Two last words about my friend. Her brother, Esmond Higgins, once said to me: "Melbourne is bad for Nettie," having in mind, I suppose, the inveterate provincialism of our native town. But however that may have been, Nettie has been mighty good not only for Melbourne, but all Australia. In "Fourteen Years" she has written "I have a feeling that Ruth Pitter's most revealing phrases are instinctive, and that she herself might take them out afterwards with surprise at their meaning:

> Grief for the quick, love for the dead . . .
> Daring, a paradox and true."

For her friends who survive. true, too, in the case of Nettie.

Our Freedom Ride

Beth Hauser

BY 7 a.m. on Tuesday 16 February the bus had already been on the road for nearly an hour. Inside were thirty university students in varying states of awakeness. Some of us dazedly recalling the events of the last 72 hours or so and trying to attach some meaning to them.

On midnight Friday we'd set out from Sydney, talking, joking and singing—thirty individuals brought together as members of Student Action for Aborigines (S.A.F.A.). It would be almost impossible to discover all the motives behind each decision to come on the bus trip—some students were regular "good cause" joiners; for others this was their first experience of any organisation; a few had some idea of what to expect of the conditions Aboriginal people were living in; but most had never even seen a shanty town where the fringe-dwellers live and their interest had come mostly from books and conversations; all were keen to find out "What was really going on."

Our aims weren't so diffuse. They were to conduct a survey of Aboriginal problems in health, housing and education and to demonstrate where we found cases of racial discrimination.

Now we were wondering what we had let ourselves in for. Last night we could have been killed! An open truck had, on its third attempt, succeeded in forcing us off the asphalt and over the steep shoulder of the road. We hardly dared think what could have happened without a quick-thinking driver.

Jarred by this thought the previous day's events became clearer. We'd carried out our survey work in the morning—dutifully noting down answers to questions on everything from the number of people living in a shanty dwelling to the comments of town council officials on integration suggestions.

By lunch-time some of our group had found a place where discrimination against Aboriginals existed. For six hot, dry hours of that day we stood there holding signs, discussing and arguing with local residents. As the sun sank lower it shone directly in our eyes so that we had to hold the posters higher to protect our faces from the burning heat. With sunset came a welcome rest —but not for long, as we had suddenly to pack up and leave the church hall where we'd stayed the previous night. By 10 p.m. we were off on the road again—not much singing this time as we were all too tired, although our spirits were high after our first attempt at demonstrating and street-corner debating.

Cars followed us out of town. We didn't know who were in them—whether they were friendly well-wishers or not. Suddenly two headlights swerved out to pass our bus but coming rather close to us. The road was narrow and we thought little of the closeness until the same vehicle slowed down, allowed us to pass, and repeated the performance. This time we realised with amazement that the vehicle—a table-top truck—was actually trying to hit us. On its third attempt it succeeded and the bus careered off the road.

As it lurched over the shoulder there were a couple of screams and crashes as various pieces of luggage fell down from the roof racks. We came to a half. There was a moment of stunned silence before someone called out, "Is anyone hurt?" Apart from shock, nobody was.

While friends in the other cars drove back to town for the police we stood around in the glare of headlights trying to realise what had happened and why . . . Nine hours later we were still puzzling over it.

Surely the truck driver must have been drunk or slightly mad. We didn't like to admit openly the possibility that he may have been sober. If he had acted deliberately we felt we must have touched on a very sore point when we chose to demonstrate against racial discrimination.

The road we were on seemed about as rough as we expected to find on the trip. Surely things could only get better.

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First impressions always seem to be the most vivid. The first sight of a settlement of Aboriginal people on the outskirts of a prosperous town is no exception. There beside a rather muddy river were scattered about twenty or thirty dwellings —mostly put together with just plain sheets of galvanised iron. (One exception was the "church". A barbed-wire fence ran round some benches under an open-sided wooden shelter. In a prominent position was the sign: "Christ died for our sins".)

This was a drought-stricken area. There was hardly a blade of grass and what vegetation there was went almost unnoticed because of the dust.

The houses were usually in groups of three or more. Four houses nearby had the makings of small gardens, but nothing was growing there. There was not even one tap for all these people.

Several houses had a shade shelter constructed outside the door—something like a car-port but with dead leaves and branches for the roof. Others had nothing but a roof, four walls and one or two doorways. In one such house, about 10 by 20 feet, we talked to the mother of five children. A family of four shared the house with them. The only furniture in the room we saw was a table and two beds. Another stretcher was placed outside the house. Just as well it was the dry season!

Despite the dust, despite the heavy atmosphere of depression and hopelessness, this woman had everything set neatly in its place. I wondered how many people would bother in such circumstances. She may have had visions of better things to come for her children—perhaps even a "town-house" one day.

Another woman, who hoped for better opportunities for her children, lived on a "mission

station" run by the government. This particular reserve had been built nine miles out of town 26 years ago. It looked as if it had been forgotten by the world 26 years ago. Here was the anomaly of green lawns and flowers in the grounds of the manager's house, while, outside the fence, the ground was dried out and cracked. I did see one tap outside his land and that was in the schoolhouse grounds. I was told that the river was only a few hundred yards away!

These houses were much the same as those of the previous settlement except that they were of unlined weatherboard. One woman had requested a bathroom for her house five years ago. A concrete floor had been laid down but the job had gone no further. We were told this situation was an exception to the general rule — most houses hadn't reached the concrete-floor stage!

In another home there were gaping cracks between the weatherboards. An attempt had been made to plug up most but there were just too many. The floor-boards were swept clean, the house was neat and tidy, although it gave the impression it was about to collapse. Despite repeated requests to the reserve authorities no repairs had been carried out here since the house had been built. There had been an answer to one request several years ago but apparently money ran out before this reserve was reached..

In striking contrast to these were seven new houses we visited later. The paint was still its bright, original color. There hadn't even been time for the sun to fade it. Here, we were told, was the shining example of how the white community had helped some Aboriginal people in the assimilation process. The government had built the houses for those lucky few families and the townspeople proudly proclaimed, "There's no discrimination in our town! Go and have a look at those houses we were telling you about."

We took their advice. They were a pleasant sight . . . but our initial enthusiasm for such "progress" took a sharp slide downhill. To reach the houses we had to cross the town boundary! The good townspeople had held protest meetings just two years ago and had succeeded in preventing the government building the homes within the town area.

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At the entrance to the municipal baths were six Aboriginal children and the thirty students. Outside a hastily constructed barrier a crowd of about 200 was becoming increasingly heated.

Some were angry at missing their swim; some seemed concerned at our anti-discriminatory actions and voiced their feelings loudly; others were there just for some Saturday afternoon entertainment and showed their sporting interest by tossing eggs and tomatoes—not even rotten.

I noticed one supporter after he'd been dumped in the gutter.

Accustomed to hearing city police say: "Get a move on" in that we've-seen-it-all-before voice, it was a refreshing change to find ourselves being really protected by the law enforcers. The police actually came out on our side and were more concerned in "moving on" the locals.

Despite their protection, as we stood at the pool entrance, we felt more than a little apprehensive —just how far would the crowd go? None of us had ever before been in the unenviable position of facing a predominantly hostile crowd. Though we hoped the man who yelled "String 'em up" had been joking, it conjured up ideas of lynchings.

These feelings were reinforced when we heard the experiences of two of our group who were caught up in the crowd. One had an egg smashed on the back of his head and some cigarette burns on his arms where someone had "accidentally" brushed against him; the other was rubbing a bruised chin and holding broken glasses after being knocked to the ground.

This opposition consolidated our members. We felt we had to see it through whatever the consequences.

We felt deeply about people so concerned to maintain their precious few privileges, that they would rouse themselves from their usual apathy to actively oppose anyone else gaining the simple right to use a public facility. We had constantly to remind ourselves of our pledge to remain passive in our demonstration so there was a very real danger of violence.

In the midst of all this the town clerk arrived with a pile of official books—presumably to find legal means of ridding the town of such nuisances. However, the police appeared most unwilling to arrest us—although by this time we were quite prepared to become "martyrs to the cause"!

*

One outcome of this incident was that several Aboriginal mothers were prepared to take their children to the pool the next day . . . and the next . . . until they were let in. After years of knockbacks they were willing to try once more. This same determination showed through in an attractive sixteen-year-old girl as she waited outside a small town picture theatre. Inside the building was a four-foot-high partition to separate Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal people.

Some of us had suntans darker than the skins of those forced to sit in the front stalls, but they had somehow been "made dirty" because of their membership of a particular race.

Outside the theatre were three groups—the students, about a hundred local whites and the local Aboriginals. We couldn't estimate how many of these last were there as, without knowing personal histories, we couldn't identify them all.

While we held up our usual picket signs the white crowd gathered closer. At first they laughed derisively at us, but were silenced when challenged to discuss the issue of the partition. Silenced at least momentarily until one woman protested at our being in the town and added defensively: "Anyhow, what's wrong with our town? The darkies have been allowed to go to the white school for ages."

We explained we weren't complaining about the school and were about to bring back the conversation to the partition when we were dramatically interrupted by a young Aboriginal girl. She stepped forward into the light and walked directly up to the woman who had spoken. There was a hush as everyone strained to hear her soft voice explaining how just a few years ago her aunt had tried to enrol her cousin at the school and had been refused. (This surprised even us as we usually pointed to the Education Department as the most progressive in its policy of integration.)

Just one quietly-spoken girl had broken through the hidden intensity of feelings. It was so much more effective that someone from the same town —an Aboriginal girl—had done this. This immediately opened the way for discussion which could only lead to improvement of racial relationships.

"What do you think you can do in two weeks? You're just here to make trouble, that's all!"

"I've lived her for thirty years and what do you city fellas know about anything out here?"

"University students! They're a pack of rat-bags! Why don't you go out and do a decent day's work?"

That's who we were—idealistic, trouble-making university students from the big city! We could understand criticisms of our youth (average age was only 19½), inexperience in debating, ungenerousness and occasional lack of manners, as these were basically true. We did become tired of the endless comments on our clothing, about us "making trouble," being "self-seeking publicity hunters" or just plain "tourists". If only our impeccable critics would come down to real questions concerning Aboriginal health, housing and education.

Why weren't Aboriginals allowed freely into public facilities? The most common rationalisations used were based on health. Well, if there is a health problem why does a healthy town tolerate this situation?

However, the children are allowed to swim in the public pool during school hours. It is hard to understand how they suddenly become dirty and unhealthy after half past three! Special exemptions from the Council's law may be granted after written application. In an analogous situation, "innocent until proved guilty" becomes "dirty until proved clean" (for Aboriginals), when the town council takes over.

What is the government doing about the reserves, with their temporary dwellings expected to stand up without repair work for 25 years?

And how are children to do homework when they live in overcrowded, falling-down homes, often with no electric light. What incentive is there to go on with their education when they are treated as second-rate citizens?

There is more than a lazy, apathetic acceptance of these deplorable conditions. When deep-down emotions were forced to the surface the "typical," happy-go-lucky Australian becomes surprisingly vociferous, expressing suppressive or, at best, paternalistic attitudes to Aboriginals.

*

Members of Aboriginal welfare committees were often among those most strongly opposed to us. They seemed to prefer order and the maintenance of the status quo, and were frightened of the inevitable changes after we left. There were signs that Aboriginals were impatient of whites who thought they could control the timetable of progress for another people. With just that small amount of support that we could give, Aboriginals—especially the younger ones—were coming forward to present their own cases.

The white moderates' usual comment was: "Things were all right till you came here. Now look at all the prejudice!" This latter statement was quite true—there was a lot of prejudice—but they seemed to believe we had created the prejudice overnight! What we had done was to force it on to the surface, out in the open, where it could be dealt with honestly.

We created tension — constructive tension—which could no longer be ignored, and had to be resolved.

The events of the S.A.F.A. trip were reported to the world through the international press. It would be far better for Australia to solve her problem now than to find herself under pressure from international sources in the future.

Some towns have made noticeable progress. Committees with equal Aboriginal representation have been set up attempting to treat the cause of their problems instead of patching up the effects.

We are aware of the incredible complexity of this problem but Australians must accept this as a challenge and not use it as an excuse for inactivity.

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