

genealogies of some of Australia's most famous artists. "People were taken up and down the stock route, or forced to assist to maintain an alien like Wiluna or Jigalong," says Carty. "It touched the lives of some of the most famous artists in this country - Spider Swell, George Wallaba, Eabouba Namprisa, Tommy May, Mone Gimgima - and older artists who've passed away like Rover Thomas and Peter Stepper."

On her trip in April this year, Martin-painting artists are camped for the week in the Aboriginal settlement of Kunawarrri, east to Well 33, where the Gami Sandy and Gibson deserts meet. It's the only townships along the stock route - a short, dusty, steep, school and medical centre nestled among groves of white-trunked bloodwood trees.

The photo session at Well 33 comes to an end and Mone begins down from the Nason and starts pointing up people into the AWDs to go back to camp. At 20, she is strikingly confident - yet presidential, when her culture demands, towards the other women. She is the Canning Stock Route Project's "emerging photographer", one of six young people selected from 70 indigenous applicants for mentoring roles in multimedia and art curation.

Mone's skills at a bilingual languages are precisely what the project needs - language fluency, family kinship that puts the media-savvy artist at ease, and a natural fluency for photography. All the photos for this story were taken by her. "I like to take pictures of old people getting, and learning about what they do," she says. It's a way to record traditions as well as individual works. "For me, it is in carry on if they're passed away, so I know what painting they've done."

The stock route project offers her what she wants - a way of working in her own remote community of Puruma, which she got homeless for every time she leaves. Mone's purposefulness is timely at odds with the relentless media coverage of hidden, suicidal youth living in remote communities. Her cousin is pregnant at 16. "I don't want that," Moneka says fiercely. "It's like I'm focused on what I'm doing right now. It's like."

THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE IS A diagonal scar across one third of Western Australia's interior, a car-widely dirt track that snakes across the Tanami,

Gami Sandy and Little Sandy deserts, and more than 300 miles of road driver. These days, AWD enthusiasts travel its length as an endurance test, in homage to pioneers who forged the track as part of curiosity about the nation's desert interior.

Alfred Canning never really noticed his dream of it becoming a bus-cattle corridor. "The track was used only 30 or 40 times, and there was almost no driving between 1911 and 1916," says Australian National University anthropologist John Carty. "And by 1950, the driving had stopped, so it was a huge achievement for so few drivers."

Carty has driven it with length and recorded out-



Elder Kumpaya Gimgima, with one of her paintings, points towards distant wells.



From left, Moneka Biljaba, who took the photos for this story;



the well at Kun Kim, where Moneka, Wunga Whyntner, Kumpaya Gimgima and Moneka Biljaba.



accounts by Aboriginal artists up and down the track has been on the area's indigenous history. It will be launched in early 2010 as part of a major exhibition of Canning Stock Route Project paintings at the National Museum in Canberra. Like so much Australian history, the early written evidence Carty found has a strong European slant. "And the reality they account for is a handful of drivers and convicts and Canning himself." Yet the events themselves were dramatic from the outset, the stock route was a contested territory. Many of Canning's 51 wells were dug out of life-sustaining water holes that indigenous people had relied on for generations.

One of the worst events happened on the very first driving trip in 1910, says Carty, "when three drivers were all accused by Aborigines at well 37. Their deaths triggered a spate of white torturers, drivers and a jilted man later reported to have killed at least 19 "dangerous blacks" at several wells along the track. What were their names? Were there more? Why precisely were Aborigines so hostile that they attacked or murdered travellers along the track?

White history went a 1989 Royal Commission into Aborigines' treatment along the Canning Stock Route - frustratingly failed to pin down such details.

But in the Canning Stock Route Project unfolded, and Carty and his colleagues recorded the words of people with direct links to that past. History became personal and particular. He was astonished how vivid memories and detailed oral accounts poured out. "So much of the indigenous version is richly remembered," says Carty. "It's all over and death and life and murder and revenge. It's epic in its historical scale, like a Greek tragedy unfolding."

One indigenous oral history concerns Canning himself, a

version of events handed down to young people such as Moneka. "I learnt about white people and the things they did to Aboriginal people," she says. "Like [Canning] gets to find the wells by feeding people salt to make them look for water."

"That's not just history," says Carty. "Canning readily admitted [in the 1908 Royal Commission] to chasing down Aborigines, chaining them up and making them his party number. It was considered acceptable, and necessary to the name of progress."

The older Martin women at Kunawarrri, with their convicts spread across the floor of a white veranda, have their own tales to tell. Moneka's grandmother, Jateya, ate with her three necked motherly in her lap. A tiny woman in her mid-70s who looks older at her granddaughter, she leans forward to dish pollen-sulphur-dust mixed white Hologans, while Moneka feeds her fish in bright orange scarves depicting lush nectar flowers.

Jateya was one of the last Martin to be isolated

from white society in the desert, around Well 23 south of Kunawarrri. Moneka has made a short video, entitled *Nona*, in which her grandmother tells her life story in her own language. Moneka Wungla, at five sworn in maddening clouds around her half-closed eyes. She glimpsed her first white man on the Canning Stock Route; later, in 1965, her family group was summoned to come across the tracks of an ancestral snake that had spit a wide swath through the bush. She wasn't to know it was a bulldozer preparing roads for a rocket firing range; she leapt over the track for fear of touching it.

"I saw budock on the stock route, Jateya says, and Moneka. "When [you were] small or big?" asks Moneka, who lets out a shriek of laughter when Jateya starts describing how big the budock was. It turns out Jateya was just a child at the time. "The family was scared and they ran up a hill," translates Moneka.

A few metres away, Duda Samson is pointing Sunday Well. In her distinctive broad-brimmed

she draws in a mountain range and rows of tall trees. It's a tranquil-looking scene and her impassive face gives nothing away - until she tells anthropologist Emmaline Schomms-von-Rod what happened there. "Dada wasn't born yet but her mother, father, two brothers and other people were camped at Sunday Well when a white man came with a gun and shot a lot of people," says Schomms-von-Rod. Dada's family managed to escape.

"But there's also positive moments where people lived and worked together," adds the anthropologist, who is recording every artist's story on this trip. "The story the woman told yesterday was of going travelling with the drovers, getting a feed from them, being given live cattle, visiting family up and down the stock route. They might be putting a positive spin on it because they don't want us to remember the sad times, but there were positive moments."

One hugely uplifting event occurred just in driving faced and mining explorers began appearing along the track, says Carty. "It's one of the great stories of the stock route, known to all the people in the desert." In 1957, Yukon-born "Helicopter" Tingunray was a starving 10-year-old when he and his mother, who had a spear wound, were found by a mining survey team working near well 40. Says Carty. "The mining men gave them food and medicine and arranged to fly them out to Derby hospital in an act of great generosity." (Hence the adopted name, which stuck.) Without them, Helicopter and his mother would have died.

They moved and were then flown on to Balgo, where he has lived ever since. Now a cherished Western Desert artist whose work fetches high prices, Helicopter Tingunray's paintings will feature in the forthcoming exhibition. "The stock route is more things," observes Carty. "But ultimately it is a constellation of lives intertwined by a common history and initial by that same history."

IN A MASONIC HALL IN PERTH, WALLY CARMINE is tending to a sea of more than 100 canvases. Down the middle of the room is a long, brown sheet of paper, with 54 wells numbered at intervals along a thin line representing the stock route. The Aboriginal names for each well have been neatly written in, and on each side,

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paintings have been laid out according to their connection with a particular well.

One of Australia's foremost experts in Aboriginal art, Carnawa gently prompts the views of three Indigenous curators, Terry Murray, Louise McGill and Hayley Atkins. He's been asked by FORAM to act as mentor to all three; a secondary aim of the stock route project is to train and nurture future leaders in managing Australia's indigenous art industry. The pressure is slowly building on these novices, who know many of the artists personally but have never put together a major show. By holding up canvases in turn and comparing notes, they select 15 paintings that will be dispatched this month to the Beijing Olympics; these paintings will be Australia's only cultural exhibit at the Olympic Expo, an invitation-only IOC event running alongside the sports. After that, a much larger show must be curated and catalogued for Canberra's National Museum in 2010. (The show has also been invited to tour internationally.)

Carnawa says it was an unforgettable sight last August when "100 canvases were laid out on the sandy bank of Lake Sturtch, held down by canvas foods at the corners against the late afternoon breeze off the waters of the lake".

That an unwitting Alfred Canning cut (through the country of many desert peoples, across language boundaries and kinship groups, is evident in the paintings themselves and the way they are painted.

At Kunawarrtik, half a dozen women sit around a long canvas, wanting stray dogs off fresh paint and flicking a cattle stick off the canvas. The picture emerges over several hours' painting in what appears to be a collaborative work. Yet each woman has a fixed place around the canvas, a particular landscape feature that only they and their family can paint.

"It's a bit like a Returned and Services League map," jokes art co-ordinator Gabrielle Sullivan, who manages the Multicultural Murchison Artists Centre in Newman and has organised this painting trip to Well 33. "I used to work at the East Flinders School of Leagues Club in Sydney and at the door there's a map with circles of State radius. If you're inside you're a member, if you're outside, you're not."

TWO DAYS INTO THE PAINTING TRIP, when the women decide a bush outing is in order, the irrelevance of white maps becomes clear. Mid-morning, three four-wheel-drives head out in convoy with Kumpaya Giergiba in the lead vehicle, driven by Sullivan. Giergiba tells her to drive straight past the Canning Stock Route turn-off, raising some consternation among the whitefella contingent.

Half an hour later, we turn off a corrugated track into trackless bush. There's a tank stand and a windmill but they're not listed on the stock route. So why are we here? It turns out that this satellite well, Kun Kun, is one of dozens of waterholes that Aboriginal people were pushed out towards and forced to rely on when it got too dangerous to use Canning's wells. Giergiba leads the party on foot towards a deep depression in the ground with tufted grass at the bottom. "We dig 'em out here, and water comes up," she explains to Schoonesveldt Road, making a circular motion with her hands.

Later, after kangaroo tail is roasted in the camp fire, a canvas is unfurled and women



Canning's party sets out from Wiluna, 1906; on the route Aboriginals were captured, chained and forced to find water.

"for this country" dance around its frayed edges. Giergiba grabs a stick to point to each waterhole on the canvas, and then the direction in which it lies.

Stories of the enforced diaspora by Aboriginals to outlying waterholes like Kun Kun has helped Carty piece together a chain - although still incomplete - explanation for the violence sparked by the stock route. "Alfred Canning often sank his wells on top of or through native wells, leaching water and cutting people off from their traditional water sources," says Carty. "Some Aboriginal people died trying to access the wells because it needed a camel or three adult men to draw up the water. They broke their arms and their heads on pulleys trying to get water up, or they fell in and drowned."

The white men's "thief" of vital water infuriated them; within seven years of Canning completing the wells, more than half had been attacked by Aboriginals, who lashed off buckets and winding gear or set fire to timber props until the wells collapsed.

Mirika Bilabu, who has heard many stories of families being scattered, feels resentful that the stock route disrupted their lives. "People went

everywhere, some here, some there, because of a stupid road," she growls under her breath. "That's the big message for Australia - that Mistu were here first, even before that road, before everything."

ON THE FINAL DAY OF OUR VISIT, NINE WOMEN gather around a 2m-long strip of canvas for the final painting of the trip. Dipping their brushes into cream-white paint, then darker blues, they draw a road that runs across the full width of the black background. On each side they paint a string of blue beads, the stretch from Well 20 up to Well 36. Kun Kun appears to one side, painted in with new relief after it has been revisited. Some artists alternate pale blue for swaks, with dark blue for deep wells. Others use warm orange, blood red and yellow dots to outline sand dunes, capturing the way light plays on shifting sand. In between the highly painted sections, a woman applies gritty brown, grey and soft pink paint for salt pans and dry lakes.

When it's finished, the women nod in approval. It's the boldest visual statement yet about the Canning Stock Route story - a simple, narrow track cutting bluntly through a landscape of breathtaking complexity. Watching the women apply the final brushstrokes, Morika suggests that a child should place their footprints along the length of the road, one foot dipped in white paint, one dipped in black. Her idea is firmly rejected by Sullivan, who thinks art buyers might balk at such obvious symbolism. Every painting done as part of the project will be sold - and every dollar sent back to artists in each of the nine art centres - once the works have taken their message out into the world.

Morika looks momentarily just out, fur shrugs and tells the women to hurry up and finish. She's homesick and wants to get back quickly to Piuma, taking home a laptop full of images of her people's encounter with a "whitefella" road. Staff artist Victoria Larkin's previous story was "About the Dunes" (June 7-8), about a billiwarra Pitjara couple.



The 1750km stock route cut through the country of many kinship groups.