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Abstract

I was proud and privileged to know Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker), poet, artist, political activist and teacher, in the last years of her life.

DI YERBURY

A Tribute to Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal

I was proud and privileged to know Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker), poet, artist, political activist and teacher, in the last years of her life.

Like many Australians I had heard much of Oodgeroo and read her work, but it was not until 1988, when she agreed to accept an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Macquarie University, that I came to know her personally.

That experience had a profound effect on me. Oodgeroo was a woman filled with a creative and positive spirit which, combined with her sensitivity to and deep knowledge of the Aboriginal tradition and her immense store of wisdom, gave Australians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, a new dimension to their heritage. She was also a woman with deep reserves of warmth and personal strength, who gave of herself unstintingly.

As a poet and artist her work was not just distinguished and original, but also popular. She became the best-selling poet in Australia after C.J. Dennis. She was mainly self-educated through her love of reading, going on in later life to be invited to lecture at universities throughout the world.

From the early 1970s Oodgeroo lived a simple life on North Stradbroke Island in Queensland, the locus of her tribal roots, running an education cultural centre, and spent much of her time teaching thousands of children of all racial backgrounds about Aboriginal heritage and the natural wonders of the places, flora and fauna she knew so well. It was there, I believe, that she was happiest.

I'm delighted to be part of a tribute to this remarkable woman of vision, talent, courage and dedication to her people, and to place on record again my admiration of her life and achievements.

Di Yerbury is Vice-Chancellor at Macquarie University.