

Grog WAR

Alexis Wright

A new book detailing the way an Aboriginal community decided to do something about grog is reviewed here and followed by an extract from the book.

Alexis Wright is an Aboriginal author and researcher based in Alice Springs. Her first novel, 'Plains of Promise', has recently been published by University of Queensland Press. 'Grog Wars' will be published by Magabala Books in May 1997.

REVIEW

The grog war exists on several levels in the Northern Territory where there is the highest per capita alcohol consumption of any State or Territory in Australia. It is endemic in domestic violence; it tears apart communities. Statistics of the Territory's alcohol consumption are frequently trumpeted in the media. Publicity is usually to do with Aboriginal consumption. There are probably a lot of whitefellas fighting their own personal war with grog, but you don't get to hear about them so much.

Alexis Wright's *Grog War* details the way an Aboriginal community organisation decided to do something about grog. Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation's initiative on behalf of the Aboriginal community of Tennant Creek resulted in a landmark decision for a package of measures which included restrictions on the availability of liquor in the town. Along the way the organisation dragged this essentially frontier township into a unique solution with the involvement and support of the community at large.

Tennant Creek is in Waramungu country. Wright locates her account with a moving description of the Waramungu relationship with this striking arid landscape and the strength the tribal people derive from the land.

Besides the Waramungu traditional owners, the Aboriginal community which makes up more than one third of the town's population represents 16 language groups. This community has evolved from a series of forced relocations of various groups, notably the pastoral 'dispersions' of the 1870s, the Coniston massacre in 1928 and a series of relocations with the spread of mining activity after 1932. Aboriginal people are the permanent residents in this town, in contrast to the non-Aboriginal population whose average length of stay has been estimated at six months. Aboriginal people make a significant contribution to the economy of the town. There are five Aboriginal organisations in town, 50 outstations of up to 30 people each surrounding the town, and two Aboriginal-owned pastoral properties in the district.

These people are used to battling. In *Grog War* Tennant Creek residents tell of their family struggle for survival in the face of the invasion of their land. The Waramungu land claim was finally won in 1996 after 20 years. The Julalikari organisation grew out of the need to provide housing and a range of services to Aboriginal people in the town. All

traditional elders are members of the council, which determines policy. Other people can nominate and be elected to council. Policy and day to day management is carried out by Julalikari administration.

For a significant minority of Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek, as in other parts of northern Australia, alcohol abuse emerged as a serious problem after prohibition was repealed in 1964. There is not an Aboriginal family in this town that has not lost someone to the effects of alcohol or alcohol-related violence. The war against the invasion of alcohol was yet another battle for the Waramungu.

The elders' first initiative in 1986 was to invite their local MLA to a 'Beat the Grog' meeting at which they voiced their concerns. Julalikari set up Night Patrol, a voluntary service staffed by Julalikari councillors every night for the last ten years.

The elders knew that the significant factor in alcohol abuse was the level of supply, to the extent of illegal supply from some outlets. With characteristic pragmatism they set about attacking the cause of the problem.

Wright begins and closes her account of their ten-year campaign to amend the laws relating to liquor sales with a powerful description of the lives of a fictional family afflicted by grog. Lucas, Devine and their sons are created from actual members of the community, based on accounts told to the author by the local people. Through their eyes the reader is forced to confront the violence, hopelessness and eventual destruction of living in the grog culture.

Wright pulls no punches in laying the blame for the destruction Aboriginal lives on the grog peddlers. Nor does she let the explorer Stuart off the hook, revealing the effect of his alcoholism on his not-so-successful ventures into Waramungu country. She points out the irony of a town that advertises that it grew from the place where the beer truck broke down. Hers is a timely, honest anger tinged with the same desperation that drove the energy of the Aboriginal people of Tennant Creek.

The author has pulled together a mass of submissions, research, interviews and observations into a lively account of proceedings at the March 1994 symposium and Liquor Commission hearings in 1995 and 1996. The attitudes of the speakers are telling, from somewhat removed (for 'removed' read 'ineffective')

academic analysis to the licensees' attempts, which go from circuitous to devious, to protect their profits. There are high points. Valda Shannon's submission in Waramungu to a stunned room, and Marjorie Limbiari's quietly dignified statement describing the way her six siblings died, mark shifts in the process.

Is Julalikari administration too cool in the face of setbacks, ignorance and deviousness, to say nothing of the demands of the process — the meetings, symposium, Supreme Court hearing, Liquor Commission hearing, six-month trial period, final hearing? There are human asides during proceedings, and there is an exchange between Elliott McAdam of Julalikari and Frank Martino, licensee, which is not unlike the show-down at the OK corral. McAdam grinds his cigarette butt with the toe of his boot while he leads Martino into agreeing, in front of police commander Maurie Burke, to the first grog-free Thursday so that Julalikari and the licensees can 'discuss the issue'. It is a strategically important negotiation.

As much as it is about the determination of the local Aboriginal people, *Grog War* showcases the achievements of a strong, well-managed Aboriginal organisation. Julalikari ran a meticulous campaign, and was the only party to have legal representation at the first hearing. It made good use of the media, even managing some mileage out of the Tennant Creek newspaper owned by one of the licensees.

Grog War shows the great range of author Alex Wright. With its subdued green cover that only hints at the drama within, this is another important publication from the Aboriginal publishing house Magabala Books. The book celebrates the dignity and determination of the Waramungu people, and the emergence of community spirit in a somewhat unlikely town. In 1984 the anthropologist, Maggie Brady, wrote that Tennant Creek was likely to be the first truly multicultural town in the Northern Territory. It seems they are well on their way.

Elizabeth Tregenza

Elizabeth Tregenza is a Central Australian author and researcher. She recorded and edited Boundary Lines, the story of Charlie McAdam and his family.

When the Tennant Creek Town Council sent its delegation to Darwin, the home of the Territory's governing powers, the NT Liquor Commission was obliged under the [Liquor] Act to do something. The town council did not want to address the problem themselves. They wanted someone else to fix it up for them. On the one hand, they wanted to keep getting tourists. On the other hand, they wanted people to continue spending money on the main street. Yet they believed that the weekends and social security days were out of hand.

The *Liquor Act 1978* (NT) imposes a duty on the NT Liquor Commission to take into account the 'needs and wishes' of the community in licensing matters. The Act gives the community the ability to participate in licensing decisions

which, in terms of licensing laws for alcohol consumption, were unequalled anywhere else at the time. The Liquor Commission was given wide powers of discretion by the NT government in the granting of licences and setting conditions. So this meant that the Liquor Commission is able to tailor licence conditions to local circumstances with some independence from the government and industry lobby groups.

John Maley was different from previous Liquor Commissioners in the NT. He said the regulations were not the problem, the grog was the problem. He believes that he is a pragmatic person not a technical sort of a person. 'What tended to happen — not only in the Liquor Commission but

in others areas as well — was that we tended to regulate the goodies instead of trying to get the baddies,' he explained. This could often be the case as well in the police force where he spent most of his working life. 'I got a bit disenchanted with that.' He said that wherever he has been he has always tried to get to the grassroots of the problem.

When he began work as Chairman of the NT Liquor Commission after retiring from the police force after thirty years he designed a mission statement for the Commission. It was to manage the provisions of the Act in order to prevent irresponsible and excessive consumption of liquor in the Northern Territory.

Before Maley took the helm, it did not seem that the people in the Commission knew what they were about and everything was getting lost in regulation. He said he didn't want to use his energies on 'all the little shitty things that we can do, like worrying if someone opens until one minute past ten.' (*The Bulletin*, 17.5.94)

Maley said what helped in this case was the sense of unity in Tennant Creek amongst the Aboriginal people. Julalikari Council had already taken the initiative in Night Patrol. This was the starting point. It had all of the ingredients. It was a smaller community than Darwin or Alice Springs. In a way Tennant Creek was crying out for something to be done but they couldn't do it themselves because the people in the town disagreed over what they wanted. It was timely when the town council approached the Chief Minister with what was happening in the main street.

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Maley arrived in town as he said he would with all of the trappings of the Liquor Commission with him. There was no choice but for the licensees to drive down the main street to the local courthouse to fight it out 'tooth and nail' themselves. 'They were like a bunch of bush lawyers,' chuckled [Julalikari Council's] Elliott McAdam of the licensees' attempts to represent themselves. They sat on the benches on one side of the courthouse laughing and joking to each other while the Aboriginal people sat on the other side.

Elliott McAdam could see that the way they were acting was typical of how they were used to taking Aboriginal people for granted. The whole show that they were putting on was indicative of how they treated Aboriginal people and Aboriginal organisations as a big laugh. It was the 'Oh! Fuck them — Don't worry about them type of attitude.'

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Marjorie Limbiari [gave evidence to the Commission] of the loss of family members when the family moved from Ali Curung to Tennant Creek. 'Then they started drinking. Problem got worse and worsen.'

The recent loss of a brother who was on a pension she said bought his drink at the Goldfields outlet. 'All his money used to go on grog, and every payday, every pension, he used to end up with no money.' She said he used to book down his grog at Goldfields. 'He didn't eat at all. He used to drink a lot. He used to — drunk seven days a week, twenty-four hours. And he sometimes used to come to my place and ask me for a piece of bread, and argue at me to get a piece of bread out of me.'

Marjorie said in the end he got sick and was sent down to Alice Springs for observation and she went down to see him. Then he came out of hospital and came back to Tennant Creek. 'He was sitting there (outside the Goldfields Hotel) waiting for his pension to come up. Then he went and got his

pension — went to Goldfields outlet — and paid his book down. He went home. Took one box of Coolabah with him home. And twelve o'clock — just after twelve o'clock midnight he passed away.'

There were some pretty tired people in the courthouse but as Marjorie talked on about the devastation in the lives of her family, everyone sat forward and paid attention. There were two more brothers she said who died before that brother. She explained that they died of problems relating to the grog. 'My three sisters passed away with the same problem.'

A wall of silence fall over the courtroom. 'They never listen to the doctor,' she was thinking. Some people looked down at the floor. Others could not take their eyes off of this brave woman talking very quietly of the pain she carried inside of her. Yet she did it because she said she was thinking for the children and to show everyone that we are all human.

'One sister, she was a kidney patient, and she was in Adelaide. When she got back she joined a crowd and she drunk — went to disco, drunk, and come back home drunk. Then she got really sick and she passed away. She passed away in her sleep.'

She started to talk about her baby sister but said it was too sad to talk about. Another younger sister was still drinking a lot and had left her with her two kids.

'Plus I'm a diabetic and I'm asthmatic, and I've got arthritis, and I've got to cope with all my families — and it's terrible.'

As far as her family goes, on Thursdays as soon as they get their money out of the bank, they went again to the pub, she said. 'They sit there from ten o'clock till twelve o'clock. Then they come out of the pub, buy their grog, and take 'em home. When they run out of grog they've got to go back to the bottle shop over here to buy a couple more and take it home. And this will go on all day and all night. Half the time we don't get sleep. Half the time my kids don't get rest, and the kids — they've got to go to school.'

Frank Martino, licensee of the Tennant Creek Hotel set up a line of questioning to try to establish that he had close ties with the family, 'because you know I'm very close to your family.' Marjorie was persistent that members of her family had died because of too much grog even though Martino tried to establish 'there was a kidney problem in the family.' Or diabetes: 'And who was the one that died in your family that had the very high diabetes problem?' To which Marjorie explained that she was the only one that got diabetes.

'It's sickening!' Elliott McAdam said he felt like walking out. There had been death after death in the Aboriginal community during the months before the hearing and mostly through grog. 'The closest ties he would have had was to hand over a pot of cheap wine in the front bar. He has never attended a funeral in town where clearly people have died through abuse of alcohol.'

Keith Hallett, licensee of the Goldfields Hotel tried to dispute where one of Marjorie's sisters had died. Marjorie insisted she had died in Tennant Creek. 'He is trying to twist me around,' she thought. There was total contempt and lack of respect for anything Aboriginal or the Aboriginal community. The fact they were Aboriginal women to these people was to act as though they didn't really matter.

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Elliott McAdam gets very annoyed when he hears people going on about human rights and the right to drink. He works

on the premise that there are basic human rights that apply to all people regardless of who they are. He remembers the old women saying those sort of things. People saying that black-fella is going around stabbing people and bashing old people and women up. They have no right to do that.

He explained to the hearing that he understood the licensees' position in the economic sense. However, it could not compare to the difficulties and the problems that Aboriginal people are facing on a daily basis. The statistics were there to prove the amount of people getting locked up, going to casualty. That was the reason Julalikari Council were asking for six months [trial of grog restrictions] so that everyone can sit down and work out ways of tackling the problem.

'And when I say "we", we intend to involve you as the total community because in the long term in this place, whether we like it or not, we're all going to live here in the future.' That was the future for all of them, he reminded the hearing. He asked for honesty. 'Don't say "I don't sell grog to people who are drunk" because we know it is different.'

All of the Aboriginal organisations in town generate millions of dollars. 'In the next three years something like seventy-odd million,' he said. These organisations were not spending a lot of money locally because they did not believe people were fair dinkum enough to work together. There needed to be a process of respect where everyone could benefit. There would be more Aboriginal kids going to school and getting more jobs. The town would benefit with less violence and anti-social behaviour in the streets and everyone would respect each other. 'That's the bottom line!' It was called common decency and community responsibility, he said.

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John Maley, the Chairman of the NT Liquor Commission commenced his ruling of licensing conditions on the hotels and bottle shops in Tennant Creek by saying he was signalling some realities confronting the Commission. Measures that are prohibitive in nature only lead to hardened drinkers turning to other sources to satisfy their thirst for alcohol.

Licensing measures will only be one in a web of measures needed to address and control the problem. It must include education. It must include employment opportunities; policing; community-based initiatives such as Night Patrol and community support groups, alcohol rehabilitation measures and so on. He said to curb alcohol abuse takes a flexible approach and that is the reason for a six months trial period of measures to be monitored to gauge the impact upon the community.

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As far as trading hours went the parties could not achieve any consensus. However, on balance the Commission believed for the purposes of this trial only that all licensees should have their license hours varied to provide a thirteen week period when there will be a closure of front bars (not restaurant areas or lounge bars) and takeaway facilities on one day per week; followed by a further thirteen week period when there will be restricted hours of trading on that particular day.

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The Commission accepted the variations would require careful and objective monitoring. Commissioner Maley said the monitors would report on:

- (a) any changes in drinking habits, locations or beverages by drinkers;
- (b) the benefits achieved by the measures;

- (c) the impact on town life whether good or bad;
- (d) the impact on the licensees;
- (e) the impact on school attendances;
- (f) the impact on health and welfare of the community generally.

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A professionally-planned community survey was completed towards the end of the six month trial period. It was found that three-quarters of private dwelling respondents considered themselves not being adversely affected by any of the seven conditions. The Thursday ban on takeaway sales had a greater impact than the other measures, but that still only involved fewer than one in six people.

Overall, sixty-nine per cent of people thought the trial had positive effects on the community as a whole, with major benefits being less drinking, improvements in personal welfare, less disruptive and violent behaviour and quieter, cleaner streets.

Overall fifty-eight per cent were in favour of the trial measures. When asked what future actions might be taken, more than half indicated that some kind of continuing restrictions should be included.

During the first phase of the trial, incidents attended by police on Thursdays in Tennant Creek were fifty-five per cent lower than in the corresponding period of 1994. The second phase was thirteen per cent lower than the previous corresponding period. Likewise, the main offences showed remarkable decreases, as well as admissions to the Tennant Creek sobering-up shelter.

Presentations to the Tennant Creek hospital where alcohol was a factor again showed significant drops. Phase one — thirty-six per cent lower, and phase two — twenty-one per cent lower, than corresponding periods of the year before.

Likewise, admissions to the Tennant Creek women's refuge throughout 1995 were lower than 1994. However, during phase one there were thirty-nine per cent lower admissions than the second phase where it was only ten per cent fewer admissions.

'The evaluators found no evidence that the commercial sector as a whole had suffered economically, and some anecdotal evidence that business people perceived benefits from reduced vandalism and public drunkenness.' (d'Abbs, Togni, Crundall, 1996, 3) 'If there was, nobody came to us with information,' Dr Peter d'Abbs claimed.

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The Liquor Commission decision was to continue the restrictions of phase one on a permanent basis:

- Takeaway bottleshops closed on Thursday;
- Ban on the sale of all wine casks over two litres;
- Sale of two litre casks limited to one per person per day;
- No glass containers sold over one litre;
- Front bars closed on Thursday;
- Lounge bars open noon Thursday and Friday with food available.
- Other days opening at ten am.
- Wine only sold with a substantial meal.
- Light beer ONLY between ten and noon.
- No third party sales to taxi drivers.

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I think it's important to live and work in Central Australia as the emphasis is not on my culture, but on Aboriginal culture and you learn a lot. Australian culture extends beyond the coast. I also love dancing with the women.

Julia: Bush trips. When I began three and a half years ago I couldn't believe that I was being paid to drive a truck through some of the most spectacular landscapes in the world, listening to old ladies bring the country to life with their songs, stories and dances. A 'Girls' Own adventure!!' Working with and for them, to record aspects of their law and culture is personally and professionally rewarding. Learning to master the inadequacies, intricacies and requirements of native title law and process is intellectually challenging, though demoralising and frustrating.

Are your legal skills and training relevant or helpful in your work as an anthropologist?

Julia: They are certainly relevant and, on balance, helpful. Much of my work is framed and limited by legislation and the common law, and by legal process imperatives. Research is not conducted willy nilly, but in accordance with specific evidentiary requirements. It is helpful to have a foot in both legal and anthropological camps, given their inter-dependence in native title work and the historical mutual distrust and disrespect Land Council lawyers and anthropologists have had for each other. On

the other hand, there are times when too much emphasis on legal matters hinders anthropological analysis.

Who do you get to help you when you get a flat tyre?

(a) *your dog*

(b) *Royal Flying Doctor Service*

(c) *accept that no-one is anywhere near to help and grapple with the kangaroo jack*

Ruth: I am worried about the hunting that's going on — I hope I will not be called on to change a flat tyre.

Julia: (c), or if I'm not travelling alone, plead with my passenger to assist.

What is your PB for hurling a swag onto the roof of your vehicle?

(a) *10 m & one handed*

(b) *5 m & two handed*

(c) *!@#*\$*

Ruth: (c).

Julia: (c).

How do you keep yourself in shape out bush?

Ruth: I am thinking when we get to Port Augusta I might have a swim while the women visit their families. Otherwise it's the roof rack stretches, bull bar crouches, swag hurling.

Julia: See last two answers.

What is your preferred music when driving?

Ruth: The ladies I am travelling with are demanding I produce Gospel and

Country/Western tapes. Michelle Shocked, Warumpi Band, Archie Roach, Techno (for those really long solo drives), Indigo Girls, are all my favs.

Julia: Variety is important, especially for long trips. I like to take Paul Kelly, Michelle Shocked, a bit of jazz or classical, Celtic music, daggy 70s (and 60s) for singalongs and loud rock/heavy metal to keep me awake at the end of a long day. However, I rarely travel alone and my passengers usually veto my music. They prefer country icons — Conway Twitty, Patsy Cline, Warren Williams, Frankie Yamma, The Hermannsburg Ladies Choir.

Where do you see your career heading?

Ruth: Next month I start a new job as Regional Development Officer with the Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs, NT. So I'm turning into an arts administrator! I never really intended to be a lawyer. Anyone out there with any great ideas for touring community arts projects, give me a call!

Julia: Not sure. I'm reaching the point where I need to choose between developing my skills as an anthropologist (more study perhaps?), touting for work as a baby solicitor or trying something completely different. No decisions just yet though — I'm enjoying this job too much.

Grog War article continued from p.80.

The Chairman of the Liquor Commission reminded Tennant Creek that it had been invited in 1994 to improve the quality of life in their community. The community should not assume what has been achieved is the best that can be achieved. Regulation alone is not the entire solution.

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Sitting back in his office, [Julalikari General Manager] Dave Curtis was still pondering the backlash he sensed was being planned by the licensees as soon as Maley had delivered his decision. He took note of the look on their faces as they huddled to complain outside of the court as the media swooped onto him. Everyone knew it was Dave Curtis who led the two-year crusade to convince the town that it could change the things it didn't like, simply by working together. Once, he was the only voice in the town council that backed the restrictions but now he was in the majority.

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One of the things that bothered Maley was the misinformation that was generated throughout the two years it took to get to this point. For instance, a lot of people kept pushing the need for tourists to be able to get a drink: 'No tourist wants to sit down at ten o'clock in the morning and drink a beer.'

He said he found it difficult for the publican to say on the one hand that 'I lived here all of my life etc. and brought up my family and created employment here etc. and you beaut community things' on the one hand, but between the hours of twelve in the day and nine o'clock at night do things that were deleterious to the community and which they knew were deleterious to the community. He thought it was a real double standard on their part. 'You can't separate yourself from the community for several hours a day while your bank balance swells. And go to church on Sunday morning and say I am part of this community: it is just too bad about the drinking problem.'

He knew he was home and hosed when the liquor trial started to have so many fathers. 'When the mayor started saying that they thought they were lucky they had started this whole process off. Well! It had so many fathers so really the town did it itself. It was an easy thing to do once everyone was sitting down and getting rid of a bit of prejudice.'

Dave Curtis, reflecting for a moment on the historic win, thought that even though the issue had been pretty divisive, in the end everything that happened throughout this process had actually brought the town together.