

The poignant arc

Jaya Savige

Anita Heiss and Peter Minter (eds)
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OF ABORIGINAL LITERATURE
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If ever there was a national question, it is this ... We were good enough to fight as Anzacs. We earned equality then. Why do you deny it to us now? ... We ask you to be proud of the Australian Aboriginal, and to take his hand in friendship ... At worst, we are no more dirty, lazy, stupid, criminal, or immoral than yourselves ... After 150 years, we ask you to review the situation and give us a fair deal – a New Deal for Aborigines.

Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights!
William Ferguson and John Patten

IN 1938, the year of Australia's sesquicentennial celebrations, trade unionist William Ferguson and former boxer John Patten helped to organise the first Aboriginal Day of Mourning and Protest on January 26; later that year, they co-wrote the pamphlet from which the above excerpt is taken, on behalf of the nascent Aborigines Progressive Association (APA). At the time, David Unaipon's *Native Legends* (1929) was the only work of literature written by an Aboriginal Australian to have been published, and it would be twenty-six years before the next, Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *We are Going* (1964).

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, though still remarkable, that approximately half of the writing represented in this 260-page anthology of Aboriginal writing in English consists of excerpts from works published in the last twenty years. As the editors, Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, explain in their insightful introduction: 'Aboriginal literature as we know it today had its origins in the late 1960s, as the intensification of Aboriginal political activity posed an increasing range of aesthetic questions and possibilities for Aboriginal authors.' And if the 1960s and 1970s introduced us to Oodgeroo, Jack Davis, Gerry Bostock, Kevin Gilbert and Lionel Fogarty, the two decades since the publication of the first comprehensive anthology of Aboriginal literature in 1988, *Paperbark*, have seen an even greater upsurge in indigenous writing in English.

Heiss and Minter have taken the significant decision of commencing the anthology not with Unaipon's work – the expected starting point for such an anthology – but with a letter written by Bennelong (of the Wangal people, Sydney) some hundred and thirty years earlier, in 1796: the earliest documented piece of writing in English by an Aboriginal person. The opening third of the book consists mainly, therefore, of excerpted letters, petitions and political manifestos writ-

ten in the period between the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, sometimes in raw, ungrammatical English, but always describing the same poignant arc, a people's suffering under various assimilationist state and federal legislation.

For these early writers, English was far less a tool for creative expression, and, as the editors explain, more 'a tool of negotiation in which Aboriginal voices could be heard in a form recognisable to British authority'. There is Annie Rich, whose request in 1882 to the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines for permission to leave the mission on which she had been detained for two years after visiting her friends there, was denied; Bessie Cameron, author in 1886 of a letter to the editor of the *Argus*, in defence of the work ethic of her peers on the Lake Tyers mission; and Maggie Mobourne, protesting to the Victorian Board in 1900 on behalf of her peers against injustices at the hands of their superintendent at Lake Condah Mission.

The editors' inclusion of these early (and some later) petitions proves a masterstroke of contextualisation. Injustice, inequality, political impotence and sheer frustration are the prevailing themes of these writings, and this sets the scene for the explosion of literary creativity that occurs in the late twentieth century. Take, for example, the final lines of Oodgeroo's poem, 'The Dispossessed', written for her Uncle Willie McKenzie: 'But oh, so long the wait has been, so slow the justice due, / Courage decays for want of hope, and the heart dies in you.' Reading these lines in their immediate context is one thing, but reading them after William Cooper's eloquent 'Petition to the king' (1933) for basic parliamentary representation for Aboriginal people:

... your petitioners therefore humbly pray that your Majesty will intervene in our behalf and through the instrument of your Majesty's Government in the Commonwealth grant [to] our people representation in the Federal Parliament, either in the person of one of our own blood or by a white man known to have studied our needs and to be in sympathy with our race.

or after an incredulous letter by Norman Harris to his friend Jim Bassett, in 1927, in response to the passing of an Aboriginal Act:

The Police can take the children without a warrant ... They are quite within the Act to take any Aboriginal or Halfcast ... I have got a headache thinking about this Act.

or after countless other pleas for an end to injustice and inequality that fell on deaf ears, is another matter entirely – one cannot help but recognise immediately what Oodgeroo is saying about the decay of courage for want of hope.

Family relationships and the search for identity are constant themes in the recent prose works of writers such as Doris Pilkington (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 1996), Alexis Wright (*Plains of Promise*, 1997; *Carpentaria*, 2006),

Kim Scott (*Benang*, 1999), Larissa Behrendt (*Home*, 2004) and Tara June Winch (*Swallow the Air*, 2006); in the poetry of Oodgeroo, Graeme Dixon, Romaine Moreton, Lisa Belleair, Jennifer Martinello, Dennis McDermott and Samuel Wagan Watson; in the plays of Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Gerry Bostock and Wesley Enoch; and in the lyrics of singer-songwriters Bob Randall, Archie Roach, Mandawuy Yunupingu and Kev Carmody. Each of the works representing these and other writers, while powerful meditations on cultural and familial dislocation in their own right, become electrifying in the context provided by the early letters and petitions. One could imagine the character Uncle Will in *Benang* to have once been the 'nice Little Boy' described in this personal letter written by one Kitty Brangy in 1881:

My dear sister I must tell you that I have got such a nice Little Boy and he is called Willie. My dear sister will you tell Mrs Briggs that her Uncle is dead ... My dear sister I have not seen our dear Father since last year. I know not where he has got to. I should like to know very much ...

While much is alluded to in the letters and political manifestos in this anthology, it is in the poems, plays and works of prose fiction that the lived experiences of indigenous Australians are represented most comprehensively. Contemporary authors of critical non-fiction such as Marcia Langton, Patrick and Mick Dodson and Noel Pearson (whose response to Paul Keating's Redfern Address is included here) are writing explicitly, and effectively, at what the editors call 'the nexus between the literary and the political', but none of the non-fiction works in the anthology describes sexual abuse on a mission station with such startling poignancy as Wesley Enoch does, in his play *Black Medea* (2005):

You got to imagine a settlement on the edge of the desert, full of kids and dogs and nothing much else ... You got to imagine some of the girls sitting on the verandah of the canteen when the city men come in from the mine – then lining up to take their turn in the back seat of the company Toyota.

The fiction and play excerpts selected by the editors often depict the cultural impact of assimilationist policies, a moment of separation or loss, or a protagonist's search for identity and family. The excerpt from Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, for instance, describes the removal of the daughters Molly and Gracie from their families. This description made no small contribution to the rais-

ing of public awareness of the Stolen Generations (particularly after the novel was adapted to film), and as such was arguably one of many gusts, perhaps substantial, comprising the Zeitgeist that gave rise to Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations in February 2008:

A high pitched wail broke out. The cries of agonized mothers and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air ... This reaction to their children's abduction showed that the family were now in mourning. They were grieving for their abducted children and their relief would come only when the tears ceased to fall, and that would be a long time yet.

Even a sentence as uncomplicated as that found in Perth-born Glenyse Ward's autobiographical novel, describing a young girl finishing her chores, takes on a harrowing resonance: 'I was fighting a losing battle – the more leaves I swept together the more the wind would blow them all over the place.' In the context of the Stolen Generations, this description of Ward's 'losing battle' with scattered leaves becomes a powerful indictment on the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

As with all anthologies, there are unexpected delights, and some conspicuous absences. Monica Clare's autobiographical novel *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (1978), published posthumously, reveals a remarkable talent for prose that may have furnished a glittering literary career, had it not been confined in the main to letters to politicians protesting against discrimination. Aboriginal song cycles have not been included, for the obvious reason that their existence in English is due to their translation by anthropologists (most famously T.G.H. Strehlow and R.M. and C.H. Berndt); Colin Johnson, sometimes considered the first Aboriginal novelist, author of *Wild Cat Falling* (1965), *Long Live Sandawara* (1979) and *Wooreddy*, is not represented; Kelvin Kong's speech at Parliament House on the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 referendum might also have been included. And though it would alter the complexion of the anthology, I would argue for the inclusion of an appendix containing relevant sections of legislation and defining political speeches – such as Keating's Redfern Address, and culminating in Rudd's apology – to further contextualise some of the pieces here.

Nonetheless, the opportunity for more than two hundred years of indigenous literature to stand alone is of immeasurable importance, and the editors should be applauded for the recuperative research that has made this possible.



Alexis Wright