

# Thomson of Arnhem Land

## INTRODUCTION

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*Thomson of Arnhem Land* tells the story of Australian anthropologist, photographer and journalist, Donald Thomson and his lifelong struggle for Aboriginal rights. Beginning in the 1930s, the film documents Thomson's passionate interest in Indigenous culture. It follows his journeys through Arnhem Land and explores his relationships with the great clan leader, Wonggu, and his friend and guide, Raiwalla. The story reveals his professional battles and traces his fight to preserve Indigenous culture under threat from assimilation policies that demanded Aboriginal people must become like white Europeans. *Thomson of Arnhem Land* also gives us an insight into the personality clashes and politics behind the assimilationist policies that aimed to deny Indigenous Australians their culture.

Donald Thomson with Wonggu's family, 1935 (Thomson Collection Museum Victoria)



### CURRICULUM LINKS

The film will have interest and relevance for senior students of Studies of Society and Environment, History, Anthropology, Indigenous Studies, English, Drama, Photography and Media Studies.

### BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

- Work through the following background reading, activities and questions to develop your understanding of Thomson and key facets of the historical period in which he lived and worked.

### THOMSON'S BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Donald Thomson was born in Melbourne and studied natural science at the University of Melbourne. While there, he developed a proficiency in photography, particularly of scientific and natural history subjects. After graduating in 1925, he took a one-year diploma

course in Anthropology at Sydney University, and then accepted a cadetship as a journalist at the *Melbourne Herald*.

In 1928 Thomson obtained a grant of 6000 pounds to work among the people of Cape York. He made three expeditions to this area, in 1928, 1929 and 1932-'33. He worked in Arnhem Land, living with the local people in 1935 and in 1936-'37. He delivered a report to the Federal Government in 1937 recommending that the unique culture of the Arnhem Land peoples should be preserved. Thomson focused on their special relationships with the land and their complex social, cultural and economic structures. But the assimilationists, led by Professor A.P. Elkin, had more influence over government ministers and policies, so Thomson's views were ignored.

Between 1941 and 1943 Thomson was Squadron Leader in the Royal Australian Air Force. In this role he worked again with Wonggu and his sons. He organized Arnhem Land Aborigines into a Special Reconnaissance Unit to protect Australia's north coast against invasion from the Japanese.

Thomson received an OBE in 1945 for his military service in New Guinea. He continued to lobby the then leader of the Opposition, Robert Menzies, to ensure the survival of the Yolngu peoples' cultures. Thomson was greatly saddened when Menzies sided with the assimilationists. In 1950, he received a Doctorate in Anthropology from the University of Cambridge. In 1957, 1963 and 1965, he led expeditions to the Gibson and Great Sandy Deserts.



Thomson retired from the University of Melbourne in 1968 as the Professor of Anthropology. He was involved in setting up the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and served on its council. He wrote numerous books and articles.

Throughout his life, Thomson fought for Aboriginal rights. The thousands of artifacts he collected, the detailed field notes he wrote, and the more than 10,000 exquisite photographs he took, provide a cultural record of traditional Aboriginal life beyond value. The Thomson collection in Museum Victoria is considered one of the most significant ethnographic collections in the world. Thomson continued his fight for Aboriginal rights until his death in 1970. His ashes were scattered over the waters of Arnhem Land by Wonggu's sons.

- Using these facts and further information you gather when you watch the film, prepare a timeline of Thomson's life. You could do this as individual or group work. Present the timeline as a poster or wall chart.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historians now believe Indigenous Australians have lived here for more than 60,000 years. Estimates of the Aboriginal population in 1788 vary from around 300,000 to one million. The people lived in hundreds of groups, each having their own language. All land within a recognized traditional

area was held or 'owned' by a 'clan' (a cluster of families with special kinship traditions). While some customs were shared across Australia, there were many individual differences depending on the region and the local environment. Over thousands of years, the people had adapted their way of life to be in harmony with the land and resources around them. A key element of life was sharing. Food, skills in hunting and gathering, social relationships, spiritual links with the land and special knowledge of laws and sacred places were shared and passed on by each generation.

#### FIND OUT MORE ABOUT

- scientists' beliefs about the origins of Aboriginal Australians;
- archaeological evidence of early Aboriginal life;
- the elaborate kinship systems of Aboriginal Australians; and
- the spiritual traditions of the Dreaming.

Captain James Cook first sighted the east coast of Australia in 1770. He sailed into Botany Bay and selected it as a suitable place for British settlement. His impressions of Aboriginal society were recorded in his journal:

*[T]hey appear to be some of the most wretched People on earth; but in reality they are far happier than*

*we Europeans ... They are unaware of the Conveniences that are so much sought after in Europe. They live in a tranquillity which is not disturbed by the inequality [between the rich and the poor] ... The earth and the sea of their own accord furnish them with all the necessary things in life ... They do not desire Magnificent houses and live in a warm and fine climate, so that they have little need for clothing ... [M]any to whom we gave cloth, etc., left it carelessly upon the sea beach and in the woods as a thing they had no manner of use for; in short they seemed to set no value upon anything we gave them ... This, in my opinion, argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of life ...<sup>1</sup>*

Cook claimed ownership of the land for the British and observed that the



Donald Thomson (Photograph by Dr Julian Smith – Thomson Family Collection)



Aborigines did not farm the land or place fences around it. The British government declared the land *terra nullius* – land owned by no-one – and believed this gave them the right, as the first Europeans to occupy the land, to claim ownership. This meant that all land became Crown land and all Aboriginal property rights were ignored.

- What impressions does Cook’s journal give of Aboriginal Australians’ values?
- On what basis did Cook believe it was right for him to claim possession of Australia?
- After you have watched the film, decide if Thomson would have agreed or disagreed with Cook’s views.
- Why didn’t Aborigines fence or farm the land?
- Find out what happened to the concept of *terra nullius* after the Mabo judgement.

Across Australia, the arrival of the Europeans in the 19th Century had a disastrous impact on Aboriginal people. Traditional food hunting and gathering sites were taken over, European diseases caused thousands of deaths and, in many areas, violence broke out when

the Indigenous population realized that the Europeans were invaders. They tried to defend their rights and beliefs but had no hope of defeating the well-armed Europeans. Many thousands of Indigenous people lost their lives. Colonial governments established reserves where Aborigines would be ‘protected’ and ‘segregated’ from Europeans. Many of these were missions controlled by churches.

- There are now many written sources which document the conflict between Aboriginal groups and Europeans in the 19th Century and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Do some further research to find out what happened in various parts of Australia.
- Why do you think the government decided to segregate the Aborigines?

The breakdown by Europeans of traditional Aboriginal culture continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Most Aborigines were separated from their land and forced to live on missions or government reserves, under the authority of a ‘protector’. Many thousands of Indigenous children were taken away from their parents, made government wards, and trained as domestic servants or farm workers. They were paid poor wages and had very few rights.

- Locate and read stories of children of the ‘Stolen Generations’.
- How did the government justify the taking of the children?
- What impact do we now know this period had on many of those who were taken?

Until the 1960s Australian governments had little respect for and knowledge of the rich cultural traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They tried to ‘assimilate’ Aboriginal people into white society and make them adopt white culture and lifestyles. However, they underestimated the powerful links of the Aboriginal people with their land and culture and the strength of the traditions that are still being passed through the generations in oral stories, music, dance and art.

- What is assimilation?
- Why might the process of assimilation be devastating to people of any culture whose way of life is being denied?
- What evidence can you find today of renewed respect and celebration of Indigenous peoples’ cultures?

In the 1960s Aboriginal people began to speak out, demanding land rights, respect for sacred sites and greater self-determination. In 1967, a national referendum was held which resulted in all Indigenous Australians being counted in the census for the first time and having the right to vote. Since then, pride in being Aboriginal has been reasserted, and nationwide organizations are calling for reconciliation.

- What is self-determination?
- Why is this such an important concept for Indigenous Australians?
- Create a timeline of key stages in Aboriginal peoples’ land rights movement. You should include such events as the presentation of the bark petition by the Yirrkala community to



Federal parliament in 1963, the 1965 Freedom Ride, the 1966 Wave Hill walkout and the establishment of the tent embassy in 1971. Also try to include an update on recent land rights issues.

- What is reconciliation?

#### **CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

##### **Who Are Australia's Indigenous People?**

'An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and is recognized as Aboriginal by members of the community with which he or she is associated'.

This Commonwealth Australia definition is social rather than racial, in keeping with changes in attitude towards identity. Today, Indigenous Australians identify themselves with the clan region where they come from in recognition of their close relationships with their traditional land area.

##### **WHO ARE THE YOLNGU PEOPLE?**

The Yolngu people are the Indigenous clans whose kinship region covers over 90,000 kilometres of north-east Arnhem Land. In the film, the time Thomson spent with the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land is documented. It is only since the early 1930s that the Yolngu people have had regular contact with Europeans. This was mainly through missionaries and, during World War 2, through contact

with service personnel based in the north as a result of the Japanese invasion of the region.

- Consult an atlas to locate Arnhem Land.
- Looking at a map, describe the land and find out more about the climate in the area.
- Yolngu people today are actively working in community groups to develop their schools, health services, industries, tourism and many other needs and services. Visit <http://www.eastarnhem.nt.gov.au/yirrkala/> to find out about these initiatives.

#### **UNDERSTANDING KINSHIP AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAND**

In Indigenous groups, kinship patterns are very complex, since the people regard themselves as being related (although not biologically) to all the people in the cultural or linguistic region. The Yolngu people see the universe as two parts which complement each other. These parts are expressed as moities known as Dhuwa and Yirritja. The Yolngu use the idea of moiety division to allocate the land, sacred sites, plants and animals. This also has an impact on relationships since Yolngu always marry into the opposite moiety.

Donald Thomson understood the special relationship the Yolngu people have with the land and their kinship beliefs. All Indigenous Australian groups have hereditary land rights based on principles of descent, kinship and marriage. Each land holding group has the collective responsibility to look after the country by keeping out intruders, maintaining sacred sites and performing traditional ceremonies to ensure the country's continuing identity and fertility. Elder members of the group ensure that knowledge of traditions is passed on. Before the European invasion, men, women and children shared in the collection of food and hunting. Food was distributed according to the rules of each society, but the decline in food resources due to the loss of traditional lands led to dependence on European food.

- After watching the film, who do you think were the key elders amongst the Yolngu in Thomson's time?
- What do you learn about Yolngu marriage traditions, social and economic structures in the film?

#### **AFTER WATCHING THE FILM**

- In a class discussion, reflect on and share what you have learned about Australian history from the film *Thomson of Arnhem Land*.

- In small groups write an obituary for Donald Thomson recording his significant achievements and then share your views. You might like to include this comment from the producer/director of the film, John Moore:

*I was struck by the quality of the relationship that Thomson had with the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land. His efforts to understand Aboriginal culture from within, through immersing himself in their lifestyle, had given him a unique insight into their value systems and view of the world.*

- Why was it so tragic that much of Thomson's archival film of Arnhem Land was lost in a fire?
- What messages of hope for the future of reconciliation does the film leave us with?

#### KEY EVENTS AND THEMES

**Life in the Missions in the 1930s**  
Thomson and his first wife Gladys spent time at an Arnhem Land mission in the 1930s. At the time, many missionaries believed that bringing Christianity to Aboriginal Australians would provide them with a better future. Sadly, not all missionary activities had positive outcomes, and for many Indigenous

peoples, living in the missions meant loss of their culture and sense of identity.

- What reports did Thomson give of the way people were treated at the Arnhem Land mission?
- Why do you think the Presbyterian hierarchy in Melbourne wouldn't respond to the reports?
- Do some further research to find out more about both positive and negative aspects of life in missions in the 1930s in various parts of Australia.

#### THOMSON'S TIME IN ARNHEM LAND

In 1933 a state of panic erupted in Darwin after five Japanese fishermen and three white men were killed by Aboriginal clansmen in Caledon Bay, Northern Territory. Thomson was appalled by calls for a punitive expedition and volunteered to go alone into Arnhem Land to try to prevent the race war that people feared.

The sons of clan leader Wonggu were sentenced to twenty years hard labour in Fanny Bay Jail, Darwin. Thomson wanted to find out why the fishermen had been killed. He suspected that the Aboriginal men were resisting invasions of their land and had acted in self-defence. At the same time, he was aware that the official policy of 'protection' of Aborigines had failed. He proposed making a scientific study of Yolngu culture as the basis for new policies that would finally bring justice to Aboriginal people.

- What was the significance of the message stick that Thomson took from Wonggu's sons to their father?
- How would you describe the journey that Thomson took with Raiwalla to Caledon Bay?

- Why was a knowledge of the appropriate rituals so important to Thomson's success in developing a relationship with Wonggu?

For two years Thomson lived with the Yolngu people, learning their languages and way of life. He developed a close relationship with the great Yolngu leader, Wonggu, the head of the Djapu clan. Wonggu gave Thomson a message stick to take to the Commonwealth government. It said that he would keep the peace and ensure that there were no more killings. In return he asked for the release of his three sons and respect of the Yolngu cultural traditions. In 1936, after Wonggu's sons had spent three years in jail, Thomson sailed with Ngarkaiya, Natjialma and Mau back into Caledon Bay.

- What did Thomson discover were the reasons why the Yolngu people had killed the Japanese people?
- Why was the return of Wonggu's sons such a triumph for Thomson?
- Why were there so many Japanese people living in Northern Australia at the time?
- What impressions does the film give of Arnhem Land peoples' views on Thomson?

Early in 1937 Thomson was invited to go with Yolngu people to Gatji on the north coast where clans gathered for secret ceremonies and trade. He was keen to find out more about the economic life of the peoples, their systems of land ownership and what induced them to work so hard. While he was there, he extended his already large collection of photographs of Yolngu culture.

- What did Thomson find out about social and economic organization?
- Why did Raiwalla owe equipment and commodities?

Raiwalla, a Miljijngi man. Loyal friend and companion to Donald Thomson, 1936. (Thomson Collection, Museum Victoria)



Donald Thomson with Wonggu's family, 1935 (Thomson Collection, Museum Victoria)



- What does Thomson's visit to Gatji tell you about the attitude of Yolngu people towards him?

- Why was Thomson so reluctant to return to Melbourne in 1937?

Thomson delivered his report to the government in 1937, opposing the policy of assimilation and arguing for specific policies to recognize and protect Aboriginal land rights. But his strongly voiced opinions won him few supporters. In many ways he was a man ahead of his time. He recommended that:

*those Northern Territory Blacks not yet 'de-tribalised' shall have the Arnhem Land reserve set aside for them and maintained strictly for their use ... It may or may not be 'practical politics' to maintain the whole area as a reserve.<sup>2</sup>*

- In a brief role play, act out a possible speech a supporter of Thomson's views may have made to support Thomson's recommendations.

### THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Australian forces became involved in WW2 as soon as war was declared in 1939. Thomson was a squadron leader between 1941 and 1943 in the Royal Australian Air Force. In this role, he organized Arnhem Land Aborigines into a special Reconnaissance Unit. After the Japanese bombing raids on Darwin

in 1942, Thomson sailed to Arnhem Land where he once again lived amongst the Yolngu people. Wonggu greeted him like a son. It was ironic that the government now wanted his people to kill Japanese people.

- What does reconnaissance mean? What special qualities and skills would the local Indigenous population and Thomson have had for a force like this?

- Why do you think Thomson was sent on to New Guinea?

- Why would this period have been personally troubling for Thomson?

### THE 1950S

In the 1950s Thomson continued to campaign for Aboriginal Land Rights, mainly through writing feature newspaper articles. He attacked both pastoralists and missionaries for their poor treatment of Aboriginal Australians. He called for recognition of Aborigines' hereditary ownership of land.

- Suggest reasons why Thomson had little success in gaining support for his views in the 1950s.

- What was the significance of the fact that Thomson's second wife delivered an amulet to Menzies in 1949?

- What was Menzies' attitude to Thomson's views?

- Why was Thomson so appalled by the rocket testing at Maralinga in South Australia in 1957?

- What was Elkin's view on the testing?

- Why was Thomson denied access to Queensland missions in the 1950s?

In 1957 Thomson continued his efforts to document and increase his deep knowledge of the rich cultures of Central Australian Aboriginal clans.

- What was he trying to find out in the desert regions?

### LEARNING FROM THOMSON'S PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD

The film includes many of Thomson's photographs taken on his journeys in the 1930s. Russell White helped catalogue his collection in 1970 and commented:

*Donald Thomson was a man of considerable accomplishment ... [T]he further I delved, the more my respect grew for a man in many ways ahead of his time. The collection includes a vast number of photographic negatives, a great many ... are glass plates. It was difficult enough to process these in a photographic laboratory, but Thomson would build a bark shelter in the bush and process them at night. Working under extremely primitive conditions, he produced outstanding images of very high quality. Not only did he*

*photograph every aspect of Aboriginal life ... but he also collected specimens of the flora and fauna, each of which was carefully annotated. Pickled snakes, stuffed birds, dried flowers, nuts, seeds, snail shells, every type of creeping, crawling, hopping, swimming or flying creature, every form of plant life is included in this collection, along with their botanical and Aboriginal names, what they were used for and who collected them, where and when.*

- How did Thomson travel around the shores and rivers of Arnhem Land?
- What equipment would he have required to process the photographs?
- Why was the support and friendship of local Aborigines so important to his work?
- Why does White think that Thomson's records are such an achievement? Suggest other reasons why Thomson's work is so significant.

In the film, *Thomson of Arnhem Land*, you see many images derived from Thomson's extensive photographic collection. As you watch the film, jot down images which help you to learn about Indigenous culture. Compare your list with other members of the class and discuss what you have learnt.

#### **A.P. ELKIN: ANTHROPOLOGIST**

Throughout the film we gain the impression that Thomson had very different views about Indigenous Australians compared with the noted anthropologist A.P. Elkin. The producer/director John Moore says:

*The reason for Thomson's ... loss of political influence can be traced to his conflict with his great rival and the architect of assimilation, A.P. Elkin. This battle for influence over Australia's 'native affairs' was to have far-reaching and quite damaging consequences for Aboriginal people and for the country as a whole. ... I*

*am not sure that Thomson was aware just how extensively Elkin undermined his credibility.*

- In what ways were Elkin's views opposed to Thomson's?
- In what other ways did the two men differ?
- How does the biographer Tigger Wise describe Elkin?
- Why might the film producer have a clearer view of Elkin's influence than Thomson himself?

#### **THE MAKING OF THE FILM, THOMSON OF ARNHEM LAND**

The making of *Thomson of Arnhem Land* involved a great deal of careful archival research, interviewing and filming so that Thomson's story would be faithfully and accurately reproduced and represented.

- Make a list of all the different sources used in scenes from the film.
- Who is interviewed in the film and how do their various insights help to build the story of Thomson?

An Indigenous camera assistant, Djangirrawuy Garawirrtja (Djangi), was employed. He had a key role as location manager, forward scout, translator and community liaison person. Djangi felt his job was made easier because everyone in Arnhem Land knows about Thomson and wants to talk about him. 'Some of the older people remember him personally and they always speak very fondly of him. Us younger ones have had the story passed down to us many times over, til we know it backwards', explained Djangi.

- How important do you think it was for the film production team to build contact and trust with Arnhem Land people?

- What special insights did Arnhem Land people provide?

The co-producer of the film, Michael McMahon, and Film Australia's Executive Producer, Franco Di Chiera, were drawn to Thomson's story because of his courage and commitment. Di Chiera asks the question, 'What if Thomson had been listened to? Perhaps the story of Australia and reconciliation may have been much different'.

- In a class discussion, talk about what you think Di Chiera means.

The crew spent time in Darwin filming at Fanny Bay Jail, where Wonggu's three sons were imprisoned in 1933. The film crew was confronted with contemporary issues about the over representation of Aboriginal people in jail, deaths in custody and the justice system today.

- Do some library research to find out why Aboriginals die in custody at a greater rate than other members of the Australian community.

the Thomson family had kept for sixty-four years was returned to \_\_\_\_\_ t was an \_\_\_\_\_ portant ceremony involving the Governor General, Sir William Deane, Dorita Thomson and then chair of ATSIC, Gatjil Djerkura, who is one of Wonggu's grandsons.

- Look again at the scene in the film recording this important event.
- Who is involved in the presentation?
- Why do you think the return of the message stick attracted such interest and respect?
- Reconciliation is an issue receiving a great deal of attention today. As a class, discuss what the term means. Find out

more about the many reconciliation activities occurring today. Why is there still a need for further reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

- Form small groups and choose one of the following aspects of Aboriginal culture to investigate: ceremonies, art, literature, music. Groups could choose to focus on historical or contemporary aspects of culture. Gather resources to construct a classroom display and then invite another class group in for a presentation on the many ways Aboriginal culture is celebrated.

#### POSTSCRIPT

In the final scene of the film, we see a shot from a plane flying over the waters of Caledon Bay, Arnhem Land. In June 1970, Donald Thomson's ashes were scattered over Caledon Bay, a ceremony witnessed by two of Wonggu's sons.

- How different might aspects of Australia's Indigenous history be if Thomson's views had been listened to?
- In the last twenty or thirty years of Thomson's life he was a forgotten man. Why do you think the film was made?
- How do you think Thomson would have defined reconciliation? What hopes do you think he may have had for Indigenous Australians in the future?

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#### ENDNOTES

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2. *Argus*, Melbourne, 13th June, 1938.



Nellie and Bambi, Stewart River, Cape York 1928 (Photograph by Donald Thomson – Thomson Collection Museum Victoria)

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