

Lex Wotton will be sentenced in Townsville in the morning over the 2004 Palm Island uprising. Warriors for peace; an in-depth look at the man who led the resistance.

NATIONAL, November 6, 2008: On the eve of his sentencing for his part in the 2004 Palm Island uprising,

ESTELLE CASTRO reviews a new book about (and co-written by) Lex Wotton, the man who led the resistance on Palm and is now facing life in prison.

'Warriors for Peace' opens with a moment of silence - a silence requested by Palm Island Mayor, Erykah Kyle, before she reads out the autopsy report into Mulrunji Doomadgee's death in custody.

It was the result of an accident, Ms Kyle told a community meeting.

The 36-year-old Aboriginal man, who would become known throughout Australia as Mulrunji, had been found dead within an hour of his arrest by Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley on November 19, 2004, after sustaining massive injuries that included four broken ribs and a liver split in two.

In March 2005, during the inquest into Mulrunji's death, a video recording is played in Townsville's courthouse that shows the gathering of Palm Islanders that led to a protest and to the burning down of the police station, but which resulted in no serious injuries.

Anthropologist, Barbara Glowczewski, director of research at France's National Scientific Research Centre and an invited Professor at James Cook University in 2004, sits in the courtroom throughout the inquest.

Along with Mulrunji's family and friends, Glowczewski watches the young man crying for help as well as his slow and painful death, on a video recorded by a camera in the police cell where Mulrunji's body was found.

The video footage also includes a scene that shows a policeman pushing Mulrunji with his foot, a procedure known in police circles as "the arousal technique".

Such video recordings, shown during the inquest, uncover such obvious contradictions in the notion that the defendants accused of "rioting" on the island are given any reason to hope that the conflict will be resolved peacefully.

Warriors for Peace meticulously recounts the events that led to the Palm Island protest - using video footage provided to the court. The uprising itself is recreated for the reader from two points of view: that of the police inside the station, where the policemen first panicked and counted their bullets, before later making jokes and laughing - as shown on video footage taken during the riot.

The book also offers the reader the perspective from outside the police station where Lex Wotton acted "as a shield" between the police and the protesters.

It gives an account of the arrest of 19 men - 3 women were later arrested - as well as the initial police investigations and the subsequent report written by Deputy Coroner Christine Clements for the second inquest, which concluded that Senior Sergeant Hurley had caused the fatal

injuries to Mulrunji.

The book further relates the later statement by Queensland DPP Leanne Clare that there was not sufficient evidence to secure a conviction against Senior Sergeant Hurley.

A wave of protests across the country, as well as a nationally and internationally circulated petition led the Queensland Government to appoint former New South Wales Chief Justice, Sir Laurence Street, to independently review the decision of the Queensland DPP.

As a result of this review, Senior Sergeant Hurley was charged with manslaughter.

Chris Hurley did ultimately admit that he might have caused the death by falling on Mulrunji and, also, that he had not tried to revive him.

But although “Prosecutor Davis observed that it would have required Doomadgee to be like a 'reincarnated Rudolph Nureyev' to perform the pirouette required for him to suddenly land on his back and for the injuries to then be inflicted, accidentally or otherwise”, on June 20, 2007 Chris Hurley was acquitted by a non-Indigenous jury in a Townsville courtroom.

Over a year later, on October 24, 2008, Lex Wotton, who had been repeatedly singled out by the media as “the ringleader of the riot”, was found guilty of “riot with destruction” by a non-Indigenous jury in Brisbane and now faces life imprisonment.

His sentence will be delivered tomorrow, on Friday 7 November.

In 2004, shortly after the Palm Island uprising, Barbara Glowczewski recognised Lex Wotton while doing her shopping at a Townsville supermarket and asked him for an interview. She subsequently began preparations to write a book on Palm Island.

Some have argued that non-Indigenous people should not write or work on Indigenous issues, while others refuse to co-write books because they fear they could lose the necessary distance towards their “object” of study.

Warriors for Peace, however, was based on the idea that complementary points of views could be presented in collaborative projects under specific circumstances.

The book includes two chapters in which Wotton talks - in March 2005 and October 2006 - about his upbringing, the directions he took in his life, his family, his hopes and vision for his community, his dreams, and his faith.

His nuanced, yet critical account of life on the island, and the often serene tone of his words contrast with the descriptions of him that circulated in the mainstream media up to his trial in Brisbane.

Warriors for Peace is a result of 30 years of work and shared experiences with Aboriginal people in Australia, as well as interviews and interactions with Lex Wotton, who co-wrote the book.

The book therefore offers to its readers far more than just thorough research into the legal ramifications of the case. Apart from its obvious interest in documenting the case, as well as the history of Palm Island, the success of the book is due in part to the intricate way in which

connections are woven by Glowczewski and Wotton between the situation on Palm Island and those that exist in other Aboriginal communities across Australia.

The book's success can also be attributed to the way in which the writers not only explain endemic problems in Aboriginal communities, but also include examples of success stories from across Australia and on Palm Island itself, in order to highlight the capacity of Aboriginal people to be both resilient and creative.

A plumber by trade, a community leader, as well as a father of four, Lex Wotton is perceived by many in his community to have these two qualities.

Glowczewski explains that the image of the warriors taken up in the aftermath of the uprising belongs to a long, but largely unknown history of struggles that can be traced back to local warriors, such as the Kalkadoon people, who were almost completely exterminated in a battle during which several hundred warriors fought with their boomerangs and spears against the armed native mounted police.

In another book (*Rêves en colère*, 2004), Glowczewski explains that this battle is commemorated during secret ceremonies conducted by people gathered from different Aboriginal groups. Glowczewski has worked extensively among the Warlpiri people, and writes that ceremonies in the Central Desert, for instance, commemorate this event.

Wotton recalls that as a child, he always “wondered what it would be like to live in a world with peace, to live in a world where there's no such thing as hatred, violence, discrimination”.

He speaks of his desire to educate his children, and of other projects he is passionate about, such as the men's group he set up in 1997 to help with “social problems, domestic problems, employment”.

He believes his community “needs to get together”. He goes on further to say that “there needs to be reconciliation between organizations, between individuals, between the whole community. [...] We need to look at outside investment in the community, but we also need, like I discussed this morning with Stewart Levitt, my legal council, to look at land agreements between ourselves and traditional owners.”

He also wishes to see a cultural and local knowledge centre on Palm Island, where tourists from Townsville could visit.

His words in this book reveal a man who seems to be reconciled with himself. During an interview given in March 2005, Wotton speaks about his Baha'i faith that, he believes, enables him to confidently envisage the future: “I will continue to have these experiences with God,” he says. “At the moment I'm fasting. Starting today. [...] So there's a different side to me than what you see on the television, with the shovel and everything else”.

For Wotton, the protest brought an inquest into the death of his friend, Mulrunji, and therefore was “about equality”.

“So far things are looking good,” he says, before adding, “one day, I suppose, this book will bring more better things for myself. And I actually believe, that one day, I'll actually be free from all these things. Free from all the courts.”

Wotton also speaks about his heavy drinking as a young man prior to his spiritual conversion, and about people who use “culture as an excuse”.

He also speaks of the effects of “bureaucracy playing around with [our] lives”, as well as the consequences on the health of Palm Islanders of only having trainee doctors on the island.

Wotton goes on to further consider the difficulties faced by Aboriginal communities, and therefore, by Australia as a whole: “We are still part of the society whether you like it or not, whether we end up in your parks or not. [But] we are trapped in so many ways.”

The interviews also show a man who wishes to know more about his biological father and ancestry; a man who knows that dreaming tracks run across the continent and link places such as Northern Arnhem Land and Palm Island, where culture is “what you call asleep”.

The call for social justice recurs throughout the interview: “What do we want out of reconciliation? [...] I don't want to be treated as an Aboriginal person. I want to be treated as a human being. [...] We want to live in peace, knowing that there is protection out there, for each and everyone of us.”

Wotton focuses on good outcomes: “I believe something good will come out of this in the long way. Not only for myself, for my family, but for mankind, that's what is going to happen, I believe that.”

Yet he also admits: “The hardest thing is living today, is to live with all the problems we have around us. I can't wait for the final year, I can't wait. Because there must be something better than this. It has to be.”

Glowczewski considers Aboriginal people to be “refugees of the interior”. Many are descendants of hundreds of groups from all across Australia yet still feel exiled in their own country.

Using an eloquent, yet clear writing style, the book contextualises the loss and grief accumulated by Aboriginal people over generations; it also provides a history of Palm Island, where more than 40 linguistic groups were forcibly relocated, where men's life expectancy is still 50 years old, and where people “turned their despair onto the bodies of their loved ones and the buildings alike”.

According to Glowczewski, assimilation has not worked on Palm Island, where “the serpent of colonisation keeps regurgitating apartheid, instead of unity”.

Glowczewski also questions the use of the term “riot”, which ignores any notion of “civil disobedience”, resistance, or social justice, although these notions have been internationally recognised as civil rights throughout world history.

Wotton's lawyer, Stewart E. Levitt, concurs with Glowczewski's view. At an exhibition organised by the Errol Wyles Foundation in May 2007, Levitt declared that Mulrunji was “one of 241 Black deaths in custody in Australia between 1990 and 2005, for which not a single person had been prosecuted”, and that, therefore, the protest on Palm Island was certainly morally justified.

Glowczewski's ambitious and intellectual project also proposes a model for an anthropology

informed by an “ethics of hope” in a context she compares to a post-war situation.

She asserts that ethnography “does not consist in foregrounding any truth, but in taking into consideration the different points of views of all social agents”. Therefore, anecdotes and stories of the island are also related in the book.

A few illuminating passages are devoted to a Debutante Ball which was held on the island after the inquest as a way for the women elders to lead “normal lives”.

Glowczewski also writes of how, after the first inquest, Wotton's mother, Agnes, and her daughter, Fleur, wrote a card to Judge Wendy Cull as well as to the security guards.

Agnes asked all the Palm Islanders in the dock to sign her message: “Thank you for treating us as human beings”.

“The security guards were obviously moved by this gesture and shook her hand,” Glowczewski writes. “From an Aboriginal point of view, this capacity to “touch”, to “reach out”, is the only true remedy against racism.”

After discussing the final draft of the book with Wotton on Palm Island in July 2007, as well as the outcomes of the intervention in the Northern Territory, at the end of the book Glowczewski questions the reader and herself: “The emergency today is to think about what it means to be human, to be a respected member in and by society, locally and nationally. What does it mean to be Australian, European, French today? What is the place of cultural communities within the nation? Indigenous people propose a model of sovereign justice for all. How can we build that together?”

* Warriors for Peace - The Political Conditions of Aboriginal People As Viewed from Palm Island

By Barbara Glowczewski and Lex Wotton

Edition Indigènes, 2008, €20, 192 pp.