

# ABORIGINES PROBLEM IN OUR OWN LAND

By MICHAEL SAWTELL

*The Munjongs is a bush word from the Kimberleys meaning wild aborigines, who have not been detribalised.*

For some years it has been customary for the United Nations and others overseas, who do not know what we are doing in Australia for aboriginal welfare, to ask, "What is Australia doing for her aborigines?"

Australia has come in for quite a lot of criticism.

Therefore it was refreshing to read the other day that, at last the U.N. has congratulated Australia on her policy of houses for persons of aboriginal blood.

Many people have no idea of the enormous strides that have been made in Australia in the past twenty years.



I can say this after fifty years of vast and unusual experiences among all kinds of aborigines.

I lived for a few years among the Munjongs, in the wild Obagooma country, right in the heart of the man and cattle-spear- ing hunting grounds of the

aborigines in the Kimberleys.

I have seen hundreds of Munjongs in chains being walked into Wyndham, Hall's Creek, the Fitzroy Crossing, and Derby, for cattle killing. But now there are religious and Government mission stations in that country.

The aborigines are taught to read and write, and they kill their own cattle.

The Aborigines' Welfare Board of New South Wales spends about £200,000 a year on aboriginal welfare.

Since the war the board has spent more than £500,000 on houses for persons of aboriginal blood. Many white people would be pleased to live in these houses.

The Board charges a nominal rent of 17s. a week, but is owed thousands of pounds for back rent from aborigines making the same money as white men.

Every aboriginal in New South Wales who works for an employer works under trade-union conditions.

But aborigines are never very keen on homes. In the Northern Territory and Queensland cattle country, where the squatters have to build huts for the stock boys, the aborigines store their belongings in the huts and sleep outside.

If a death occurs, they burn the hut down.

They do not want the spirits of dead aborigines hanging about.

The Board and its welfare officers are trying to educate aborigines to become home conscious and to live like decent citizens. But many aborigines consider paying rent a waste of money.

They prefer to spend their money on hiring cars, liquor and gambling.

I must say in fairness to the aborigines that this waste of money is no worse than many white people.

Albert Namatjira, the famous aboriginal, who earns from his art £2,000 or £3,000 a year, did not up till a year or so ago trouble to make his own home.

Albert, his wife and family used to live around a small aboriginal camp fire. I know this because I had several long talks with Albert and had a meal with his family.

When I first met Albert, I said to him: "Albert, what skin are you?"

Albert knew then that I understood aborigines because that is the proper form of aboriginal salutation. The word "skin" means kin in the bush, or, in more scientific language, totem.

To tribal aborigines this is most important because when you know a man's totem, you know how to conduct yourself towards him and his womenfolk.

When I asked Albert what skin he belonged to, it was like asking you what religion you are—Baptist, Roman Catholic or Methodist, and Albert answered at once, "Carpet snake skin."

That meant that Albert could take part in the sacred ceremonies to increase the supply of carpet snakes, but he must not eat them, because in some mystical way, that we white people cannot understand, the carpet snakes, are "brothers belonging to Albert."



Albert introduced me to the woman he should have married according to tribal law, and also to his Christian wife, because Albert is nominally a Lutheran.

I went to church with Albert and the rest of the tribe. The service was held out under the trees. I was the only white man present.

The service was conducted by a full blood Hermannsberg trained aborigine. The whole of the service was in the Arunta dialect. I understood only one word. That was Abraham.