The final word on a dream of native title

TRENT DALTON

IT was written in stars and written in stone.

Five years ago, with his native title claim on 20,000 sq km of central Queensland perched on a legal knife edge, Col McLennan presented Federal Court judge Steven Rares with a copy of celebrated novelist Alex Miller’s 2003 Miles Franklin Award-winning novel, Journey to the Stone Country.

“Read it,” encouraged Mr McLennan, the 60-year-old patriarch to 3000 Jangga people from the bendy scrub and sacred stone country an hour west of Mackay.

The book was the literary equivalent of a native title connection report, with a lead character, the enigmatic and unforgettable Bo Rennie, drawn entirely from Mr McLennan’s life and deep love of country. And it proved to be a deciding factor in the realisation of a 20-year native title dream beset by bureaucracy, clan differences and endless negotiations.

One morning late last month, Justice Rares fresh from the murky matter of Peter Slipper and James Ashby — dropped into a community hall in the small mining town of Glenden, two hours west of Mackay, to formally grant Mr McLennan’s people native title rights over Jangga country. Seated in the hall that day were 300 of Mr McLennan’s family and friends: Fraser-era minister for immigration and ethnic affairs Ian Macphee; philosopher and author Raimond Gaita; and Miller, the London-born former Queensland ringer and two-time Miles Franklin Award winner. “It is the power of the Jangga in their own country, resumed at last, that is being recorded today,” Miller said.

He met Mr McLennan through Liz Halle, the white archeological consultant and childhood cattle station neighbour whom Mr McLennan’s elders had prophesised he would one day fall in love with, forming the real-life love story at the heart of Miller’s book.

“For Col, today is a day for whitefellas as well as blackfellas to celebrate,” Miller said.

“Col has never been a divider, he has never been one for conflict, but has always been a leader who has brought people of divergent views together.

“From the first day I met him, and began to listen to him and be educated by him, and later to travel with him in his country, I knew I had met a man of rare and extraordinary vision and ability who was in possession of a deep and richly detailed knowledge of, and spiritual connection to, his people and his country.”

Through his 20-year fight, Mr McLennan, a former cattle ringer and champion rodeo rider, has emerged as an influential and insightful leader in his region.

Quietly, humbly, he has been dealing his people into a hefty slice of the Queensland mining boom, negotiating indigenous training and employment programs with mining companies such as NRW Holdings, Adani and QCoal, and using money from multi-million-dollar indigenous land use agreements to establish a university education fund for Jangga teens.

The first six of Mr McLennan’s Jangga Operations young indigenous recruits will fly home next week from an exhaustive pre-employment training program with NRW in Western Australia, having equipped themselves with entry level skills to break into civil and mining industry roles in Jangga country. Mr McLennan calls it the “reversal”.

“It’s not the mining companies telling us how it’s done,” he said. “We want to tell them how it’s got to be done. It works this way. You won’t be raping and pillaging the country like you did earlier in the piece.

“We’ll tell you what we want. We want to be able to manage the country the right way.

“Make life a little bit easier for our families. It’s a thing that grows and grows and grows. You open up new schools, for black and white, and that money is there for them to get their education.

“If you have a good business sense, maybe we can open a business for you, and maybe we can buy an office block in Sydney and rent those spaces out to Jangga people and they can think like good business people do.”

PREMIUM CONTENT

Watch Col McLennan interviewed

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Justice Steven Rares with Col McLennan at Glenden

Col McLennan in his beloved Jangga country in central Queensland where he has finally succeeded in winning native title rights for his people