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An Interview with Oodgeroo

Kath Walker

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Abstract

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In 1987 you chose to give up the name of Kath Walker and choose the Aboriginal name. Can you tell us about that decision?

Pastor Don Brady, who is now dead, was quite surprised at the way my poems were accepted into the White Australian scene and that White Australians were buying them and he said, 'Kathy you know if we didn't have the white people dictating terms to us, and if we still had our own way of life, our own Aboriginal laws to uphold, the tribal elders would have given you the name of Oodgeroo, that's the paperbark tree, because without the paperbark you could not have done it.' And it's from then that I started thinking, 'Why should I carry the English name? Why should I not go back to my own identity and my own name?' And I thought, 'I think the time is now for me to strike a blow in the interest of the cruelty that was inflicted upon the Aboriginals.' And I did it as a protest against that.

When you gave up that name and took on the name Oodgeroo, you also gave up your M.B.E. Did you have any problems in your own mind about accepting the honorary doctorate having given back the M.B.E.?

Well as far as the M.B.E. was concerned, as I'd rejected the English name it would have been hypocritical of me to hold the M.B.E. I would have been a hypocrite to do it. On the other hand, when the Chancellor of Macquarie University wrote to me asking if I would accept this great honour that they had bestowed on me, the doctorate of letters, I felt I had really earned it and that the offer was sent to me with all good faith and in all sincerity, without any tokenism whatsoever, and for that reason it was my pleasure to accept it.

In her colourful and vital life, Oodgeroo has won international recognition as a writer and poet, a teacher, an artist and an Aboriginal activist.

Born in Brisbane in 1920, her formal education concluded when she left school at the age of 13 to work in domestic service. Through a life-long love of reading Oodgeroo is self-educated and notes the irony that she is

now invited to lecture at universities around the world. She began writing for the entertainment of her friends and her own interest. Through contact with an Australian writers' group she was encouraged to continue her writing. Her poetry came to the attention of Mary Gilmore who recognized the merit of her work and urged her to share her poems by publishing them. With the support of Judith Wright, Oodgeroo received a grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund to publish her first book and her career in the writing world began. She has five books of poetry to her credit and another, written during her visit to China in 1985, was published both in Chinese and Mandarin.

Her achievements as a writer have been recognized by many awards, including the Jesse Litchfield medal, the M.G. medal and a fellowship of the Writers' Guild. She has been an official representative at many overseas festivals and arts conferences. She toured the United States as a Fulbright scholar.

Oodgeroo has always painted for her own personal fulfilment. Again her talent as an artist was recognized by chance and she was persuaded to exhibit, attracting considerable acclaim. A book of her paintings was published by the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1986. A short film biography of her life made in 1977 resulted in an international prize for acting and a place in the U.S. Black Hall of Fame. She also appeared and served as script consultant in Bruce Beresford's film, *The Fringedwellers* in 1986.