JOE McGUINESS

Joyce Tattersell, helping in the Aboriginal Rights movement in Cairns for the last six years, tells of the life and work of national Aboriginal leader, Joe McGuiness.

THE MASSIVE, greying, mild-mannered Joe McGuiness of today, who so dislikes to talk about himself, doesn’t admit to any deliberate militancy in youth. He implies that he merely dealt, as they came, with the problems common to most workers who battled up through the depression years. But an Aborigine asserting his independence in a northern, white-dominated community of that time must have been endowed with exceptional qualities.

Even at the age of 18 he set off with two older Aboriginal mates for Darwin’s Government House to interview a visiting Minister for the Interior. The case they put was for drinking rights for their people. That was in the Darwin of the “thirties”, and like many deputations it wasn’t immediately successful, but it evidently put young McGuiness on the road to another deputation thirty years later.

This time, 1963, a mature McGuiness was the leader of a delegation of Aborigines from five States, and a Torres Strait Islander, to wait on Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies at Canberra. And this deputation presented a developed, definite program of Aboriginal and Islander needs which could, to some extent right a century and a half of injustice and oppression.

1967, by now seven years President of the Federal Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Advancement, he journeys thousands of miles through eastern States explaining the urgency of a Yes vote on the Aboriginal section of the referendum to job meetings, church congregations, trade union bodies and officials, politicians, clergymen, civic organisations. The public response to him, to his campaigning colleagues and all who took up the fight is now history.

*Shortly after this deputation the Exemption system was introduced under which certain Aborigines were allowed some citizen rights including liquor drinking.
Joseph Daniel McGuiness was born in Darwin in 1914, youngest of a family of five. His father was a prospector and railway worker. His mother, Lucy (tribal name Ullngdubboo), was a member of the Khoongarrakhung tribe from the Humptydoo district. Lucy McGuiness was held in the highest regard by northern Aboriginal people and remained one of Darwin's most respected citizens till her death at the age of 86.

During some lean years of childhood after his father died, Joe spent a short time in Darwin's infamous Khalin Compound. "I don't know how we survived," he told me, "there were never any regular or organised meals."

"How did you get out of the place, Joe?"

"I just walked out."

No regimentation, none of the humiliations of mission or settlement life for young Joe. At 13, on leaving primary school, he was off with a travelling salesman. "Five shillings a week, two bob in the hand, three for the Trust Fund*. My job was to grease the car, fix the punctures—plenty of them on those rough tracks—open gates and be general Billy Boy."

Through Queensland's outback, its towns and outposts, inland to Alice Springs, down the Birdsville track, finally to Adelaide, the Aboriginal boy became acquainted with more of the country than most of us can do in a life time. Two years later he was driving a truck with a Katherine mailman over wide areas of the Northern Territory. "Five pounds a week, and that was money," he relates, "but the job only lasted the Dry and then you had to sit down for the four months' Wet". (Station work never attracted him. His horse always had wheels). There is scarcely a district in the Territory or Queensland you can mention now to Joe that he doesn't know something about.

Numbers of unemployed workers on the track from both south and north during the Depression managed by various means to reach Darwin. At a camp established by some hundred of these men the youthful Joe often had a good feed, made friends, listened to the talk. He observed how they ran the camp and pooled their weekly £1 dole to buy food wholesale. "They got three good meals a day and some tobacco," Joe told me. "You couldn't live alone on a quid a week. Then when the dole was cut to 17/6 they pulled on a strike." This was his first lesson in working class organisation and struggle, one which no doubt prompted...

* A government method of extracting part of Aborigines' wages, claimed to be saved for them or used for their general benefit. Neither claim has proved to be valid.
him and his friends to venture on that early deputation to speak up for their people.

"I remember the first job we got when things picked up a bit," he told me. "Shovelling coal off a railway truck. Our condition wasn't the best and we had to keep pace with a mob of 'Bulls' who'd had it good all through the Depression. We stuck the job out for the ten days, all sorts of hours and extended shifts. We got about £15 each and thought we were millionaires."

The "Caloden Bay Murders" off the coast of Arnhem Land is an incident still vivid in his memory.

Rough justice, but the Japanese were trespassing and the local tribes were proud people. Church missions later went to Arnhem Land to tame the savages. Nowadays big mineral companies exploit the Aborigines along with the area's manganese and bauxite, but the land is no longer the tribes' and the royalties promised them are insignificant.

After the Japanese bombings of Darwin where he was then employed by the Public Works Department, Joe was called up in 1943 to drive Army ambulances and trucks, stationed in camps from Bacchus Marsh to Northern Tablelands and finally Borneo. An Army course in motor mechanics rounded off his long practical experience to turn him into a first-rate mechanic.

Demobilisation, and he worked at odd jobs around Thursday Island till 1947 when he became a member of the Waterside Workers' Federation. He came to Cairns in 1953 and has remained a wharfie ever since, sometimes holding executive positions in the local branch.

The war had made a big impact on Aborigines and Islanders. Many, called to various naval and military duties and construction moved into a wider world, came into more fraternal contact with the ordinary soldier, sipped a little at the cup of freedom. Wasn't this a war for freedom? Wasn't it time something was done about this freedom for themselves?

This temper was reflected in Cairns, a centre to which Aborigines still come from stations, missions and settlements for medical care, holidays, to visit relatives or seek work. Over the years hundreds have remained in the town, retaining connections with their own people left behind.

There had been independent Aboriginal and Islander activities in Cairns after the war, but these were mainly social till 1960 when a case of discrimination against a colored taxi driver was
taken up by the Cairns Trades and Labor Council. The campaign for the driver's reinstatement canalised the growing resentment of the colored population against discrimination in employment, humiliations in public places; against galling restrictions and pittance wages. From that campaign emerged the Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Advancement League. The most conscious and courageous participated, foremost among them Aboriginal women, two of whom, with Joe, were the League's first officers.

Deep understanding of his people's conditions and problems, as well as experience in trade union struggle and methods brought Joe inevitably to prominence. A delegate to the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement conference held in Brisbane in 1961, he was elected President of that body in place of the retiring President, Mr. Donald Dunstan, and was drawn actively into the national advancement movement. He has been re-elected President at every successive Federal Conference.

The name of Joe McGuiness is known widely throughout northern Queensland. Much of his earlier work involved setting up League branches, weekend travelling around the Tablelands, listening to Aborigines' problems, advising and giving them glimpses of a better future, at least for their children, if they themselves would make some concerted effort. Innumerable cases of harsh or brutal treatment, deprivation of meagre rights, under-payment of meagre wages — the multitude burdens placed upon those under the Protection Acts — were brought to him to be taken up with the authorities. Whether his endeavors succeeded or not, word soon spread to remote places that here was one of their own openly fighting Aborigines' battles.

The help given by the Cairns League, under Joe's guidance, to the people of Mapoon and Lockhart River missions to retain their lands and oppose deportation to other settlements stiffened resistance. His proposals of delegates from remote places and assistance to get them to Federal conferences has disclosed a new horizon to some who have never been far beyond their own settlement or island. Mapoon peoples' fight for freedom as they termed it, will be long remembered. Joe's personal letters, news bulletins and verbal messages telling of so much support from the outside world put them in good heart.

At a recent quite large meeting of Aborigines listening to Joe's story of how far the movement had come over the years, a settlement man got up to thank him on behalf of all of them for the job he was doing. "You understand," he said, "better than any white man ever can."
Integrity is natural to Joe. Never much of a talker, hesitant in conversation, never known to bustle, he is an unwearying listener. With friends he indulges a lively sense of humour, a gift for neat irony, sometimes in a bit of tomfoolery. Yet slow moving and mild as he appears, he is an indignant man, a man perpetually angry at the crude ignorance of officialdom and calculated inhumanity behind pious assertions from so many quarters. Sophistication in method and diplomacy have come with widening experience. He no longer conducts acrimonious correspondence with departmental officials concluding, as one memorable letter did—“Yours in displeasure”.

Joe lives with his wife Amy, and bright young daughter Sandra, in a small house in West Cairns. Amy, a meticulous housewife, coming from a famous Thursday Island family, has a store of Island songs and dances and is a talented performer much in demand at festivities, a popular member, too, of the town’s Folk Singers. She holds executive position on the Cairns League and has attended Federal conference as a delegate. Innumerable people come to that small house with their pleas and problems, or ideas, or just to enjoy its simple hospitality.

Government policy has always been to play Islanders against Aborigines (mainlanders). Joe’s long sojourn among the Islanders, his knowledge of their culture and customs and his efforts on their behalf have made them more prone to listen to his insistence that the basic problems of both peoples are identical and that solution lies in unity along the same road.

Compassion, towards all of his class who are ridden by their conditions, is combined in Joe with confidence that his own people, retaining their own identity, can and will make their distinctive contribution to society. Their emancipation, he maintains, will only come hand-in-hand with the democratic advance of all Australians.

Joe McGuiness will hold a niche in our history as the first Aboriginal leader from the organised Australian working class.

Latterly he has had to spend some time in southern cities. His participation along with Federal Council colleagues, in conferences and seminars, organising and publicity activities have brought him more into national prominence, but few could wish for a more heartfelt welcome on return to the home town.

The simple tribute paid by an Aborigine who had come the long distance from Townsville to Cairns to join a referendum victory celebration, summarises best his standing here in north Queensland. “Joe”, he said, “is a mighty man!”