



NEWSLETTER #39, July 2009

THE PAST MATTERS

**Nillumbik Reconciliation Group and Eltham Bookshop:
A Reconciliation week event 29-30 May & 2nd June 2009**

**Opening address by
Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya**

As an Indigenous woman, I usually have a lot to say about past matters, but my presence here today is shadowed by my recent life events. There are however threads of commonality in both stories.

In the last few weeks I have had the painful task of returning to the ruins of my home; in a sense, the ashes of my life and all it represents. Futilely searching through the ashes I did not find anything that I wanted to find; nothing of material intactness, nothing of emotional, spiritual preciousness. No physical, touchable, visible evidence of my life, my children's lives, my Aboriginal heritage, And nothing of my husband's life and of our life together, our creativity of more than thirty years laid waste as ruins and ashes. I gazed on scorched earth, the place where Graeme passed from this life. It seemed like we had never existed, that any idea of a past had been completely obliterated. My only existence an unbearable now.

But this unbearable now begs some questions: does this grief not mean there is a past. That this past matters? That this past will enable me to create a future?

Almost invisible amongst the rubble there was one thing intact and remaining; a tower of jumbled metal inexpertly welded into a sculpture, perhaps eight or nine feet high. To an outsider, just junk; to my children, their childhood friend, and myself something pricelessly precious. Our memories, our lives. The tower, always there, was now a tangible symbol of Dad, invoking so many associations. As children they had scrambled around finding all sorts of scrap metal – horse shoes, chains, rusty old tools, rabbit traps and discarded plough teeth; Dad was teaching them how to weld.

With a hacksaw a friend cut through the anchors; we carefully toppled the tower, and lifted it into the trailer. We took it to the new house and stood it up just inside the front gate. Still an unfathomable pile of junk to an outsider; perhaps eventually to again become 'invisible' even to ourselves, it will always represent something from 'the past', our story, something which is in the very fabric of our being. The nurturance of a loving Dad, embodied as part of self and now brought into consciousness as memories. In this sense the past is always the present.

Facts of time and events are not the only dimension of 'past'. The fact of the fire is one thing; the impact, and our engagement with this is another, and day after day I listen to the Royal Commission as I, and indeed all of us, seek to



Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya. Pic: Eugene Highland, *Diamond Valley Leader*

understand why and how. In my life the fires will never be a past matter.

But what is this thing we call 'the past'?

I think of 'the past' as lived lives

I think of 'the past' as cause and effect

I think of 'the past' as story; personal story, collective story, a multitude of stories

I think of 'the past' as knowledge, empowerment and inspiration

I think of 'the past' as a source of strength, and as a precious gift

But I also think of 'the past' as a jail, a confine from which there is no escape; this is because when past is unexamined, it maintains privilege and marginalization; rights and opportunity for some are taken for granted while injustices and lack of opportunity for others become normalized and invisible.

Past can give no surety because it can be an imagined 'truth' claimed for privilege and power, for maintaining the status quo, for shirking responsibility and, ironically, for denying the truth. Selected versions of the past have been appropriated, and claimed as mega narratives, promoted as valid, valued and valorised whereas selected other pasts have been denied, disputed and silenced.

Sometimes the past is conceptualized as 'ancient', as 'in the olden days', as historical, over and done with and somehow not connected to the present. These versions allow a convenient denial of the impact of past matters on contemporary lives. They have been used to objectify Indigenous peoples in government practices and policies, in research, land appropriation and social attitudes. Today they have become a way of distancing Indigenous people through language and representations with words like 'traditional' and 'authentic' and images of desert, difference and dysfunction.

No doubt our guest speakers will be unpacking these issues more thoroughly than I, but to finish up, I have a couple more comments. I wonder if western societies have become self-consciously obsessed with hanging onto the trappings and tangles of the past; nothing can be allowed to be ephemeral.

But I ask what is the point in amassing cultural artifacts and accounts of events if we have no interest in the meaning of these and the impact on lived lives. I like the pun contained in the title of this conference: *Past Matters*. While I hope we can

all agree that 'past matters matter', it is *how* and *why* they matter which is important. The past is the warp and weft in the fabric of ourselves. It is who we are, what we know, how we live, it is our embodiment.

None of us, least of all those of us affected by the fires, nor Indigenous people affected by generations of dispossession and marginalization will ever 'just get over it' as we are so frequently told we will do or should do. The past is not a past matter; it is a present matter and it matters. Thankyou.

Portrait of a Lady

Aunty Alice Ethel Louise Connolly, born January 7 1919

Alice is the oldest survivor of babies born at the Aboriginal Mission at Lake Tyers in Gippsland, which was established in 1861. Her family lived on a nearby farm. They were Gunnai people. The patriarch of the family was William Thorpe who owned the farm. His wife was Sarah Edwards. In the photo you can see the beautiful lace and dressmaking that Sarah could do.

The Thorpes were a large clan with three generations living on the farm, where they had a wonderful life. They were well respected by the white people in the area. Alice went to school at Lakes Entrance state school where she was treated as an equal by the white children and teachers.

Her father, John Connolly (a part-Irishman) was the local gravedigger. When Alice was a little girl her dad used to put her in the graves for fun after – so she says she has already been down there so she knows what it is like!

John Connolly and his father-in-law, William, helped build the lovely little timber church at Lake Tyers. It has recently been restored.

When William Thorpe died, an unscrupulous land-grabber got Sarah to sign a document that she was unable to read. In this way the enforced sale of the farm went ahead and the Connolly family moved into Lakes Entrance, where Alice says there were really beautiful people.

Alice remembers no prejudice in her life, but she was unable to learn her native language. Her Grandmother Sarah spoke five languages, but the Gunnai language was never spoken in front of Alice as a child, only English.

After Alice married Nancen Young and had three children, the Connollys moved to Melbourne. Here they helped set up the church in Gore Street, Fitzroy, run by Dowie Nicholls.



When Dowie died the church was taken over by his famous brother Pastor Doug. Alice's mother (also Alice) was the organist at this church and also the Treasurer. There was always a bed in the Connolly house for any Aboriginal people who needed a place to stay. Sometimes the living room floor was covered with sleeping figures.

Alice was a very talented little girl. Her mother introduced her to the piano when she was only four. When she was seven she was taken for music lessons. But she soon decided that formal teaching was boring and that she could teach herself. All her life she could play anything by ear – I was treated to a great rendition of some old hymns, which she played at a merry pace on her electronic organ while singing in a sweet, high voice. Yes, Alice's ninety-year-old hands appear as nimble as ever and she plays with a professionally straight back.

As a younger woman she played piano at hotels all over Melbourne, when she was not waitressing in cafes along Smith Street. With Harry Williams she played at all the dances that were organised by the Aboriginal people of Fitzroy to help one another out. Later she was in a women's band with Jessie Taylor and Margaret Tucker.

Alice had two husbands and raised, with the help of her parents, seven children and five step-children, all of whom have matured into wonderful human beings who contribute to society in one way or another.

Unfortunately her eldest son has died but her other children all care for their mother.

There are upwards of 120 descendents in all, who attended the glorious night of Alice's ninetieth birthday celebration. Alice played the organ and then, surprise of surprises, brought the organ home because it was her birthday present.

She says she has had a wonderful life.

Ann Curry

A message from Reconciliation Victoria

It is an unfortunate task to report that despite our best attempts Reconciliation Victoria has been unable to secure any further ongoing core operational funding and has thus been forced to close its doors. The office at Level 4, Ross House, Flinders Lane will be vacant as of Friday, 17 July 2009.

The organisation will be managed by the Council and dedicated volunteers. We are hoping to secure a voluntary desk space at a like-minded organisation shortly and will keep you informed as to our progress.

The Co-Chairs of Reconciliation Victoria, Keith Gove and Vicki Clark, can be contacted via post at:

PO Box 121, Montmorency VIC 3094, or email:
info@reconciliationvic.org.au

Annual General Meeting

Reconciliation Victoria will hold its AGM on Saturday, 12 September 2009 at a location to be advised. The day will involve an LRG Forum in the morning to discuss the journey ahead for reconciliation followed by refreshments, meeting business and then entertainment to celebrate the work of Rec Vic. We look forward to seeing you there.

Thank you for your support!

The Team at Rec Vic!

Travelling North: visits to sites of Aboriginal significance

We drove north from Adelaide heading for Birdsville. Just before reaching Oodnadatta we stopped at the Ochre Pits in the Lake Eyre region. They are extensive and were a source of ochre which was traded for pituri or native tobacco, Spinifex resin and stone axe heads.

Ochre was used for ceremonial body painting; for ornamenting weapons, tools and shields so that they were empowered; for medicine when it was applied to the ailing part or swallowed; in painting when it was mixed with animal fat or bird eggs to bind the elements; and in burial processes, where it was applied to the body or sprinkled over it. It is awesome to stand on the ochre beds and imagine a scene from a thousand years ago involving this very place, this ochre; just the Aboriginal people are absent.

We continued north through Birdsville and Mt Isa, then NW to Riversleigh and Lawn Hill National Park. Riversleigh is an old station which has been taken over by the government as it is the site of significant fossils of ancient giant marsupials, crocodiles, fish and birds. The most famous is Big Bird, a huge flightless bird, a precursor to the emu and the cassowary. There are rocks on view with bones fossilised in them and numerous examples of wave and ripple rocks. An excavation workshop revealed the arduous and painstaking work which archaeologists undertake in sorting through the slivers of bone to match and build up the larger structures to which they belong. An Aboriginal guide spoke to us at the information centre, identifying with the ancient life which is revealed in these rocks.



The Longreach Stockman's Hall of Fame had little information about Indigenous people. There were a couple of Aboriginal stockmen but almost no information about the part they played in outback station life. In the grounds, however, I discovered a sculpture garden in honour of Pioneer Women and near this was a moving sculpture called Walking Together. Two girls of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage are depicted walking together in friendship.

Carnarvon Gorge in Central Queensland is a magical place imbued with Aboriginal spirituality, a beauty and grandeur which is both magnificent and frightening. Mammoth cliffs and gorges with their heritage of life and passions stun us with their beauty, their fascinating plants and rocks and wildlife, their history. How small we are in this land!

There are gorges with rock faces covered with petroglyphs, sandstone which is abraded or picked with harder quartzite rock. The most common engraving is the human vulva – the purpose of those images is unknown. Stencilled hands make a symbolic identification of the artist with his land. Shell pendants traded from Cape York are stencilled there as well as axe shaped weapons which have never been found, their passing recorded only in this stencilled art. Carbon dating of the campsite puts the earliest habitation here at 3560 years ago. These are relics of tribal life long before European invasion.

At Brewarrina on the Darling we saw fish traps, which are now in a poor state of repair like much of the town. But they were still there, a complex of walls and holding ponds clearly evident in the bed of the river. Further downstream we found Gundabooka NP: a gathering place for hundreds of years of the Ngemba and Paakantji people. This walking tract, they said, will introduce you to our attitudes and country and take you past special cultural sites. We reached some shallow caves in the side of a cliff face where paintings showed figures dancing – shake-a-leg – emus, hunters with boomerangs, all done in pipe clay and ochre.

The Paroo-Darling river system is home to the Paakantji people: the people of the river. The language, Barkindji, was widely spoken until 1940 but can still be heard today, especially in Wilcannia. Outside the CDEP office a large fish sculpture declared the continuing importance of the river and fish to the Aboriginal people of the river who live there today. But the Darling is a river which no longer has its glory – now it's a series of pools far below the beautiful

bridge at Wilcannia and the wharf where barges and ships docked.

And the town: main street buildings with windows barred and covered with iron sheets, and at 9am a lone man walking there, no one else to be seen and no shops open for the business of the day. Climate change? Or land management excesses? Or the course of life and its legacies? Many of the Europeans who settled and made their fortunes have now moved on. The Aboriginal people remain – town dwellers with the temptations of European culture to battle with, as they use opportunities for education as best they can while the town is dying. It was difficult to feel cheerful in these stretched and impoverished places.

Notwithstanding the depression, what remains is the ancient history, the claim on land and the marks of habitation and ownership which are never erased. They are there, preserved and spiritually powerful, to be experienced by those who are open to seeing it.

Jan Aitken

THE WURUNDJERI CULTURE RESOURCE KIT

The Wurundjeri Culture Resource Kit has been completely updated and is now available on CD-ROM.

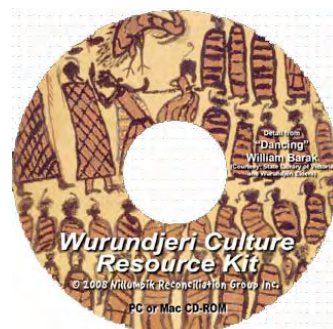
There are many advantages to a digital version: images in the kit and multiple copies of the various exercises – which are often required in an educational situation – can be printed direct from the computer without photocopying losses. We will also be able to email major updates if this should prove desirable in the future.

The kit is primarily targeted at children in the primary years, and as the title implies it is particularly relevant to the Yarra Valley and surrounding areas – Wurundjeri country. However, other regions would find much that is relevant, and would also see ways in which they would be able to particularise it to their areas.

You can download a preview of the first ten pages from our website. The main document is 63 pages and includes an extensive bibliography and links for further reading and research. It, and a colour cover, are Acrobat (pdf) files; image (jpg) files are included to print a board game to 3 sizes depending on the available printer.

The price of the kit for individuals, churches and Indigenous organisations is \$30; for others – such as institutions, schools and local councils – it is \$50.

Please contact the Secretary for further information.



The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus

Peter Sutton

"Incandescent, emotional, tragic and challenging" - Marcia Langton

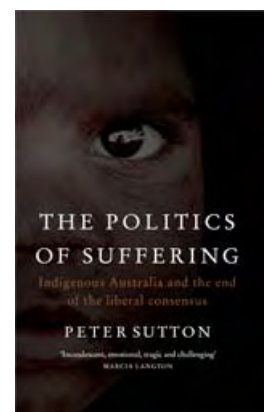
In this groundbreaking book, he asks why, after three decades of liberal thinking, has the suffering and grief in so many Aboriginal communities become worse?

The picture Sutton presents is tragic. He marshals shocking evidence against the failures of the past, and argues provocatively that three decades of liberal consensus on Aboriginal issues has collapsed. *The Politics of Suffering* cuts through the cant and offers fresh insight and hope for a new era in Indigenous politics.

About the Author

Peter Sutton is an anthropologist and linguist who has worked with Aboriginal people since 1969. He speaks three Cape York languages and, as an expert on Aboriginal land ownership, he has assisted with fifty land rights cases. He has authored or edited twelve books, including *Native Title in Australia: an Ethnographic Perspective*, regarded as the most authoritative work in its field. He is an Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow at the University of Adelaide and the South Australian Museum (doing research focusing on the Wik people), a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, a Fellow of the Australian Anthropological Society, and Honorary Research Fellow, Institute of Archaeology, University College London.

The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the Liberal consensus, by Peter Sutton, Melbourne University Press. RRP: \$34.99



What's On:

- Tuesday 21, 28 July & August 4: Talking on Tuesdays: 1-3pm. *Three Conversations about Reconciliation*, supported by Lisa Thorpe, Aboriginal woman. Carlton Railway Station Neighbourhood House, 20 Solly Ave, Carlton North. Phone 9380 6654 to register.
- Tuesday 28 July at 5pm: NRG Artists meet at Ann Curry's house 84 Buena Vista Drive, Montmorency re Application for Library Gallery space in 2010 Phone 9439 2984
- Tuesday 11 August, 5.30pm at the Eltham Library: NRG Business meeting. Please note change of usual date and venue.
- Wednesday 19 August at 47 Patterson Street, Ringwood: Reconciliation Eastern Metro with a Wurundjeri elder. Phone Jan 9439 0342 if you would like transport.
- Tuesday 1 September at 5.30pm NRG Business Meeting at home of Don and Joan, 22 Hillcrest Ave, Eltham South 9439 7016
- Saturday-Monday 17-19 October: World Matters 2009. *The End of Certainty*. Will include an Indigenous session sponsored by NRG

MEMBERSHIP: Subscriptions (July to June) are now due. Please consider before deciding not to contribute as your membership is vital to NRG continuing as a viable, representative group! Just \$20 for an individual membership; \$30 for a couple or a family. Membership can be paid for two or more years. A form for renewal or new membership follows.



Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc

PO Box 1017, Research VIC 3095

ABN: 61 506 201 828

www.vicnet.net.au/~nrgp

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP AND NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION

The Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc membership fee is \$20 (family \$30) covering the year from July to June.

FIRST NAME(S) _____

SURNAME _____ TITLE (Mr/Ms/etc.) _____

POSTAL ADDRESS _____

SUBURB / TOWN _____ POSTCODE _____

PHONE NUMBERS (H) _____ (W or M) _____

FAX &/OR EMAIL _____

Members receive newsletters, news sheets and occasional updates by email, or by post if an email address is not provided. Minutes of monthly meetings will be sent by post or email **on request** to the Secretary, Diana Warrell: 9439 8565 or dcwarrell@bigpond.com. The website is also updated regularly: www.vicnet.net.au/~nrgp/.

Please read the small print!

All renewing and new members are required to sign the following statement:

Whilst participating in the activities of Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc. both my property and my person shall be at my own risk and I will not hold Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc. liable for any illness, personal injury or loss of property sustained during or as a result of taking part in any activity of Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc. whether caused by the negligence of Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc. or its servants or agents.

Signed *Signed Dated:

*** In the case of family membership, both adults need to sign the disclaimer.**

COMMENTS / SUGGESTIONS _____

We welcome members' involvement – if you would like to join the Committee or take an active role in the Group's events, please contact the Secretary (see above) or Jan Aitken (President): 9439 0342 or aitken59@bigpond.net.au.

- I CAN HELP WITH
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter | <input type="checkbox"/> Fundraising | <input type="checkbox"/> Festivals/market stalls |
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