagine a whole history of the frontier in Australia... in the darkness inside Uluru, the metaphorical dimensions I don't need to elaborate."



*Bill McKinnon.*

Queensland-born Bill McKinnon arrived by train in Stuart (later known as Alice Springs) in 1931, aged 30, to join the town's small police force. He was, according to McKenna, "lean, brash and tough... a no-nonsense raconteur with a sharp tongue and unyielding forbearance and determination". He'd had a varied working life up to that point: a prison warden in Brisbane, an officer in the NSW Mounted Police, and a warrant officer in Rabaul in Papua New Guinea – where he was dismissed for insolence. Joining the police in Central Australia, he "entered a brutalised world, similar to the one he had known in Rabaul", McKenna says. "It was an 'us or them' mentality. Whipping, spearing, poisoning, rape, shootings and long marches of Aboriginal prisoners handcuffed or chained by the neck quickly became a part of his everyday existence."

In late August 1934, Aboriginal station hand Kai-Umen, who worked at Angas Downs Station, 130km east of what was then known as Ayers Rock, was murdered by fellow Pitjantjatjara men for "infringing tribal law". McKinnon – on patrol with his Aboriginal trackers, known as Carbine and Police Paddy – was ordered to hunt down the killers. Six suspects were arrested and charged with murder: Numberlin, Wong-We, Paddy Uluru, Joseph Donald, Tony Naninga and Yokununna. But the men escaped, and after weeks of hard slog through drought-affected bush, McKinnon and his trackers picked up their trail near Ayers Rock.





*Bill McKinnon, far left, with prisoners and their families on a station near Uluru, 1934.*

So began a tortuous game of cat and mouse. McKinnon was low on supplies, including water. Their camels were parched. With heavy storms on the horizon, they headed for what was then known as Maggie Springs (Mutitjulu waterhole) at the base of the rock. Carbine soon declared he had picked up Yokununna's tracks.

At the cave above the waterhole, McKinnon wrote in his diary that he "smelt a decidedly - Aboriginal odour from inside" and caught sight of Yokununna. A stone whistled past McKinnon's head. The police officer let off a shot and another stone thrown from the cave struck him on the knuckle. McKinnon then wrote: "Keeping my head clear, I pointed the pistol in his direction without taking aim whatever, and fired a second shot. I did not know whether he was armed with any native weapon or whether I had injured him."

Yokununna had been hit, and McKinnon and Carbine carried the wounded man out of the cave and laid him in the shade. Two of the other fugitives had been rounded up; McKinnon abandoned the search for the other three. "I personally took him [Yokununna] a drink whenever he called for it, and the trackers did what they could to make him comfortable," McKinnon wrote. "At 3pm I took the prisoners to the waterhole for a drink, and when we returned Yokununna was dead. I superintended the digging of a grave."



*Mutitjulu waterhole.*

McKinnon later recorded in his patrol log book that in attempting to rearrest Yokununna he “shot him in self-defence”. A subsequent inquest into station hand Kai-Umen’s death elicited damning allegations from the men McKinnon had arrested as part of the manhunt. Their stories “of McKinnon and his trackers handcuffing them to trees, of him kicking and punching them, whipping them with bullock-hide ropes and chains, beating them with camel irons until their blood flowed and their limbs were broken, and depriving them of food and water” reached the Department of the Interior in Canberra.

An official inquiry was announced. In May 1935 the Board held its first session in Alice Springs and then travelled as a sort of mobile judiciary, gathering evidence in the field. It was chaired by John Cleland, professor of pathology at the University of Adelaide. A young Ted Strehlow, who later became a famous anthropologist, was a special adviser to the Board on Aboriginal languages and culture. McKinnon went along as guide and cook. “Bizarrely, the Board, which was to inquire into the allegations made against McKinnon, welcomed him as a fellow traveller. His side of the story – he conducted his own defence – was their daily bread,” McKenna writes.

By September, the Board’s report was completed. They concluded: “The shooting, ethically, was not justified.” They found it difficult to believe that “the second shot [at Yokununna] was fired under circumstances where the direction of the bullet could not be calculated with the deliberate intention of seriously wounding the fugitive.” The Board added: “We are of the - opinion that the shooting of Yokununna by Constable McKinnon at Ayers Rock, though legally justified, was not warranted”.

McKinnon claimed he had been cleared of any wrongdoing, and continued his work as a police officer throughout the Northern Territory for the next 25 years. In 1959 he was awarded a medal for long service and good conduct. He retired in 1962 and settled at Buderim on the Sunshine Coast. He treasured his years in Central Australia and kept a vast amount of

memorabilia, including books, hundreds of photos, artwork, some of his police logbooks and his meticulous personal diaries.

Years later, a journalist asked him about the case of Yokununna. He said he “felt exonerated”, and he “wouldn’t have done anything differently”.

In the early 1980s, a young filmmaker named David Batty had settled in Alice Springs and was filming and compiling “video magazines” in English and Indigenous languages for distribution to the local communities. In 1986, Batty and his crew were invited to Docker River, a remote settlement south-west of Alice Springs, for the opening of a new council building. “In the midst of all this festivity and action two guys came up to me and said, ‘We’d like you to come over with us, we have an old man who wants to tell you his story’,” recalls Batty. “My Pitjantjatjara wasn’t great, but I had enough to get by, so we just went over on the edge of the community, in a bit of a river bed, and this old guy rocks up and he sat on the ground and I sat on the ground and he launched into this story.”

That old man was Joseph Donald, Yokununna’s brother-in-law, the last survivor of the group McKinnon hunted in 1934. Batty was astonished by the details in Donald’s story. He recounted being pursued by McKinnon, and the fatal confrontation at Ayers Rock. “I could tell from the very early part of that engagement that this was a really important story,” Batty says. “He went out of his way to get me to record it. It was pretty amazing. That doesn’t happen very often. I’ve been doing this all my life and most people run away from the camera. But he obviously saw this as an opportunity for his story to be recorded for all time.”

Donald told the full story of the manhunt and the death of Yokununna. “The policeman went into the cave,” he said into the camera. “They found the one who had been shot. They grabbed him by the arm and brought him outside... the police shot him in front of me... I started crying.”

McKinnon had never mentioned shooting Yokununna outside the cave; he said he fired that second, fatal shot into the cave. But Donald said he saw Yokununna dragged out of the cave and then shot. “There’s a real difference there, of course,” McKenna says. “Is Joseph [Donald] talking figuratively or literally? I didn’t want to play judge and jury. I felt I had to present both versions, and then leave it to the reader to decide.”

Donald told Batty he had later hidden out in the Bloods Range, near Docker River, “and the story was he lived in a cave for a long time... until the mid-1960s. He’d been hiding away from the whitefellas.” According to his testimony, Donald had been on the run for about 30 years.

As historian McKenna would conclude: “Told more than 50 years after the shooting, Donald’s account captures every detail of his harrowing experience – the sheer physical endurance and skill required to elude McKinnon and his ruthless trackers, his photographic knowledge of country and the devastating emotional impact of seeing his brother-in-law shot in front of him.”

McKenna wouldn’t come across the story of Yokununna and McKinnon until the early 2000s, courtesy of articles by other historians. When he learnt of the case he was nagged by a series of questions. Who was this police officer, McKinnon, before that moment in the cave? And what was he like after it? “I asked a biographical question, and that changed everything,” McKenna recalls. “I started digging and I kept uncovering more and more... I got on the phone

and talked to people who'd known him. I found out some incredible things that made me want to keep going."

McKenna started searching for McKinnon's only child, Susan. By chance, he came across her married name, Golledge, and finally found her living in Brisbane, aged 80 and recently diagnosed with dementia. "Susan was warm and helpful on the phone," McKenna writes. She told him she had boxes of her father's "things" in the garage and that if he was interested he could look through them. He remembers: "I nearly fell over." Within two weeks he flew to Brisbane, hired a car, drove 20km and found Susan Golledge waiting for him. Then she showed him into the garage.



*Bill McKinnon's logbooks.*

When McKenna was writing his award-winning biography of fellow historian Manning Clark, he never forgot one particular moment when he was sitting in the great man's study and came across something so personal that he had to pause and take stock. "I opened a filing cabinet and in a plastic bag was the ponytail his wife, Dymphna, had cut off when she was 16," recalls McKenna. "And it was still wrapped in a plastic bag in a filing cabinet. And I remember feeling that I was both very fortunate to be given access to this, but also like I was an intruder."

That same feeling returned in Susan Golledge's garage as he began wading through a lifetime's memorabilia and trunks full of diaries and logbooks. McKinnon died in 1997. These possessions had travelled with him throughout Central Australia, into his retirement to Buderim and finally, upon his death, they'd gone to his daughter in Brisbane. As McKenna went through the material he came to a trunk, and with difficulty prised it open. Inside, he found McKinnon's original police logbooks from the 1930s, including the very logbook he had used, out in the field, just hours after he'd shot Yokunna.

"I realised then that McKinnon had used this journal as the basis of a second, handwritten account in another logbook, before typing up a third and final version for his superiors and the



Board of Inquiry. Unlike the last two accounts, McKinnon's record of the shooting in his first log differed in one crucial respect," McKenna says.

McKinnon had told the 1935 inquiry that he fired his pistol towards Yokununna "without - taking aim". But this is what he wrote in that first logbook: "Fired pistol at his feet, but he went into another cave, threw a second stone which struck the knuckle of my left index finger and quite disabled the hand for a time. Called out, then fired to hit. Heard no sound."

Fired to hit. McKinnon had lied to the inquiry and taken his secret to his grave. "I remember thinking... well there you go, in a suburban garage is the legacy of Australia's frontier history," says McKenna. "And it's still there. You can still hold it in your hands. It's so close to us.

"Fired to hit. It was an arrow in the heart. It was phenomenal. And I couldn't believe those words... it was staggering to find that."

In February last year, McKenna arranged to meet Matt Golledge, Susan's youngest son, to tell him what he'd found in those old boxes. "I had been in this position once or twice before – the historian who arrives on a family's doorstep with knowledge of their relative gleaned from combing the archives, most of which is entirely unknown to them – but I'd never had to relate a story such as this," McKenna writes. "I described how I'd found the original journal in the garage which proved McKinnon was lying to the Commonwealth Board of Inquiry."

Golledge was keen to protect his mother, but never suggested suppressing the new information. "After hearing everything that I had to tell him about his grandfather's life, he leaned back slightly in his chair, arms outstretched. 'I can see the bigger historical perspective,' he said. 'All of the family, Mum included, are on board for reconciliation. We wouldn't want anything else.' "

McKenna says McKinnon's grandson immediately grasped the broader significance of the - history, "a history that stood for all those who were killed or brutalised on Australia's frontiers without being remembered: even more so because it occurred inside Uluru, the sacred place that has come to represent the nation's true heart".

Golledge, a Brisbane-based property banker, told The Weekend Australian Magazine that his main concern was for his mother. "Mum has a very heavy sentimentality towards Grandpa," he says. "Mum, I think, appreciates that the times were different back then. Some people hated Grandpa, rightly or wrongly. Mum appreciates that this might not be the most glowing book."

He says he worries about how his family might be impacted by the revelations, particularly those three simple words, fired to hit. "You know, I might be getting carried away... What's it all about? What does it all mean? Are people going to judge us for it? I've got a young family. I'm probably worried for them. I'm ugly enough to deal with whatever comes. I'm just hoping we're not going to be social pariahs for what Grandpa did back then. Obviously he's not here to say otherwise."

McKenna says he's grateful to the Golledge family for their graciousness and is adamant that what happened at Uluru did not define Bill McKinnon's long and varied life. "It's not enough to say he was just typical of his time, that's a kind of glib statement in a way, but not many men could have carried out what he did, and I'm talking about not only the events at Uluru but his whole policing career in that environment... you had to be incredibly tough and resilient,

and of course he was not only tough and resilient but he was also caught up in the idea of his own presence in that environment, and what that would mean in the future.

“He wanted his story to be known. He wanted to be seen as much more than a policeman. Somewhere in the book I saw in a way he’s caught up with the myths that we created about the Centre at the same time that he’s implicated in the big, big truth of Australian history, which is the taking of Aboriginal land without compensation, without consent, without treaty. That’s the big, fundamental injustice. Of Australian history. And McKinnon is at the heart of that.”

One question still nagged at McKenna: where were Yokununna’s remains? The records indicated that Cleland, chairman of the Board of Inquiry, had taken them back to the University of Adelaide in 1935. They remained there until 2017, when the university’s human skeletal remains collection was transferred to the South Australian Museum.

McKenna met with Anna Russo, the museum’s Aboriginal Heritage and Repatriation Manager, who confirmed that Yokununna’s skull was in the museum’s Keeping Place. As McKenna writes: “Yokununna’s skull rested in Box 39. Anna took the box from the shelf and laid it on the table; she turned on an overhead lamp, put on white cotton gloves, carefully removed the skull and placed it on tissue-like paper. With the stark light bearing down from above, the words etched in capitals on the crown were clearly visible: ‘YOCKANUNNA [sic] COMPLETE SKELETON.’”

The skull had been labelled because it was critical evidence at the 1935 inquiry. Yokununna’s postcranial remains were not with the skull and their whereabouts are unknown.

Russo says that if all goes to plan, Yokununna’s remains will be repatriated to country in coming months. “Repatriation is for healing the living,” she says, but it “does raise all of these things to people today... why did this happen, how did this happen, who did this? For him there are a lot of answers, which is good, but for a lot of people there are a lot of unanswered questions as to why this happened.

“Despite these terrible things that happened in the past, what I find, more often than not, is that Aboriginal communities will reach out and invite people to share that experience of repatriation. I can’t say it will happen in this case, but it is a shared understanding and Aboriginal culture by its nature is very generous.”

Meanwhile, the Golledge family, Susan included, has indicated a willingness to take part in any repatriation ceremony if they are invited by the Indigenous community. “Mum has even been talking about it in the last few weeks,” says Matt Golledge. “Mum has been talking about going back to Alice Springs, going back to Darwin, how nice it would be to go back there again... Mum’s open to it. We’re open to it. The family is open to any ceremonies.”



*Sammy Wilson points to the spot where Yokununna was killed.*

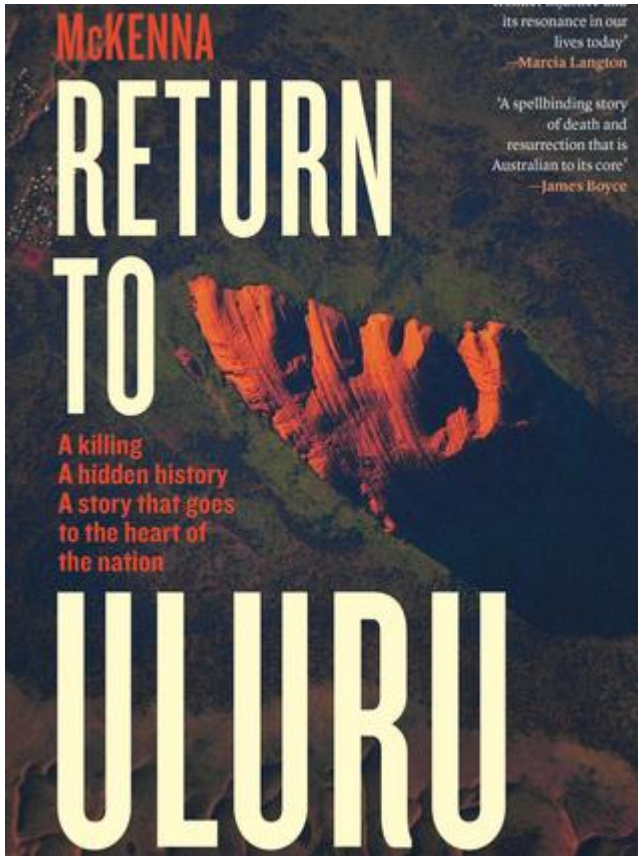
“By doing something a half-centimetre high, you are more likely to get a sense of the universe than if you try to do the whole sky.” So said the great Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti. McKenna uses it as an epigraph in his book, *Return to Uluru*.

His achievement with this story is to show the parallel narratives of Yokununna – the version of history passed down through generations of Indigenous people, and the white account in official documents, police reports and logbook entries – and finally entwine them after 86 years. And it is at that singular point of entwining – the half-centimetre – that Australia can stare down the uncomfortable truths of its past.

Professor Marcia Langton, foundation chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, has said of the book: “Mark McKenna sets the highest standards for truth-telling of the kind that Australians so urgently need if they are to live in this country with honour. I feel sure that this book will become an Australian classic, not the first of its kind, but most certainly the most powerful narrative I have read of frontier injustice and its resonance in our lives today.”

Back in the Eden public library, McKenna is still coming to terms with the implications of the story for 21st-century Australia. “If the families that have been affected by this whole history can find it within their hearts and their generosity to build that bridge, to listen to one another and understand one another’s experience, why can’t we? Why can’t our politicians? I think there’s much more willingness in the Australian community to make that journey than the politicians will allow. I really think that we are ahead of them. We just need them to catch up to us.”

Yokununna’s grand-nephew, Sammy Wilson, says he and his family remain shocked that the truth behind the death was “hidden” for more than eight decades. But he would welcome Bill McKinnon’s family to Yokununna’s repatriation ceremony. “The best thing is we can come together, shake each other’s hands and move forward together,” he says.



*Return to Uluru* by Mark McKenna (Black Inc, \$34.99)