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Abstract

The usual Aboriginal line on Australia's Bicentennial has been that the 200 years of white occupation are small beer beside the 40,000 to 100,000 years of Aboriginal presence. Yet 1988 may prove an important milestone for modern Aborigines, and may yet justify Oodgeroo Noonuccal's (Kath Walker's) belief that blacks should use the Bicentennial 'to educate, not to celebrate.

Aboriginal Literature Becomes A Force

You and my people roamed this land
Thousands of years before
The booted foot and the cloven hoof
Came from another shore

Jack Davis 'Dingo'¹

The usual Aboriginal line on Australia's Bicentennial has been that the 200 years of white occupation are small beer beside the 40,000 to 100,000 years of Aboriginal presence. Yet 1988 may prove an important milestone for modern Aborigines, and may yet justify Oodgeroo Noonuccal's (Kath Walker's) belief that blacks should use the Bicentennial 'to educate, not to celebrate.

It is no secret that Hawke's Labor Government hoped Bicentennial sentiment would create public support for a formal treaty with the Aborigines. But while Hawke has tried to lead public opinion, he has led cautiously. He knows that the conservative opposition, eager for an election-winning issue, is poised to launch a full attack the moment it sees the government put itself too far ahead of public opinion. The conservative parties' line is, predictably, that no Australian should have special advantages over any other.

The result has been a lot of cautious kite-flying and tentative advance-and-retreat towards a goal that now has no hope of being reached in 1988. This has left many Aboriginal activists disillusioned. Yet it may be that in culture, if not in politics, more ground has been won, and more permanently, than they realize. It is not just that whites have altered: so have blacks.

By a co-incidence, the years around the Bicentennial have seen a great weakening of one of the hidden causes of discrimination against Aborigines – a highly effective language barrier. No single one of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages has much chance of becoming a national language. Yet till recently many Aboriginal groups were slow to master standard English, even though all advancement in Australian society depended on it. But now, within a few years, Australian public life has been entered by large

numbers of Aborigines who wield the English language with the full authority of native speakers.

Literary skills are another and perhaps the clearest proof of this new Aboriginal mastery of English. If I had to offer as evidence of the change in just two recent books, I would choose Kevin Gilbert's anthology *Inside Black Australia*² and Colin Johnson's verse-narrative, *Dalwurra*,³ the first as showing a new breadth and the second a new complexity in Aboriginal literature in English.

First a glance at the past. The European invasion robbed many Aborigines not only of land but of language. Quick though they were to improvise compromise languages or Pidgins, they were soon swamped in most regions by an influx of monolingual whites. Later, as the Aborigines were driven from home and imprisoned in reservations with people from different language-areas, their children came to speak various kinds of Pidgin-influenced English which many whites found unintelligible.

For later generations the price of acquiring standard English might be years of commitment to a racist education system – one that openly aimed to replace their culture. Thus Aborigines in their own continent suffer many of the problems of non-English speaking migrants. Throw in the fact that they had no tradition of written literature, and that to sell well an Aboriginal author has to appeal to white readers, and it is no surprise that Aboriginal literature had been slow to appear.

According to Kevin Gilbert, the first complete published work by an Aboriginal was David Unaipon's *Native Legends* in 1929. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (the known as Kath Walker) published the first book of poetry, *We Are Going*, in 1964; and the first Aboriginal novel, Colin Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling*, followed in 1965. The 1970s saw a proliferation of Aboriginal newsletters and broadsheets, in which poetry was prominent.

Now in 1988 Gilbert has produced a national anthology of Aboriginal poetry. This important anthology may well be read in different ways by Koories and non-Koories. Poets from Homer to Burns have long been vital in creating a sense of nationhood. Koories may see their poetry as primarily about defining themselves as a people, about expressing their sense of injustice, and about sinking tribal difference in the vision of a common

Aboriginal nation. White readers may sympathise, but they will lack the Koori's aching need for personal and racial (or national?) identity. They are more likely to ask 'How *good* are these Aboriginal poets?' and 'Can they write about other things beside being Aboriginal?'

An anthology whose main catchment is 'the last twenty years of limited access to white education and education in the alien English tongue' is bound to be mixed in quality. But beside the obvious talents of established Aboriginal poets like Jack Davis, Colin Johnson, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and Gilbert himself, there are impressive newcomers like Vickey Davey:

I saw Death take my friend into his arms
Like a satisfied lion, they disappeared into the darkness

Maureen Watson's performance pieces like 'Female of the Species', though not designed for the page, show obvious quality, whilst W. Les Russell does a fine parody of Queensland's right-wing former Premier, Joh Bjelke Petersen, on rainforests:

What use are they? well I'll tell you:
the Japanese – I know they're a funny mob of people -
but they make paper out of trees, see...

Harvard-educated Bobbi Sykes, though sometimes more preacher than poet, in her poem 'One Day' captures the relief of being greeted by another black person while 'lost' in the USA: 'Moving along Main St. / Whitesville / Diggin all them white faces / Staring or 'not staring ' / Until I felt surrounded...' In a moving poem called 'Final Count' Bobbi Sykes tries to think of the black children who die from poverty as martyrs to the revolution: 'We must count them / We must count them / For if we do not / They will have died in vain.'

Colin Johnson too feels the bitterness, yet looks beyond polemic:

Don't tell me who I am:
A child cries in me too often,
To have many illusions
My mouth curves
In sadness these days.

Archie Weller, perhaps the most talented of the younger poets, gives a tribesman's view of Cook's landing:

A bird with many wings as white as gulls
sits upon the waters of your bay.
A wingless baby from her breast is born...
Wurarbuti, your warriors wonder
for from the baby strange ghosts appear.

But for me, the outstanding find was the work of Robert Walker who died in custody in Fremantle jail in 1984, aged 25. Walker's death from head injuries followed a struggle with warders after he tried to slash his wrists. He was a natural poet whose imagery combines surprise and certainty:

The rose among thorns
may not feel the sun's kiss each mornin'
and though it is forced to steal the sunshine
stored in the branches by those who cast shadows
it is a rose and it lives.

His complaints of injustice are the more forceful for a note of self-knowledge: 'Okay, let's be honest: / I ain't no saint / but then again / I wasn't born in heaven... / Just another non-identity / fighting to be Mr Tops.' There is more force in his swift reference to watching '...my brothers smashed, / thrown into dog-boxes, drunk, crying for the dreamtime' than in the long diatribes others offer.

A poet of such talent who dies young and martyr to his people's cause, is likely to be mythologized. This process seems to be underway in Grandfather Koori's line: 'Never blood / so red so red / never blood so red / as blood of the poet/ the Kokatha poet / who lay in the pool / so dead... / in Fremantle gaol so red'. One wonders if other poems by Walker, beyond the four Gilbert includes, have survived.

It is difficult to comment on the selection of poems in this ground-breaking anthology. No doubt it was a matter of some diplomacy to represent different Aboriginal groups and regions; the result is that some very bad poems are included. I was disappointed to find only two short and undistinguished poems from the promising Selwyn Hughes. The brilliant and mysterious 'Munganje' (whose full name and racial background are still to be clarified) is also missing.

Inside Black Australia does not include all types of poetry dealing with Aboriginal experience. It omits work by white poets, eg. Judith Wright, however talented or sympathetic. More importantly, it omits the rich and ancient oral tradition of Aboriginal sacred and secular songs – perhaps because this might involve using the transcriptions of white anthropologists. The ‘black Australia’ it reveals is that of dispossessed Aborigines trying to survive in a ‘white’ society – or perhaps rather in an advanced capitalist multi-racial society which reserves its worst prejudice for those who refuse to ‘get ahead’.

Gilbert’s notes reveal that many of his poets have had only an interrupted secondary education. when they fail as poets, their faults are not related to Aboriginal culture, but are precisely the ones found in under-educated white poets: outdated poetic licences and archaic phrases of the ‘warriors of yore’ variety, thumping rhymes and rhythms, McGonagail-style fluctuations of tone, and above all the reliance of abstract declamatory statements. Good poetry tries to convey even its more abstract ideas through concrete images – something the great Aboriginal song-cycles illustrate perfectly.

Jack Davis is one of the few who knows how to use images rather than abstractions:

The neon lights flicker: ‘Kia-ora Saloon’.
The kangaroo comes from the shop on the corner.
My brother, my sister, you are dying too soon.

Most of these poets belong to what Gilbert calls ‘the stolen generation’ - Aboriginal children, often from very large families, who were forcibly removed from their parents and fostered out to white families. The cry of ‘Please mista do’n take me chilen, please mista do’n’ was widely ignored under a policy of assimilation. children were removed from four generations of the family of the poet Joy Williams, including one of her own daughters whom she is unable to trace. Many such children continue to long for the warmth of their lost Aboriginal families – a recurrent theme in their poems.

Gilbert's preface and his shorter biographical introductions to individual writers turn the whole book into a powerful plea for justice to Aborigines. Yet his concluding remarks suggest some nervousness about the anthology's repetitive harping on themes of injustice. Perhaps some of his poets do need to learn the same hard lessons as conservationist poets: viz. that the answer to resistance is not to 'turn up the volume', and that in poetry a platitude remains a platitude, even though there may be red-necks or self-servers who vehemently deny it.

Yet to develop a personal voice you need to trust your audience. For many poets this anthology may be their first introduction to a large non-Koori audience. They may be surprised to find how generally white poetry-lovers sympathize with their struggle; and in future work one can hope they will feel freer, even when they choose to write for the white reader, to develop their own poetic voice and range.

I suspect this anthology is firmly aimed at a hungry educational market, both inside and outside Australia. Gilbert's eloquent introduction covers many of the issues students will want explored. If its historical facts are coloured by an angry rhetoric, yet students may take both rhetoric and anger as primary source material. Even if only one race's viewpoint is represented in the book's introduction and notes, few readers will be unmoved by the horrors Gilbert recounts. I thought I knew most of the kinds of beastliness Aborigines suffered, but Gilbert managed to surprise me with the sport of 'Lobbing the Distance' which apparently involved trying to kick the heads off live Aboriginal children.

Inside Black Australia is not a substitute for history, indeed the book leans out so far to assault 'white racism' that, when studied abroad, it may risk overbalancing from sheer lack of conservative opposition. Abroad, too, there is more risk that sympathetic readers may be bored into apathy by some of the low-grade repetitive material which dilutes the collection. But at least and at last we have an anthology which states the Aboriginal view of white society – with a vengeance.

Colin Johnson's *Dalwurra* is a new development in Aboriginal literature. Its hero is the black bittern *Dalwurra*, and the book's shape is derived from the traditional East Arnhem Land *manikay* or song-cycle celebrating the travels and adventures of a clan's ancestral heroes.

The black bittern, Johnson remarks, 'is a non-migratory bird, and this explains some of his anguish at leaving his home'. But leave home he does. Swept north from the Australian coastline by the Asian monsoon, he is deposited in modern Singapore. 'From there he flies on to India and the Eastern Himalayas where he is magically ingested by the White Dragon (*Karpo Druk*). He undergoes an identity change and becomes for a time the national bird of Nepal, the *Duwa*, and later the Indian blackbird. In Calcutta he 'suffers a psychosis' connected with his mother, then regains health. But the epic journey is far from over. He flies on to Edinburgh (where Johnson himself attended the 1986 Commonwealth Writers' Conference), reflects on sanctions against South Africa, observes a grouse-shoot, moves to Brixton, experiences Britain's racial hatreds, learns West Indian street-talk, and finally returns (partly transformed by a mid-air spiritual experience) to Australia.

Colin Johnson (he seems not to insist on his Aboriginal name Mudrooroo Narogin, though it appears in brackets on the cover) is well aware that this is no traditional *manikay*. But as his editor Veronica Brady points out, 'in following the story-lines, trading in stories, adding his stories to those current where he travels and adding theirs to his, *Dalwurra* is following the traditions of his people, singing each step of his journey into position, widening his sense of himself and his world...'

Many episodes require a prose explanation almost as long as themselves, eg. 'Poem 16 begins and ends with the mantra to *Tara* or *Dolma*, a female Buddhist deity of compassion equated with the Green Parakeet...' Johnson has kept the terse, rather flat narrative style of the *manikay*, and has not tried to match the complexity of his story with a corresponding richness of language. Many passages read like translation:

Into the clouds I fly
Through the clouds I fly.

Ahead lies the hills and valleys
Of the rain pouring down,
Pouring down on my wings.

The ideal reader for *Dalwurra* might be someone deeply immersed in Aboriginal legends, a traveller, knowledgeable about Asia, and perhaps even, like Johnson himself, one who has spent time as a Buddhist monk. The book is bound to attract a thesis or two, though probably not a large readership. But its importance cannot be measured by popularity. In his awareness of Asia Johnson is far beyond most other Australian poets. By linking up with the belief-systems of other indigenous peoples of the region he has altered and expanded Aboriginal horizons; yet he has also found a way for contemporary Aboriginal writers to express even the most personal and agonized search for identity in a semi-traditional form. *Dalwurra* is a book that may one day be seen as starting a new strand in Australian literature.

NOTES

1. Jack Davis, *John Pat and Other Poems* (Dent, Australia, 1988). Jack Davis recently won the BHP Award for Pursuit of Excellence in Literature and the Arts.
2. Kevin Gilbert (ed), *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (Penguin, Australia, 1988)
3. Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo Narogin), *Dalwurra: the Black Bittern*, (The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, 1988)