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Abstract

Kath Walker was born in 1920 on Stradbroke Island. She is a member of the Noonuccal tribe, custodian of the land Minjerribah (‘Aborigines don’t iyum the land, we are merely its custodian’). When the government of Australia set up a welfare system on the island in the 1920s, the medical superintendent decided he wanted the Aboriginals close enough to ‘keep an eye on’, but not too close to intrude upon him. Kath Walker’s tribe was moved to the ‘One Mile’ settlement at that distance from Dunwich where they remain today. The whites of Dunwich, however, are presently trying to move them out in order to develop the waterfront area for tourism.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH OODGEROO (KATH WALKER)

INTRODUCTION

Kath Walker was born in 1920 on Stradbroke Island. She is a member of the Noonuccal tribe, custodian of the land Minjerribah ('Aborigines don't *own* the land, we are merely its custodian'). When the government of Australia set up a welfare system on the island in the 1920s, the medical superintendent decided he wanted the Aboriginals close enough to 'keep an eye on', but not too close to intrude upon him. Kath Walker's tribe was moved to the 'One Mile' settlement at that distance from Dunwich where they remain today. The whites of Dunwich, however, are presently trying to move them out in order to develop the waterfront area for tourism.

Kath Walker recently adopted the name Oodgeroo, after the old woman from one of her own legends. In that story, Oodgeroo, so named because of the paperbark tree on which she writes her stories, travels the land recovering the history of her people. It is a fitting title for a woman who has spent close to thirty years recording the voice of Aboriginals. Kath was one of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement which led to the 1967 referendum which finally allowed Aboriginals to vote. Through poetry, prose, essays, and recently, artwork, Kath Walker has articulated the concerns of Aboriginals, and has protested against the many injustices which still beset her people in modern day Australia.

Kath has also been one of the leading members of the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League; The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI); and later of the Aboriginal Tribal Council. When the FCAATSI Movement collapsed in 1970, Kath retired to Moongalba, where she attempted to gain the title to her tribal land. It has been denied her by the Queensland Government. She has since turned the area into an educational centre which has hosted well over 25,000 young students, both black and white.

In 1964 her first volume of poems, *We Are Going*, was released by Jacaranda Press. It sold out before it could be launched and soon went into seven editions in as many months. Her second book, *The Dawn is at Hand,* published in 1966, was equally popular. This was followed in 1970 by *My People* which collects her previous work and includes additional poetry and prose pieces. *Stradbroke Dreamtime,* her first complete work of prose, features both autobiographical material as well as modern Aboriginal legends of her own creation. This was published in 1972. It was followed, almost a decade later, by a personally illustrated children's book, *Father Sky and Mother Earth*, which tells the story of creation from an Aboriginal perspective. In 1985, Ulli Beier released a book entitled *Quandamooka: The Art of Kath Walker* (Robert Brown and Associates), which features a series of Kath Walker's illustrations, accompanied by her brief commentary on each work.

This interview was conducted at Kath Walker's Sydney home, on 28 January 1988, two days after the Australian Bicentennial Celebrations which saw the country's largest ever civil rights protest march. The following is an edited version of this interview.

Gerry Turcotte

Could I ask you first how you started writing?

I was always fascinated by words. I was at a mixed school in Stradbroke which we call Minjerribah and I always topped the class in English and art. I used to make 'jiggly' rhymes at school but I took writing seriously in the sixties. I realized there had always been story-tellers in our world before the white man ripped the guts out of us, and what really got me seriously into writing was listening to the voices of my people. I thought, My God, we should be writing this down. Our story-tellers would stand for three days just creating stories, and I thought it's time to get back to it. Because the only book that the Aboriginals were allowed to be literate about was the Bible. And whenever they tried to express themselves – right up to the sixties – was to say, like Samuel, or, like Noah, in order to compare, to put their message over, to be understood. And whenever the old men would come into the meetings they would always have the Bible under their wing, you see. And I thought, My God it's time we recorded the cries of the people and gave them a book they could call their own. So I wrote *We Are Going*. The

Aboriginal people don't see it as my book, they see it as theirs, and it's true, it is their book, because it's their voices, their hopes, their inspirations, their frustrations, their aspirations. And it sold mainly out of curiosity value. The first edition sold in three days. Then it went into seven editions in seven months. And its success was inevitable, I think, not because I'm a good writer, but because for the first time the Aboriginals had a voice, a written voice. I'm the highest selling poet in Australia.

Who has been your audience?

Decent people.

Blacks or whites?

Oh, whites as well as blacks. The humanitarians – who wanted to know more about the Aboriginals – welcomed it with open arms, because in the early stages, the whites were kept very effectively away from the Aborigines. And whites will tell you quite blankly, I've never met an Aborigine in my life, so how could they know about us, how could they feel for us? It was done deliberately. They didn't want friends of the Aborigines coming out and upsetting the jolly old white Australian apple cart you know, rocking the boat.

When you first started writing you were criticized as being a didactic writer – your poetry was dismissed by some as propaganda. How did you respond to these criticisms?

I agreed with them because it *was* propaganda. I deliberately did it.

There is no such a thing as non-political writing, is there?

That's right! If you talk about a hole in the street up there that's politics. And this old clichéd business of saying we are non-political. If you're non-political, man, you're dead, you're not even thinking. So this was another 'fear' thing that they put into the unenlightened to keep them from rocking the boat. Australia is full of boats that are so still it isn't even funny.

You have recently adopted the name Oodgeroo...

Oodgeroo, of the Noonuccal tribe, custodian of the land Minjerribah, which is Stradbroke Island. Yes.

I believe this is the name of an old woman who records the history of her tribes on bark. She is her culture's historian.

I wrote that story in the *Stradbroke Dreamtime.* Pastor Don Brady, now deceased, gave me that name when we were demonstrating against the Queen having *dared* to come across to Australia to celebrate Captain Cook's 'DISCOVERY' of Australia. What rot! And we were down at La Perouse, throwing wreaths into the water then, and while we were waiting for the rest of the people of FCAATSI (which was a civil rights movement) to turn up, Don said, Gee whites are buying your book as well as blacks, Kath, and he was surprised about that because anything pertaining to blacks up until then was 'they don't exist because you actually can't see them'. He and a lot of the Torres Strait Aboriginals were very, very surprised that whites were actually buying the book. And he said, Kathy, if we had our own way of life, if we could decide our own destiny, the tribal elders would have called you Oodgeroo, because you couldn't do it without your sister, the paperbark tree. You need the paperbark. Which was quite logical. And so when I went home I wrote the story of Oodgeroo who had lost her tribes and was trying to get back to them, and it's only lately that the people who've read the story have realized that I was writing about myself.

Were you always accepted by your people in your role as spokesperson?

From 1960 they saw me as someone they could trust, who was honest and tolerant. I'm very rich because I'm loved by all my people, it's a very beautiful thing. No money could surpass that. The love that my people feel for me is just so tremendous. It's a lovely feeling.

In your first book, We Are Going, *there is a decidedly hopeful note to your poems, such as in 'Son of Mine' and 'United We Win'. In the first you speak of 'men in brotherhood combine', and in the second, you seem to refuse to blame whites for the situation of Aboriginals.*

Oh, I'm not refusing to blame the whites for what's happened. I'm saying that there are some whites who want to rectify the wrongs. Not all of them, but there are some.

You were one of the leaders of the Civil Rights movement which fought for and won the right to hold a referendum in 1967, an event which Aboriginals believed would mark a positive change in their lives.

So did non-Aboriginals believe that. (Although a lot of them voted that way to ease their consciences, I might add.) But it was really believed that the moment we gave the federal government a clear mandate to act on behalf of Aboriginals, we could resolve the problem. But we didn't reckon with the federal government who didn't have the guts to step in and take this responsibility because they were afraid of losing the votes from the states, so they played politics against us.

Two days ago the largest gathering of Aboriginal and white protesters in Australia's history gathered to protest against the Australia Day celebration and its implications. With Black deaths in Custody rivalling those of South Africa: with living conditions for Aboriginals shamefully inadequate; all the signs seem to suggest that things have got worse for the Aboriginal people, not better. Do you feel a sense of despair after all the work you've done?

No. I can't afford the luxury of despair or pessimism. We still have to hope. We're a timeless people, we've lived in a timeless land. We have suffered the invasion of two hundred years, and we'll go on suffering. But we are going to survive. And what we have to do now is find, in the white Australian scene, the true humanitarians. And we found a lot of them on that march. That was brilliant, how the whites stood with us. And there were a lot of them. It's the biggest march in Australian history.

What strikes me about your collection My People, *is that there are two very different voices speaking. One which says 'Gratefully we learn from you. / The advanced race. / You with long centuries behind you'; the other says 'Take care! White racists! / Blacks can be racists too. / A violent struggle could erupt / And racists meet their death'. Is one of these voices truer than the other?*

No, I think they're on a level par. I think what you have to look at is that I'm not talking about the humanitarians, I'm talking about the real racists. There are racists and non-racists in the white Australian scene. I'm saying join up the non-racists and to hell with the others, we want nothing to do with them.

Anyone reading your work can't help but notice an incredible sense of humour underneath it all. Poems like 'Nona' and 'Jarris' Love Song' are filled with good humour and an obvious love for your characters. How do you maintain that sense of humour in the midst of current racial realities?

That's easy to answer. In the Aboriginal world we give way to all emotions. In the 'British', the present white generation of Australian people have been told that to cry is weakness, and if a ten year old boy gets up and cries they say, My goodness! But in the Aboriginal world, to cry is a beautiful thing. To us it's compassion. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen is an old Aboriginal man crying for his dead grandson, and unashamedly letting the tears roll down his cheek. Now if you suppress emotions you've got problems. When anger comes you've got to kick something. Let's hope they kick trees, not human beings. All these emotions must be brought out and dealt with outside, because if you suppress them, you're in trouble. You get what has happened in Melbourne where obviously these young people could not find anyone to talk to and get that out of their system, so they picked up a gun and went on a rampage.[1] That's a terrible indictment against his friends and his relatives, that he couldn't speak out. But in the Aboriginal world if we are worried, or if we are sad, or lonely, we'll find someone and we'll cry on their shoulder – and their shoulder is always there to cry on. And so we use all our emotions. When I'm in a happy mood, the humour comes up, and when I hear about a death, down I go to that level of the emotions. This is why Aboriginals have survived, because they use all their emotions. This stiff-upper British lip – let the British have it, I want nothing to do with it, it suppresses too many things.

You once said, 'I felt poetry would be the breakthrough for Aboriginal people because they were story-tellers and song-makers, and I thought poetry would appeal to them more than anything else'.[2] That was before you wrote Stradbroke Dreamtime *and*

Father Sky and Mother Earth, *and found you could express yourself just as well through prose. Despite this do you still think poetry is the major literary genre for Aboriginals?*

Yes. I can give you an example. I was at Lismore, New England, and we were having a conference. This old man came in with the Bible under his arm and he was trying to express himself with the Bible. And then after my book, *We Are Going* came out, the next year round, here he was standing up there with *my* book under his arm. And he was quoting my poetry and this amazed me further because I knew he could not read nor write. When he got down, I went over to him and said, Old One – in our world that is an honourable name, no connotations of anything else but respect – I said how come you can recite my poetry I know you cannot read nor write. He said, Oh that was the easy part, girl. I would take it to all my white friends and to our own people who could read and write and I would make them talk it over and over until I got it in here. And he got it into his head. It was an amazing, wonderful thrill to see that old man up there quoting Kath Walker.

It seems to me that your most successful poems are those that don't use 'White-European' poetic forms.

That's right. Back to my culture. Well, I'm in my own culture there. When I'm dealing with a rotten language that's supposed to be a *pure* language ... it's been pinched from the French, the Germans and everyone. It's a bastardized language the English language and it's a terrible language to work with. Terrible!

But you did find that you had to imitate traditional 'white' poetic forms at first, until you could break through into your own rhythms and approaches to writing?

Well, if you're going to be a successful writer you're forced into using the English language in order to be published. And I do not know the Aboriginal – the Noonuccal language. It was flogged out of us at school. It was forbidden, it was classed as a pagan language. You get rid of that pagan language and you learn the king's English. Which is a *Christian* language. In the name of Christianity! look at what they did to us.

In two recent books, Father Sky and Mother Earth *and* Quandamook *you reveal an entirely different and quite considerable talent as artist. Do you see your art work as an extension of your writing?*

As a matter of fact I was an artist long before I became a writer. I dropped my artwork when I saw the need of my people wanting a book. And then I stuck with my writing and have belatedly gone back to the art. But the need for the book was more important than my art. You know how *Quandamooka* came about? I hid it for years because it was the way I saved my sanity during the civil rights years. I used to go home and just go back to my art. It was Ulli Beier who came to me one day concerning something totally different to that. I happened to be checking up on my art stuff, and they were in boxes everywhere, you know ten years saving them up. He wanted me to edit a book, or to be part of the editorial board on a magazine he was bringing out on writers in the Pacific. When he saw my stuff he said, this should be on walls, and I said, leave them alone. That's the only privacy I've got. Don't take my privacy off me. Anyway, he talked me into having an exhibition down at his place, and that's the reason for the book. So my last little bit of privacy is gone; everyone knows everything about me.

I'm curious to know why the illustrations for My People *were done by a New Zealander, Mollie Horseman, instead of by an Aboriginal artist – or by you?*

Because my white Australian publishers didn't even ask me to do it. They got a New Zealand artist – who was a Kiwi, she's not a Maori – to do it and she's been educated in the English form of art and I ended up looking like a silly little imitation *Alice in Wonderland.* Although the art is beautiful, it's not Australian. It's not suited and I was very upset about it when I saw it. Strangely enough people say it looks lovely. But it looks like a send up of *Alice in Wonderland.* I'm very disappointed about it.

In Quandamooka, *the artwork is very much influenced by Aboriginal motifs, forms and myths. And yet in one, which you called your 'interpretation of a spaceship 3,000 years A.D.', we suddenly have the coming together of two entirely different worlds and times – a fascinating fusion of space-age technology and age-old artistic constructs.*

Do you know what inspired that? I was in America and was horrified at all these space things all over the place and it took over my whole thinking and writing and whilst I was in America all I was doing were things about space. So that's how that happened. I was feeling the tension of the people about the space things that were everywhere.

And how do you reconcile those two visions?

You don't. I wasn't ... I'm not trying to bring anything together, I get an urge to do something I put it down. There's no rhyme or reason. If I'm in the field looking at all these nuclear reactors, naturally my mind is going to go to space. What is man doing anyway cluttering up everything? We've already got to the stage where there's no return. This madness to conquer everything they see. The Americans are worse then everybody else in this. No, the Russians are just as bad. I was very uptight about it. As a matter of fact I was in Harrisville and Los Angeles, and a month after I came home there was that leak there. So I escaped it by a month. What upsets me is that there have been many leakages but when Chernobyl went up, the whole world condemned them. But America has had at least nineteen disasters like that and they covered them all up. The truth is not getting out. So this is what inspired me to ... it was a form of protest I suppose.

This particular art piece does suggest how Aboriginal artists might conceptualize the future and appropriate it for themselves.

Well they haven't been brain-washed, like in the white field, by all the top artists, starting from Rembrandt right down. When they're studying. We didn't *study* art, we just picked up the pen and did it. So it's original art, therefore it has not been fouled up by teachers of art.

What struck me when reading your prose – especially the second part of Stradbroke Dreamtime *was how closely you link your stories with ideas of conservation, culture and so forth. Do you write your work primarily to educate?*

You're talking about the legends in *Stradbroke*. They're modern, twentieth-century legends out of my head. The standard legends were lived by the

people themselves and those are all well and truly in the minds of the people. But I feel that there's a need now for the present generation of artists to create a twentieth-century Aboriginal art form, both in writing and in art work. So this is very contemporary art work, only I'm still using the Aboriginal way of doing it. It's a beautiful fusion of the worlds. And in the case of my writing new legends it was because I'm a conservationist. It's a religion with me. And my politics, of course, are humanitarian. I felt that if I were to tell the children the Aboriginal names of all the trees and draw a story around them then they would see them as I do and not chop them down. It's sort of a blow for conservation.

Let's change tack for a moment. In many ways the Bicentennial has been very valuable for the Aboriginals hasn't it?

Oh, it's the year of the Aborigine. It's marvellous. And we're utilizing every moment of it. We'll mourn, but we'll take advantage of it. The spotlight of the world is on us, we'd be fools if we didn't.

So you feel the protests on the twenty-sixth of January were a success?

Oh! my goodness yes! And there's more to come. We've just had theatre at the Belvoir where it played to packed houses. Brilliant theatre. Unfortunately we haven't got enough money to take it anywhere else. That's what we lack, you see. That's why we're going overseas and asking other countries to support us. Especially to support us in the Aboriginal Theatre Trust. We put it on through them. But the government of Australia does not want us to create these things, it doesn't want us to have a platform. Now, I would rather have my people on stage using a gun with blanks and putting their protests across that way, than to have them going in the streets and indiscriminately killing people. So theatre is a must for the Aboriginal people. And with or without the government's help I will be with a lot of others, and we will build that theatre. It will be done.

What do you think of Jack Davis's work?

Jack Davis is superb! Superb! He's an established playwright now. But he's always had to go begging. And yet, when he went to Canada, the first thing he did was say half price for pensioners, all Indians in free, and it hit the headlines. But we do that. Because these people can't afford it. And where we felt that people just could not afford it, well, we said all right. We save so many free tickets, you see. We'll always do that. How dare the white Australians say, if you haven't got the money you don't go. How dare they. How *dare* they. White Australians have got a lot to learn. I hope that we will be tolerant enough to teach them.

Jack Davis has claimed that the Aboriginal lobby is fragmented by too many 'pseudo leaders' who are 'not capable of leadership'. Do you agree?

Yes. Unfortunately. When the dingo pup wants to become cock of the walk he's usually about sixteen when he tries it. But he mellows as he grows older, and after a while the 'pseudo leaders' drop out into oblivion. It's the dedicated leaders who stand the test of time.

Has the Aboriginal lobby ever recovered from the break-up of the FCAATSI and the later demise of the Aboriginal Tribal Council?

It's never recovered, but then, it wasn't meant to go on anyway. It was full of Labor party people who helped us build it. I was ten years as state secretary on that thing. But when we asked our white friends not to vote but to support us on our decisions, they refused. What they said to us was, We have no confidence in you shaping your own destiny. It had to go. The moment we realized that the whites were in to clear their own consciences, we said not on. And we broke it up. What will reform again is a new group of people. They're fragmented at this stage, but they'll finally get together. You know, you have to build the little pockets first, and then one day it'll all come together. And it'll be run entirely by Aboriginals. The FCAATSI movement was manipulated by the Australian Labour Government, who supported it and gave it every help. But they wanted to control it. And this is when we woke up to it. We thought, Oh no this is not what we've been fighting for all these years. That we do as we're told, by white Australia again, be they socialist or otherwise. So it was a dead horse, and we buried it deep.

It was largely the young people who originally rebelled and who requested that whites not vote, wasn't it?

Yes. The young people were saying to Doug Nicholls and myself that these whites are in it to make themselves look good and to pat themselves on the back, and we said, Oh come on, come on. And so, people like my young son said, All right, I'm going to move a motion asking the whites not to vote, so that we can hear the clear voice of the Aborigine. And the whites did not want to throw the vote. Doug and I stood with the young people. We said, Right, you're correct, they are in here for their own benefit. They are wanting to keep control over the Aboriginals. Then of course we tried to get the Aboriginal Tribal Council going, but without money from the government ... and the government wasn't going to back us. But one day it'll work. Aboriginals have survived terrible odds, with the strychnine in the flour bags, and the scalping. Men would go out and shoot us and bring the scalps back and get three pound for it. The murder, the rape. We survived all those things. Whites look at me and say, Look, you're not a full blood, you're half white. And I'll say, The reason for that is that our great, great grandmothers were raped by whites. We're not responsible for that white blood, the white man forced it upon us. And that stops the argument.

There are no full blood whites anyway!

Well, that's it! When someone comes to me and says, Are you a full blood, I say, NO, are you? I beg you pardon? they say. Are you? Oh, I see what you mean. No. It's the rudest thing. They don't realize they're being rude. Australians are very rude people. Very thoughtless, tactless, they have an inbuilt racist attitude which is rather sad.

How do you feel about Bicentennial grants to Aboriginal writers, dancers, film-makers and so forth? Do you feel that Aboriginal artists should have refused them on principle, or are they right to use the money?

My advice to the Aboriginals – they say we're picking up blood money, I answer we've been picking up blood money for two hundred years – whatever comes from whites is blood money. I say pick it up and run with

it and use it against them. I'm all for it. Whatever money they can get off white Australia go for it.

I wonder if you could describe some of your work at Moongalba and some of the problems you face because of the Queensland government's refusal to hand over the land to you.

They still refuse to hand it over to Aboriginals. I'm there on a peppercorn lease. One peppercorn per year on demand. They're waiting for me to die so that they can take it back. But I'm going to fool them, I'm not going to die. There have been 27,800 children there in the last seventeen years who come, all children, to learn about how the Aboriginals lived and how they hunted. It's ideal to go hunting on Stradbroke Island, because you pick up shellfish, you don't have to go chasing wallabies or anything. You don't have to pick up a gun. We give them the best of food, because shell fish and crabs and lobsters are on the menu up there. But they have to go and get it themselves, and they have to learn to do it the Aboriginal way. So it's an insight into the beautiful free life of the Aboriginal people. Kids love it. They keep coming back.

At one time the Queensland government wanted to put in a bridge between the mainland and Stradbroke Island. *Have they done so yet?*

They keep wanting to, but it won't be put in, no way. Eighty-two percent of the people on Stradbroke – black and white – don't want the bridge put in. It's only the greedy politicians who want the bridge. They want to turn it into a little Manhattan for tired politicians when they retire. A stately home away from home. There's been a big backlash reaction against it from the people on the island. We don't want to be part of the mainland. They'd ruin it if they put a bridge across. She's only twenty-three miles long. Well, she *was* thirty-*two* miles long until the civic fathers of the early days came in. A ship came aground. When they boarded it they found it was full of dynamite. Those silly white people decided the most sensible thing to do with wet dynamite was to take it away from civilization and blow it up. So they took it to the Island. They thought, Stradbroke Island, they're uncivilized, so it doesn't matter if we get them. They took it there and blew it up on the Island.

And they cut the Island in two! So we now have North and South Stradbroke! And that's how they did it. Boy. Very strange people, whites. Especially Australian.

As a final question, I wonder if you could discuss some of your future artistic projects.

My last book is a hodgepodge of art and storytelling and poetry. When I went to China I wrote seventeen poems about the place. I was really inspired over there. When I came home the Chinese people were just so thrilled by me doing that that they appealed to my publisher to let them be part of the publication of it. They also asked if I would allow it to go into Mandarin as well as English. And I agreed to this. So at the present time it's up in Beijing being translated into Mandarin. Hopefully it will be in front of the public this year. But I don't know if it will. Publishers always put you on a deadline, but they always go over theirs.

NOTES

1. On 9 August 1987, a nineteen-year-old, Julian Knight, went on a rampage in Melbourne which became known as the Hoddle Street Massacre. Using a high-powered M-14 semi-automatic rifle, Knight killed seven people and injured another eighteen. This attack preceded by ten days the Hungerford killing in England in which sixteen were killed. On 9 December 1987, another Melbourne massacre took place. Referred to as the Queen Street Massacre, this occasion saw nine people shot dead and five injured. The twenty-two year-old Frank Vitkovic fired an M-1 rifle indoors, then leapt eleven storeys to his death.
2. Kath Walker, interview (by Jim Davidson), *Meanjin: Aboriginal Issue*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1977): 428.