



Wirlomin family members brother and sister Helen Nelly Hall and Russell Nelly.

I was so proud to see these books. It's been a long time coming. It was an emotional time for all of us, but it was so pleasing that something has been accomplished and published out there. I feel it is in honour of our elders that have been recorded.

IRIS WOODS



Left: Lester Coyne, Iris Woods and Kim Scott at the launch in September. Right: Tegan Roberts and Kim Scott.



THE STORY LIVES ON

Keir Tunbridge discovers a book project bringing local Noongar culture back to life.



Gerhardt Laves

WHEN AMERICAN LINGUIST Gerhardt Laves travelled from Chicago to Albany in 1931 to record Noongar language and culture, he could not have imagined the weight of history that he had taken upon his shoulders.

As he gazed over King George Sound from his room at the White Star Hotel, did he comprehend the ancientness of the land and culture he would capture?

Did he leave Albany with an awareness of the significance of what he had travelled so far to accomplish? Or was his mission purely an academic exercise?

Whatever his motivation or emotion, Laves' contribution to Noongar culture on the South Coast has proved crucial, even 80 years after he set foot in Kinjarling, our place of rain.

But this story is not about Laves. It is about a group of people – a family – who through years of toil produced a lasting record of Noongar storytelling using Laves' notes of his encounters with Albany Noongars.

Laves' notes were neglected until the 1980s when his family sent them from the US to be placed under

the guardianship of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

In 2002, AIATSIS, in conjunction with the University of Western Australia, organised a special meeting with relatives of those people Laves recorded seven decades earlier.

So began what would become the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, a translation and interpretation initiative, which this year resulted in the release of two dual-language picture books intended to preserve and promote Noongar language and culture.

KIM SCOTT, ALBANY'S DUAL MILES Franklin award-winning author and modestly reluctant chairman of the project, describes in an essay in both books the way those gathered at their first meeting were instantly brought to tears as key family members received transcripts of their ancestors' stories.

According to Kim, Wirlomin is a name only hinted at in historical records, and since the project concerns language survival and the weight of heritage a tongue can carry, it is apt the name is so reliant upon oral history.

Kim says the name Wirlomin refers to a people, as well as a particular site, ceremony and song, and tells of "... spirits of the past, beyond a veil of death, acknowledging and speaking to those who have come to listen."

The two books, Mamang and Noongar Mambara Bakitj, were launched at the Albany Entertainment Centre in September.

Mamang is inspired by a story told to Laves, and is retold in Noongar and English by Kim Scott, Iris Woods and family members of the project, and features artwork by Jeffrey Farmer, Helen Nelly and Roma Winmar.

Noongar Mambara Bakitj is based on old words from Bob Roberts, and is retold by Kim Scott, Lomas Roberts and family members, and contains artwork by Geoffrey Woods and Anthony Roberts.

Kim said the road that culminated in the release of the books was long, describing the collective process of working through Laves' notes as intense and demanding.

Laves' International Phonetic Alphabet was idiosyncratic and difficult to read, according to Kim, and the family found it difficult to find a way to return the stories to the community.

At the suggestion of a woman by the name of Mary Gimondo, the group decided to work towards the creation of picture books, and conducted a series of workshops over many months to that end.

IRIS WOODS, WHO IS ALSO AN Aboriginal health worker in Katanning and a trained Noongar language teacher, said she was overwhelmed with happiness when the books were finally released.

"I was so proud to see these books," she said. "It's been a long time coming. I was kind of sad in a way because

we've worked long and hard with our old people through those years and we've had people pass away.

"It was an emotional time for all of us, but it was so pleasing that something has been accomplished and published out there.

"I feel it is in honour of our elders that have been recorded."

Iris said the project was ongoing, with more books planned for the future, and the group hoped to train young family members to take on leadership roles.


Kim said although individuals are named as creators of the stories, the

stories come from the Wirlomin family as a whole.

In his essay he says keeping the cultural pulse of the South Coast alive has been a difficult task.

"No wonder our ancestral tongue shrivelled, and (our stories) withered and dried like old snake skin, curling back to a thin barely-there scrap and synecdoche of what was once the living sinew and sap of our place," Kim said.

Iris believes the project is vital to Noongar culture.

"It preserves and promotes our culture and our identity and who we are as people," she said. 

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