

# LIFE AND DEATH IN THE TERRITORY

Have you ever acted as midwife to a young mother and having delivered her of twin girls had to plead, threaten and cajole to save the second child from being killed ?

Or watched a nine-months-old child die from pneumonia because her parents did not seek assistance in time, and have the roof of the verandah where the child died burned to ashes the same evening ?

Or, fight for the life of a 12-year-old boy who had been "sung to death" by the tribal medicine man ?

These were part and parcel of my life on a cattle station in the Northern Territory.

The life was full of interest and excitement, but it is the life I would choose for the rest of my days—and I'm a city girl.

Violet was only fourteen when one of my housegirls told me that she was having a piccaninny. I called her up from the creek, where the lubras spent the day playing cards and gossiping, and told her she was to come to me each morning for some vitamin tablets, which I had found a great help in trying to overcome the infant mortality rate. When the Flying Doctor came on his next visit and told her he would see her and make sure she was "properly good fella".

She agreed, and went away after I had made sure she swallowed the tablets, and not holding them on her tongue to be spat out as is often the case among these people. Thus she became a member of the daily queue, awaiting my arrival after breakfast each morning, to open the medicine chest.

Violet was examined by the Flying Doctor, and all seemed well with mother and babe, yet I had a doubt about her.

Her time drew near, and one evening after dinner the excited chatterings of the girls clearing away our coffee cups gave me word that her labour had begun.

I had her brought up to our "hospital" and then commenced the long wait—Life, like Death, chooses its own time.

The flames from a small fire cast fantastic shadows on the calsomined walls of the tin shed. Violet, supported by her mother, alternately moaned, and spat the residue from her "Nikki-Nikki" on the floor. The other attendants either dozed or had supper from a shin-bone of beef.

It was my first confinement. I had read and re-read the instructions in the book, "Your Baby and You", and had everything prepared. I would not participate in the actual birth unless it was necessary, for when dealing with these people it is best to remain an onlooker until your assistance is requested.

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**by Gareth R. Colquhoun**  
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Towards 3 a.m. a new life presented herself to the world. The native midwives were in difficulty, and my assistance was needed. To our surprise, our efforts resulted in another little girl!

The dark people were horrified. Their stark fear showed plainly on their faces. Multiple births amongst Aborigines are very uncommon, and to their superstitious minds, they savour of the "evil spirits".

Now began a battle of wits. On one side ranged the white man's code, with the knowledge that this was a normal event; on the other, the age-old tradition that the second child should be killed. The idea originated in the past, when it would have been almost impossible for a nomadic mother to succour two children. Fear, too, that this second child was "Debbil-debbil".

The older women were adamant. The child must die. In vain I pleaded, trying to tell them that there were no evil spirits in that tiny baby.

I threatened that I would get the "Boss", and the police constable, and the Native Welfare Officer. Still they persisted. I tried to praise the young mother, telling her that she was a "properly smart girl" to have two fella piccaninny together. It didn't work.



**Lanceen and Shannon Archibald  
of Armidale among the pumpkin  
vines.**