

The Road Ahead

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Long before the British invaded Australia our people expressed their emotions, our history, the sacred and secular events of our lives, via the medium of painting, storytelling, song and ceremony.

Pre-invasion stories and songs tell of the paths of the Creation ancestors, of the history of development of our clans and nations, and the social rules which govern them. Dramas by the camp-fire re-enact the skill of the hunt, emphasise the harvesting time for foods, celebrations and teach the young technological skills. Religious ceremonies formalise in song and dance the sacred laws which dictate the daily secular behaviour for all our people — religion isn't a "one-day-a-week job".

On the fateful day that the English arrived, however, the tide of change enforced by them was to at first quell, and then almost wipe out in the South and East, the modes of expression which had survived for over 60,000 years. Monolingual English-speaking missionaries, who found it too difficult to master our languages, were the first (for purposes of evangelism), to place prohibitions on the speaking of them — penalties ranging from the washing of mouths with soap to the deprivation of food and beatings were meted out to those who elected to ignore the rule. The English missionaries also denigrated our languages (as they had done the Welsh language), as an added method of deterring our people from using the forms of communication in which they were most competent. Later, bans on the speaking of Australian languages were associated with slavery, forcing us to replace our languages with only a limited English vocabulary (Fesl 1993).

Other factors contributed to language loss, but the bans, followed by the stigmatisation of our languages, played a large

part in bringing to extinction, or the brink of extinction, most of the Australian languages — a linguistic loss to the world.

For a time, our public voices were silenced, but time and fortitude, the great healers, ultimately enabled us to regain confidence and to seek other communicative means to attain justice. Oracy, which had served us well in our cultures, was transformed to oracy in English — many of our speakers were eloquent. A few outside our cultures listened, but orators can't win when seeking attention and action from those whose traditions have taught them that only the written law and the written history are valid and correct.

Under the Protection Acts which were initially legislated in 1897 and not finally repealed in their various forms until 1978, English literacy was denied to our male population and restricted to a third-grade level for the mothers and daughters of our nations who had been forced onto missions, reserves and settlements for the purposes of exploitation of their labour and seizure of their lands. Protector Roth of Queensland echoed the sentiments of those appointed under the Acts to “protect” our people:

... No practically useful results can accrue by our teaching our mainland blacks composition, fractions, decimals or any other subjects that will in any way enable them to come into competition with Europeans. (Fesl 107)

A consequence of the Australian Government's regulations and its actions to maintain a slave or poorly paid labour force, was that men and women in my parents' generation and those in later generations who remained incarcerated under the auspices of the Protection Acts had very little or no opportunity to develop literacy in English.

As a child, Oodgeroo and her family were among a fortunate few not part of the “settlement” system. She and her family were known as “outsiders” by the Murri community. Whether there was a stigma associated with the name “outsider”, and from whose perspective is debatable. On the other hand there certainly was with the label “mission blacks” applied to those at Cherbourg (then known as Barambah) and other places where people were forced to live and provide free or menial labour for neighbouring whites.

Oodgeroo was, of course, well aware of the Protection Acts, first implemented in Queensland in 1897, legislated in all states except Tasmania by 1911 and not finally repealed in all states until 1978. "Protectors" were appointed under these Acts to force our people off their land and into the concentration camps; of them she wrote: "... There are good white men who will help us, But not the appointed and paid officials, Not the feudal police Protectors, The protectors who do not protect."

When it became painfully obvious that they needed a break from domestic work or labouring, those called "mission blacks" were sent to Dunwich for a "rest". They were boarded with the "outsiders" but had to work and look after themselves while there. Probably the "outsiders" were paid for providing this service.

Because of mixing more freely with the white community, not being a slave, having been treated comparatively well and encouraged by her school teacher, Oodgeroo developed a faith in the white community which was not shared by the "mission blacks". Her faith is reflected in one of her first poems, "The Dawn Is at Hand" which expresses hope and predicts that progress in black-white relations will occur.

Perhaps this "outsiderness" at Dunwich influenced Oodgeroo to think in international rather than parochial terms — "I'm for humanity, All one race". Despite this, it seems she faced a dilemma — on the one hand she had hope, on the other she was well aware of the injustices dealt our people. "My love is my own people first, and after that mankind". "... For there are ancient wrongs to right ... But oh, the goal is sure" (*We Are Going* 11).

In those early days her writing was to have more effect upon white people than upon black. She became a bridge between the two worlds, communicating in a language foreign to this country, the ancient beliefs and lifeways of our people. At the time of course many of our people could not read, this factor adding to the lack of influence upon us.

In 1961 the Assimilation Act had been passed. At first Oodgeroo had a belief in the rhetoric of equality which accompanied the supposed political shift. "... Make us neighbours, not fringe-dwellers. Make us mates, not poor relations ...". But slowly the reality seeped through, a sadness overwhelmed her as she believed at this time that all of our culture and all of us were to be sacrificed

for assimilation — “The corroboree is gone, And we are going ...”.

Disappointment in the white community followed, “... Namatjira, they boomed your art, They called you genius, then broke your heart ...”.

Hurt became anger. Anger at the hypocrisy of the Christian church. Like most of our people, she was not deluded that the message “of light” was for our benefit, but unlike others among us at the time, she was able to articulate our feelings in writing. A number of her poems expressed this — “. . . Laws of God and laws of Mammon . . . and we answered ‘no more gammon’. If you have to teach the light, Teach us how to read and write . . .”. — “Holy men you came to preach; Poor black heathen, we will teach, Sense of sin and fear of hell, Fear of God and boss as well . . . We will teach you work for play, We will teach you to obey . . .”.

Although Oodgeroo was well received generally by the white community, even her friend and mentor, James Devaney, insisted that her writing be politically correct. For acceptance in the white community she was to “entertain” only. She was to leave out “propaganda-like stuff” and write in poetic form stories heard from her people when she was a child. Little has changed, for while we “entertain” we are accepted and applauded, but mention “land rights” and the room empties but for a few. Oodgeroo tried to comply with the request in her next book, but she slipped in “Daisy Bindi” which dealt with slavery on Roy Hill Station.

Like a true Murri, Oodgeroo was concerned for Nature and nature’s children. “Dingo on the lone ridge, Fleeing as you spy them, Every hand against you, May you still defy them . . .” and “. . . Municipal gum, it is dolorous To see you thus Set in your black grass of bitumen — O fellow citizen, What have they done to us?”

Oodgeroo’s writing was to have a profound effect upon some white people, for she was able to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap that still separates the black from white citizens of this nation.

It was not until her latter years that she began to have a powerful effect on indigenous Australians. As we became literate we realised the power of the pen which she had demonstrated. She, along with a handful of other writers among our people, became a role model

which I hope our young people follow. Her inspiration at Black Writers' Conferences encouraged others to take up the pen to write for justice for our people through plays, fiction, poetry and non-fiction.

Sadly, the last time we were together was at Brambuk, Gariwerd in Victoria. By now she had become a strong voice for our rights, no longer content to be politically correct for the benefit of the white population. Together we stood and addressed the conference on the Mabo legislation.

She was among the first to express our frustrations, disappointments, hope and anger at injustice in English-language literature. It was a hard and lonely road for her to tread. She had also attempted to use the white systems to benefit our people but with little success, for, while white people are dependent upon our dependency for their high wages, status positions and power, they will actively implement strategies to prevent our attaining the goal of self-management.

Now that most of us are literate in English, the young with a lifetime ahead of them must take up where Oodgeroo has left off if we are to achieve the goal of self-management which Oodgeroo finally sought.

Through the efforts of Oodgeroo, Jack Davis, and others, assistance is available to indigenous Australian writers — the Aboriginal Arts of the Australia Council offers special grants. The David Unaipon and other prizes are available to assist successful writers in having their work published.

We have had over 200 years of dominance by an English-language literate society; we now have the necessary skills so it is up to us to turn the tide. Like the road that Oodgeroo trod, the going will not be easy but with Jack Davis, Mudrooroo Narogin, Sally Morgan, Ruby Langford, Archie Weller, to name but a few of the growing number of pen-wielders amongst us who are leading the way, by the year 2000 we should have a formidable army writing for justice.

Sister, Mother and Cousin to our people,
She put in words the heartaches of us all —
Of our landscape, of the sea, of our world.
In her poetry she expressed the torments of anger —

At the treatment of our people —
The frustration of waiting for hopes
That budded, showed promise but never bloomed.

When she joined our ancestral spirits
In the arms of our Mother, the Earth
She left not a void to be filled
But a signposted path which some must follow.
The time has gone for spear and woomera to help our way
The time has come for more to use the pen
To follow along that path for Rights, that Oodgeroo has hewn.
(Eve Mumewa D. Fesl)

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