

Telling it our Way: Koori History in NSW

Fabri Blacklock

During November 2001 I was involved in the 'Australians and the Past' survey as part of a special joint project between the University of Technology, Sydney and the Powerhouse Museum. I interviewed five Koori people from the New England area: Auntv Patricia Davis-Hurst from Taree; Sharon Cutmore and Andrea Chapman from Glen Innes; and Aunty Patricia Locke and Uncle Michael Brown from Tingha.

One of my main findings from the surveys was that Indigenous people from the New England area are eager to share our history and culture with the wider community. We want non-Indigenous people to know about our culture and experiences, but these histories need to come from us. We have to research and write our own history. For far too long we have had non-Indigenous anthropologists and historians research and write our history for us and interpret to us what our culture and history is from their perspectives. They have researched our culture and histories in every possible way and produced hundreds of books and other resources which we now as Indigenous people in contemporary times have to cite or quote to validate whether we are right when we are researching and writing about our own cultures and histories. Auntv Patricia Davis-Hurst says:

I don't put much faith in getting anything of value from white writers. Look what Tindale

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did to us ... I mean that fella that put that big; map together and all the tribes ... he was from Texas would you believe, now what the heck would he know?¹

Publishing Indigenous History

Before 1970 there were only a handful of Indigenous writers researching and writing about their culture and histories. Nowadays I find that more and more Indigenous people are writing books on the history of their people but we are not given the same opportunities as the more qualified non-Indigenous authors and academics.

Two of the people I interviewed were both involved in writing books on the history of their people. Firstly, Aunty Patricia Davis-Hurst, who is a descendant of the Worimi people from the Forster-Taree area, wrote a book called *Sunrise Station* based on the history of the Worimi people. The second book was written by Aunty Patricia Locke, who on her father's side is a descendant of the Ngarabal people from Glen Innes and Tingha. On her mother's side she is a descendant of the Biripi people from Dingo Creek. Aunty Patricia wrote the book *Millie's Walkabout*, which is an oral history based on the life of her mother and my Great-Grandmother Millie Brown (nee Glover).

Both *Sunrise Station* and *Millie's Walkabout* were self-published and they were not handed over to a white editor in a big publishing firm. Aunty Patricia Davis-Hurst observes that 'because we did it ourselves we published, edited we did everything ourselves except typeset because we had to have someone do that. We didn't want to give it to a publisher because I was fearful that they'd take the guts out of it' .2

Sunrise Station is one of the most comprehensive books written about Koori people that I have ever read. It covers a broad range of topics from traditional society to massacres of the Manning Valley and Koori participation in many of the wars. There is a tribute to the Elders of the community, the stolen generation of which her Mum Margaret Maher was a part of and life on the mission which was called Sunrise Station. The introduction to the work declares that:

This book has been written to make the non-Aboriginals aware, as well as our own people who may not understand what has happened in history and what the Aboriginals had to go through to survive, and how over the years they fought to be accepted by white society. It also tells of the forgotten Koori soldiers who went to the two great wars and every war since, some losing their lives in the battle fields, with

no recognition. Historians ignored the feats of our men and nothing was written in Australian history about their exploits to pass onto our children, and it's only through collecting old photos and information I did not know existed from various people, that I began putting some of the pieces together. I do not think this book would have been possible if it was not for my dear mother and her collection of photos going back to the late 1800s.³

Aunty Patricia Locke compiled *Millie's Walkabout* from a series of recorded interviews with Millie Brown over a number of years. It is based on the life story of Millie from when she was born to the present day. Aunty Patricia had this book published by a friend of hers in 1999. She outlined the reason she decided to write this book:

I wanted to keep a history of the family but mostly I thought that we lived a very unusual life. Mum and Dad lived a very unusual life. Because when I'd tell people different things about my life they'd say how old are you? What century did you live in? You couldn't have possibly lived in this century, and I thought to myself well, why did they think that. That's what motivated me to write it. Then as I started to write I thought this is valuable information because it can be passed on to all the different generations.⁴

From the interviews I recorded I found this to be the main reason that people record and write history: future generations. Due to assimilation policies and the removal of children from their families much of our culture has been fragmented, marginalised, and in some cases lost. But it is still very much a part of our lives. Language is a very important part of our community and my Nan Millie can clearly remember her parents speaking in the language of the Biripi people, but they were too scared to pass it onto the children because they were fearful that they would be taken away as they were forbidden to speak their language. This was something that Uncle Michael Brown was very upset about. He said:

I'd like to learn our language cause it all got wiped out ... well, they've taken that from us and that's what I'd like, to come back to find that again, where we could have it in schools to be taught to our kids ... that's what I'd like, the stuff that was taken off us that we used to have here, which is almost literally impossible to get it back. They've killed our people, our past, everything — even our language ... how could someone take something off you like that?⁵

Anniversaries, Commemorations, and Memorials

Participating in historical anniversaries such as Australia Day and the Centenary of Federation celebrations really had no positive meaning for some Indigenous people for obvious reasons. Aunty Patricia Davis-Hurst says: 'I don't feel like celebrating Australia Day. What the heck have we got to celebrate Federation, you know it means nothing to us'. We are more inclined to celebrate our survival by attending the Survival Day concert on what many Indigenous people refer to as 'invasion day'. We have several events each year including NAIDOC week and Reconciliation week where we have the opportunity to celebrate, commemorate, and share our culture with the wider community.

One historical memorial that is particularly important to my family is the Myall Creek Massacre memorial, just outside Bingara in north-western NSW. My Aunty Sue Blacklock was involved in erecting and unveiling a series of memorial plaques to some of her ancestors, who were victims of the Myall Creek massacre. The Myall Creek massacre was the first time in Australian history where the white perpetrators were convicted and subsequently hanged for their actions in the massacre. It was also comforting to see that the descendants of the white perpetrators also participated in the memorial and offered their apologies to the Koori people.

Adele Chapman talks about her involvement in the Myall Creek memorial:

We just heard about it and they were taking a bus load over and Dad was going over representing the National Parks and Wildlife and he told us about it and he said he'd like us to go and we lived like only an hour away. We knew a lot about it and thought oh yes for the kids and everything to show the kids it was important for them and for us too because it was one of the first stands of justice for Aboriginal people.⁶

Memorials are very important to Koori people. There are many of great significance such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which was erected on the lawns of Parliament House Canberra in 1972 and still remains there today. There are numerous special places that are of great significance to Indigenous people and the history of this country but some of these are not marked or commemorated in the way they should be. For instance the place where the Sydney Opera House stands is called Bennelong Point and is where Bennelong, one of the first Kooris captured by Captain Arthur Phillip, lived for many years.

In the book *Aboriginal Sydney: A Guide to Important Places of the Past and Present*, Hinkson notes that in 1790 'Governor Phillip had a small hut built for his friend Bennelong on the site where the Opera House now stands. Thereafter the place became known as Bennelong Point'.⁷ But if you ask people what the point is called I bet that not many people would be able to tell you the significance of the place other than that is where the Opera House stands. Sadly there is no memorial to Bennelong at the Opera House, only a bar named in his honour. This is most ironic considering Bennelong died an alcoholic from the liquor that was introduced into his community by the first settlers.

Family Memorabilia

Family memorabilia is a vehicle for reminiscing about the past. Most Australian families keep and use memorabilia and Koori people are no different. Just about every Koori household is filled with an array of photographic imagery, often spanning generations. Koori people love looking at photographs of their families, extended families, friends, and themselves and seeing who they know in them. Some of the best times I've had are when we have all gone over to my Uncle's house for a slide show. We still do. We look at all the really old slides and my Aunties and Uncles reminisce about the old days. But it is also a really good way of stimulating people's memories and finding out about stories of the past. Every photo has a story to tell of a time and a place and it is fascinating listening to all the yarns from the old days.

Everyone that I interviewed thought strongly that family memorabilia should be kept within the family. Patricia Davis-Hurst writes that:

My house is full of memorabilia from the past. I'm one of those people like a real bower bird, you hoard things. My Mum was the same and that's how I came to write the book actually, because she had all these old negatives, a whole boxful ... There's one thing that Kooris do like looking at and that's pictures. I mean you write a book with no pictures, people will just put it down and they won't even bother going through it. But if they see pictures they always go through it to see if there's someone there that they know.⁸

Photographs are not the only mementoes that are important to families. Objects collected over years by family members have varied significance. In Glen Innes there are hundreds of sapphires and stones to be found. A lot of my family go fossicking for these. They have

collected many stones over the years. They may not be worth much in dollar terms but their significance lies in who found them and where. Uncle Michael Brown says, 'they sort of turn into a family heirloom, they should always be in the family cause they remind you of a time and place as well. Like one stone there reminded me of when I was there with Mum by myself and every time I see the stone it reminds me of her'.⁹

Indigenous people have survived white occupation of this country for 215 years now, and while we still have a long way to go with health and education we have survived to finally be able to tell our story our way. I love listening to the stories and recording them. Some are sad, some are happy. But at least we are telling it our way. Auntie Patricia Davis-Hurst says:

I love the Koori people for their great sense of humour they can always laugh in the face of adversity ... I think that's the only thing that's kept them going over the years.

1 Patricia Davis-Hurst, *Sunrise Station*, Sunbird Publications, Taree, 1996, p 6.

2 *ibid*, p 11.

3 *ibid*.

4 Patricia Locke, *Millie's Walkabout*, Patricia Locke, Sydney, 1999, pp 2—3.

5 Interview with Michael Brown, 29 November 2002, Glen Innes.

6 Interview with Andrea Chapman 2 November 2001, Glen Innes.

7 M Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney: A Guide to Important Places of the Past and Present*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2001, p 6.

8 Davis-Hurst, *op. cit.*, p 3.

9 Interview with Michael Brown, 29 November 2002, Glen Innes. Thanks also to Patricia Locke and Sharon Cutmore.