

# "You can't play with her. She's black"

On the country station where I was brought up, there were no Aborigines. Occasionally I was aware of them in the camps beside the river on the way to town. Once when I was a small child, a family came to see my father, perhaps with scalps or rabbit-skins to be negotiated. They had a small girl with them, younger than myself. Lonely for playmates, I was always demanding a baby sister; here was a little girl readymade to play with. 'You can't play with her; she's black.'

That seemed to me a point easily got over; the bucket of whitewash in the backyard would fix it. The howls of the poor kid as I enticed her to submit to the whitewash brush brought people running and once more I was in disgrace. But I remained mystified. What difference did it make what colour Sally was?

The Aborigines on that station and on most of the land around Armidale had long been done away with. For

us as children, they might never have been there. Later by many years, I found an old manuscript in the Dixon Library, written by a man who had worked on what I thought of as my country, in the mid-nineteenth century. He described the fearful dangers of living in a place where there were hundreds of Aborigines 'who would eat you as soon as look at you.' That was one conventional excuse for doing away with the original occupants.

In 1963 I acted as publisher's reader for Kath Walker's first book, **We are Going**, and after that we became friends. Through her I was involved in a small way in the 1967 referendum issue and in Abschol. With the referendum resoundingly won and the Council and Office for Aboriginal Affairs appointed, it seemed that only a small distance separated the Aboriginal cause from success. Through Kath I learned something of the prejudice, amounting to hatred, which faced



By JUDITH WRIGHT MCKINNEY

Aborigines everywhere and the problems of those who have no land, no money, no power and no way of getting any of them. I met other Aborigines too, among them those who had to live and sleep in Brisbane parks and had no other shelter except the then sole Aboriginal hostel, Joyce Wilding's original 'OPAL' boardinghouse. I waited for some kind of betterment in Aboriginal conditions.

By 1969, the struggles and frustrations of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs were notorious. When the Whitlam government came in and at last things began happening on the Aboriginal scene, Aborigines in all States began to hope again.

Then the Governor-General's dismissal of the only government which had made any moves towards taking up the directive given in 1967 put an end to that hope. The Fraser government increasingly eroded what had been done and rejected any further initiatives, its chill inhumanity and its obsessive occupation with the chimera of the resource boom and with money and multi-national enterprise, at the expense too often of the rights and hopes of Aborigines, seemed to constipate and corrupt the whole nation.

When in 1976 Stewart Harris first took up the question of a Treaty with Aborigines, I saw it less as a possible guarantee of finance and compensation than as a way of pinning down Commonwealth governments to keep the nation's own word given in 1967. The northern States were obviously never likely to accept or keep that word.

These were some of the factors behind my involvement with the Aboriginal Treaty Committee from its inception in 1978-79.

I am asked by the uncomprehending why a writer should neglect the

'duty' of writing, in order to get involved with political questions and moral engagements such as those with conservation and Aboriginal rights. Such questions usually come from those who are made uncomfortable by the questions themselves. They are anxious to see art as non-political. The fact is that writing, and what you write, are never neutral factors. What you choose to become involved with, or to ignore, is a political choice — not party-political, but an active expression of yourself.

From 1977, the research I undertook into the real story behind the glorifications of the pastoral invasions, in which my own forebears took part, fortified and confirmed the shame I felt over the Fraser government's consistent betrayal of its clearly set tasks. When the book was finished ("The Cry For The Dead") those betrayals had already become notorious and appalling. It was natural to turn to a further attempt to complete the part the theme had been playing in my life and work.

Moreover, it was one way of contributing something to a movement in which Aborigines themselves have increasingly been taking the lead, and of adding a bit to the story Kath and others have impressed on me — that the future, in some still unspecified way, has to belong to them.

Bill Stanner, in his talks for the ABC under the title 'After the Dreaming', said: 'One of the most striking developments in the world in the last generation is the rapidity with which peoples who but a short time ago were powerless, dependent and voiceless found power, independence and voice and through them began to make an impact on history in their own right.' Race, or the terms of race, he went on, are 'seldom if ever the real issue, but only a language which is conveniently symbolic and expressive of other grievances . . . I believe that the path of statesmanship is to work while there is still time towards a grand composition of all the troubles that lie between us and the peoples of Aboriginal descent.'

Since the ATC began, and indeed before that, we have seen Aborigines make great strides towards independence and gain a voice which is

now heard beyond the coasts of Australia, if not yet power.

The question of what prospect there may actually be for a fair and just treaty negotiated on an equal basis, and within a reasonable time (say ten years) isn't one I can answer with any confidence. If there is one lesson to come out of the Fraser government's reign, it is that any Commonwealth government with an interest in resource development on Aboriginal land, or what could or should be Aboriginal land, is going to be a most untrustworthy negotiator. This, of course, includes practically any conceivable Commonwealth government.

But Aborigines now have on their side the possibility of an international covenant on the rights of indigenous peoples. Provided the Commonwealth will both sign this, and negotiate on its basis, there may be hope where before one could see little. International interest does still appear to influence the Commonwealth, if not the States. But without a firm constitutionally-embodied directive and an absolute responsibility — not just power — enjoined on the Government, whatever its political complexion. Aborigines cannot hope for much. As for rights embodied in legislation only, the case of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act proves the final inconsequence of that.

So I think Aborigines would be unwise to settle for rights granted under legislation only. And I regard the four and a half years of working with the Aboriginal Treaty Committee as perhaps the most useful part of my life. Whatever else we may have done or not done, we have provided much of the necessary research and information on the issue and highlighted the urgency of the need for a binding agreement — an instrument which can be used to hold the Commonwealth Government to its responsibilities under the Declaration of Human Rights and its later instruments. If an international covenant on the rights of indigenous peoples comes about, some such instrument on a constitutional level will in any case be obligatory; meanwhile, what change in opinion there is on the part of the dominant community owes something at least to the Committee's years of work.

**Aboriginal Treaty Committee Papers**

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