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## OBITUARY: OODGEROO OF THE TRIBE NOONUCCAL

John Collins

Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal, Custodian of the Land Minjerribah (formerly known by her Anglicised name of Kath Walker), died on 16 September 1993.

Minjerribah is the Noonuccal word for the great sand island which fringes Moreton Bay opposite the city of Brisbane. The Noonuccal-Nughie tribes occupied both North and South Stradbroke islands and fished the waters of the bay, which was known to them as Quandamooka. Visitors from many countries sailed into the bay in the early days, and when Kathleen Jane Mary Ruska was born on 3 November 1920 there was plenty of variety in her blood line.

Her father was the caretaker of the local aged and infirm asylum on the island but he also maintained traditional ways. The young Kathie (one of seven children) knew the bay, its beach and forested dunes:

Children of nature we were then

No clocks hurrying crowds to toil.<sup>1</sup>

Schooling at the local primary school had to be endured rather than enjoyed but, at 13, like so many other Aboriginal girls of her age, she was drafted into domestic service in Brisbane. This meant that she had to live in a white world; that she had to obey the orders of the women and to keep clear of the men. She managed to do this until the Second World War, when she joined the Women's Army.

She became a telephonist and was on the way to accumulating skills that would see her move out of the cramped 'no highway' that was the lot of her people, until illness forced her back into domestic service. She married, had a son and settled into suburban Brisbane, but the marriage was not to last. Now with two young boys, Dennis and Vivian, Kath (as I shall call her) might have been overcome with the burdens of single parenthood in a very hostile society. Instead, she enrolled in a repatriation stenographic course and joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). As she said many times, she was political by genes as well as by upbringing and the only political party she could find in post-war Australia that did not have White Australia as a major plank of policy was the CPA. She stayed a member and benefited greatly, but left when they wanted to write her speeches.

She had already begun to write verses and was attracted to the Realist Writers' Group that formed in Brisbane in 1954.<sup>2</sup> Kath Walker's first volume of poems, *We are Going*, was published in 1964 in Brisbane and the following year in New York. The reaction was varied; nevertheless, immediate reprintings followed to keep up with demand. This was the first publication of poetry written by an Australian Aboriginal person, and Kath Walker immediately became a public figure. Language had now become a weapon and some critics responded with malicious comments: 'She wasn't a full black, so it was the white blood

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<sup>1</sup> 'Then and now' in Walker 1964.

<sup>2</sup> On the Realist Writers' Group see Syson 1993.

that was writing'; 'someone ghosted the work, if not wrote it'. This doubt as to genesis hurt Kath then and remained with her for most of her life. In the foreword to her second volume, *The Dawn is at Hand* (1966), Kath hit back at critics who called her poems bitter 'as though even atrocities were not mentioned to nice people' and who sought to quash protests against social injustice by accusing their author of being a communist.

The decade of the 1960s saw Kath travelling the length and breadth of the continent as a leader of the movement which eventually forced the Liberal-Country Party government to hold the 1967 referendum. As the decade drew to a close, Kath, worn out and penniless after her years of exertion and battle, retired to her 'sitting-down' place on Stradbroke Island (Moongalba), but not for long. Various literary awards came her way and, in 1969, she made her first of many ventures overseas as the Australian delegate to the World Council of Churches Consultation on Racism which was held in London. Seven years earlier, at a council meeting of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) she had made her feelings about racism well known in a poem written especially for the meeting, the 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights':

We want hope, not racialism,  
Brotherhood, not ostracism,  
Black advance, not white ascendance;  
Make us equals, not dependants ...<sup>3</sup>

In 1979, in a speech given at the Australian National University in Canberra, after her widespread travels in the previous ten years (Fiji, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Ghana and the US), she said:

As I have travelled throughout the world, I have often thought that one could judge a society by the way it treats its racial minorities. Where a minority was forced to live in squalor, I have seen a squalid society. Where a minority was riddled with disease, I have seen a sick society. Where a minority was without hope, I saw a nation without hope.<sup>4</sup>

Kath was now quite conscious of the world's misery but that did not prevent her from criticising the apathy of white Australia.

On her return from Lagos to Sydney in 1976, her flight was hijacked at Dubai. She survived three days of murder and mayhem by compiling a life report card! As she said later, she only gave herself three out of ten for tolerance and determined that, if she survived, she would try to improve. She was, in fact, extraordinarily tolerant of the everyday failings of humans. She knew that she had her own quota and, in particular, worried about her sons who, in her words, 'grew up behind my back while I was out hustling politicians'.

In the meantime, she had established a very strong relationship with another Australian poet, Judith Wright. It had been Judith who, as reader for Jacaranda Press, had been enthusiastic about Kath's first collection. In 1976 they were together in the film *Shadow Sister*. Judith dedicated and presented to Kath her poem 'Two Dreamtimes', in which she tried to sum up this strange 'white Australia'.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1980s, partly due to the Hawke Labor government's failure to enact land rights legislation and partly in protest at the celebrations of the white bicentennial, Kath Walker decided to do three things: first, she returned the imperial honour (an MBE) that was given to her in 1970; second, she decided that she and her second son would be part of the bicentennial celebrations; and third, she decided to change her name. Many Aboriginal

<sup>3</sup> Walker 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Walker 1981.

<sup>5</sup> In Walker 1990.

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groups were violently opposed to her participation in the World Expo at Brisbane, where Oodgeroo and her son, Kabul, scripted and directed *The Rainbow Serpent Theatre* which entranced thousands of Expo visitors as it told some of the Dreamtime stories. Many of her literary friends thought she had made a stupid mistake with the name change. I doubt if any of the reactions worried her in the slightest.

Oodgeroo had now been honoured with doctorates from three universities (I'm sure they do it to get some mileage out of it for themselves,' she said to me as we waited once for an academic procession to begin). She had been to both China<sup>6</sup> and the USSR, had acted in an award-winning film (*The Fringe Dwellers*), had had a volume of her paintings published,<sup>7</sup> and, after teaching thousands of children and young adults at her sitting-down place (Moongalba), had involved herself in an educational project at the University of New South Wales.

But this world of achievement was to be shattered when her artist son, Kabul, sickened and died of AIDS. Kabul (previously known as Vivian) had shared many of his mother's artistic gifts. He was an accomplished dancer and painter and, in the last few years, had become his mother's closest critic and confidante. With Kabul's death Oodgeroo was tested as never before. In public she had always remained strong, resilient and ready at all times to be provocative, with a piercing wit and a menacing intellect. But the loss of her son was almost too much to bear, and less than three years later she had succumbed to cancer. On 20 September 1993 she was buried beside Kabul at Moongalba.

Oodgeroo had fought a long and often bitter fight against the apathy of comfortable middle-class Australia. She had paid a heavy price in personal terms, but she had won many battles. One battle that she never managed to finish was the battle between her two selves: the girl who was born on Stradbroke, who strode the land as if she owned it, who became an elder of the Noonuccal tribe and a teller of Dreamtime tales; and the activist and agitator in the white man's world. This divide between the two laws and two starkly different views of the world is rarely bridged. Oodgeroo's experience in countries other than Australia enabled her to create bridges and linkages.

She would often say, 'I feel as if they all want part of me'. That was the price she paid for the power that had come out of the poems and the podium. At the same time, she knew how important had been the associations with people like Kathie and Bob Cochrane whom she had met in the early days of the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League; like James Devaney of the Realist Writers' Group; like the Cilentos and Stephen Murray-Smith, as well as Faith Bandler and other members of FCAATSI. But she realised that, with the publication of her first collection of poems, she had become the property of two publics whose wishes would very rarely be similar.

Two generations after Oodgeroo now look at an Australia which is still to come to terms with its inheritance. On the black side there is new hope and with it a new urgency. Because pioneers like Oodgeroo sounded the call and made significant contacts in other places, there is now more strength and direction in the movement. On the white side, through a less blinkered education system, young Australians are beginning to understand that there is more to the cultural and economic system than their elders believed. Oodgeroo believed quite firmly that the forcing of change and the redressing of injustice in the land

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<sup>6</sup> Walker 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Beier 1986.

will depend as much on an enlightened young white population as on an educated and activist black one.

Her first volume, *We are Going*, was originally entitled *All One Race*. That was the title of a poem that clearly sums up Oodgeroo's world view:

I'm international, never mind place,  
I'm for humanity, all one race.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Walker 1964.