

While My Name Is Remembered . . .

Roberta Sykes

This is a personal account of my association with Oodgeroo Noonuccal and the context in which it occurred.

A couple of generations of young Aboriginal people have now been fortunate enough to grow up with, and share in the legacy of, the works of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker). Most, understandably, have no comprehension of what life was like before this, and it's important for them in order to be able to appreciate more fully Kath's work and times.

Although there had been an Aboriginal writer, David Unaipon, whose work had been published before Kath's, he had not enjoyed distribution or credit and, indeed, was virtually unknown until almost forty years after his death.

When I was growing up in Townsville, North Queensland, during the 1940-50s, there was really no Black literary figure of any description for anyone of my generation to relate to. Our world, and particularly the educational world — for those handful of us who were given any access to literacy at all — was bereft of our own imagery, history and aspirations. As children, we were overwhelmed with the history, imagery and successes of white people to the extent that we could not have been blamed for doubting our own existence and worth and the existence and worth of all, and any, other Black people.

While a teenager and young adult, a dribble of books with Blacks on the covers began to appear and in my hunger to learn of the experiences of people who looked like me, in the absence of anything else, I read them. They were written by white, mostly American, authors about slavery in the United States, in which men, women and children of colour were sold as chattels, raped

at whim, and brutally butchered, maimed and murdered in an alarming variety of ways.

The world was a very hostile place for a young Black person, and even the other world — the world of the imagination — was polluted. Unfortunately, at this time — pre-Referendum, pre-citizenship, pre-anti-discrimination legislation — awful fantasy merely mirrored real life.

It was into this cold grey environment of hopelessness and despair that Kath struggled to step, to light a little fire, to take the chill off the air. But to have her work accepted, she had had to adopt a line that wasn't too threatening to the establishment. I didn't want to hear *We Are Going* (which she published in 1964), I wanted to hear how we were standing to fight.

Seven years later, when I was endeavouring to break through the wall into publishing with my own work, I found the marks she had left in the very same wall. Her blood and tears still stained the bricks and indicated where the wall was thickest, but also where again they could be made to crumble. How many Black writers now have scrambled through the little hole she made for us? Each one, though they still find it hard, must appreciate that their entry has been made easier by those who assailed the wall when it was strongest.

Kath and I skirted somewhat gingerly around each other for years, with very few opportunities presenting themselves for us to ever meet and talk. We attended state (Qld) and national meetings and, with hundreds present, the agendas were far more on our mind than personal matters, and so I saw her mainly across crowded rooms. I was impressed to see that a woman so diminutive in physical stature could bring a bustling and noisy room to an expectant dead standstill by merely appearing to be 'about to speak'.

On a few occasions she surprised me by approaching me — I would never have been game to approach her, such was her aura of privacy, reserve and power. Each time, she grasped my arm and said words to the effect of, "I know what you're suffering. How are your children?" Sometimes she said she knew what I was "sacrificing". Very few people saw me as a mother first, and framed their interest around my family. I was touched and at the same time shocked by the intimacy, and my answers were always brief.

From newspapers and grapevine I heard of Kath's adventures, China, Europe, Africa, and the struggles of establishing her dream at Moongalba. I dropped her a line from time to time, looking for ways to assist or for ways in which our organisations could cooperate. The network of women-initiated projects was, and remains, loose, but, in the main, they constitute a grid over this nation that is much stronger than, at first glance, they might appear.

During my study period at Harvard University (1979-1983), I wrote back to perhaps ten people for information at various times, Kath amongst them. She was one of the few who sent me over the information I sought, and she enclosed a nice handwritten card which read:

Do what you've got to do, girl, and hurry home. I'm waiting for you.

It was a heartening message of warmth and solidarity, which I badly needed because I'd been feeling isolated and had begun to think that no one realised what it was I was trying to do. Kath's card conjured up for me her earlier confidences, that *she* knew of my suffering and sacrifice.

Because Kath lived at Stradbroke Island and I lived in Sydney, we continued to meet — after my return in December 1983 — only occasionally and in crowded venues, so the personal closeness we might have had never really had an opportunity to develop.

Still I kept tabs on her — her appearance in *The Fringe Dwellers*, for example, was almost a cameo of the Kath I knew, here one moment, gone the next, a notion which I shared with her — and from time to time we had a bit of a laugh about the way things were going in the movement. She kept tabs on me, too, evident from the comments she made when we paused to snatch a few words.

When the opportunity arose for me to write a book about Australian women high achievers, Kath (who had by that time rejected her name and embraced a traditional name of her Noonuccal people) was high on my list.¹ A niggling tiny voice in the back of my mind told me her clock was ticking over, and that if I was ever going to *know* Oodgeroo in her lifetime — over and above the public words in passing, the newspaper reports, grapevine information and opinions from others — I would have to get

myself to Moongalba and let her share herself with me in her own setting, because Moongalba was the backdrop to the woman she was and the life she had led.

She rang me when I was in Brisbane and roused on me for not setting a firm date, which convinced me that she was as keen to spend time with me as I was with her. She had been ill and I had tried to work around meeting up with her in Brisbane, but this didn't work out. She gave me precise instructions of how I was to travel by train and ferry to North Stradbroke Island, and even which of the ferry companies I was to patronise because of an altercation she had had with one company. She would meet me.

The morning was blue and clear, but the wind was blowing hard and cold. Oodgeroo wanted me to interview her on the beach. The wind was so strong it was blowing the dry sand into a stinging frenzy which whipped our faces and clothing as I followed her. She didn't hesitate and knew exactly where she was taking me. Quite suddenly, and surprisingly, we entered a place that was no different from any of the other places we had passed to get there, but which was somehow an invisible cocoon against the wind. An area of a few square yards where the air was still, the sun shone warmly and the view of the water, wild birds and jumping fish, was incredibly tranquil and rejuvenating. Oodgeroo's smile told me she had wanted to demonstrate her absolute familiarity with every inch of her domain, and she was aware of how impressed I was.

Our conversation was wide-ranging. We covered her trips away, what she thought about Europe and other places she had travelled to, the details of how she felt when the plane she took — returning from Nigeria — was hijacked, and the empathy she experienced with the hijackers. Her moods rose and fell all day. She was angry at having been misquoted by the press, particularly after the hijacking, and her quiet voice conveyed her deep respect for the men who had died during the hijacking, and for the bravery of the pilot. Discussing this subject led her to other “un-sung heroes”, and other times when the press had betrayed her.

She spoke of people whom she regarded as friends, and others whom she thought of as enemies and traitors to the movement, but who — because an Elder had, long ago, told her she must — she struggled to love despite their shortcomings.

I talked about the sterile white literary environment in which I had grown up and how I felt it had negated me. I wondered, since her exposure would have been similar, where and how she had found the courage to write and to make publishers sit up and take notice. She told me she had reached inside herself for material and nerve, and that she had continued to do so, and that, in the early days, a mere handful of friends had sustained and encouraged her. She blessed them.

After I had taped several hours, I told her that I would have to edit the interview down and that I would, as I did with everyone who appears in *Murawina*, send her the interview which she would be free to change. She said, "Don't worry about it. I trust you, so you can write anything you want." I asked her why she was so trusting, thinking of her earlier rages against people who had taken her words and twisted them. Oodgeroo replied that while she hadn't read everything I'd written, everything she had read had impressed her. I was humbled, and when she charged me with a responsibility to continue writing — "Write anything, just keep doing it" — I understood she was telling me she was going soon.

Our conversation somehow moved quite naturally from there to the subject of death. Underneath her occasional abrasiveness, she carried an awesome sadness about her life, and she had been wanting an opportunity to share her grief. It was a private sharing about her life which I understood was only for me. Then we began to talk about her death.

She told me her plans, where she intended to be buried, and how her spirit would hang about and in what forms. "Oodgeroo," I said, trying to approach the subject obliquely, "you know that when a person of your stature dies, it will be expected that we do not mention your name, probably for years, as a mark of respect." She knew I was thinking of the book I was working on, and the possibility that her prediction of her imminent death would perhaps mean I would have to leave her out of my book, or withdraw the book from circulation for many years.

She put her hand on my arm, her familiar gesture to draw us closer together, and chuckled. She said she admired my forthrightness, how I kept my eye on my goal. "When I die, I want people to shout my name. Write your book. All my life I've been teaching, teaching, and I'm going to keep right on teaching

beyond the grave. Nothing I've ever written is to be withdrawn, no pictures of me to be turned to the wall. From beyond the grave I want to keep looking them in the eye. Remove nothing, change nothing, let me keep teaching from beyond the grave. Help me to keep teaching. While my name is remembered, I teach."

Mid-afternoon, and after her photo-session, Oodgeroo took me back to her house. Her dogs distressed me, she kept them for her own safety and they were chained. There were things she wanted to show me, bits of her lifestyle she wanted to familiarise me with. She showed me the separate dwelling she had installed for Vivian, and her own simple accommodations.

At day's end and when I'd convinced her I just couldn't "stay a few days", she loaded my bag with passionfruit and took me back to the ferry. On the way, we went by the old cemetery and she explained its history and significance. She stood by the pier and waved until I could no longer see her, and despite the spiritual and visual beauty of her paradise in the twilight evening, I knew our sharing was complete and I was heavy of heart.

By faxed messages and phone conversations, her interview for my book was edited to her satisfaction and, as she had said, she didn't request any changes and was happy with those parts of our talk that I had chosen to accompany her portrait. Oodgeroo didn't live long enough to see the publication of the book.

Oodgeroo's adult life was spent in quest of answers, and in her early days, she recalled, she was often more wrong than right in determining the direction she should take. There were few opportunities for a young Aboriginal girl in her day, but the ones she saw, she pursued.

Oodgeroo's legacy, which she has left for future generations, is vast. Moongalba, for example, is an idea that she created and fought for, to enable young people to get in touch with the land and with nature. Her lifestyle was simple and she was scrupulous about waste, especially of any living creature. She deplored vandalism and its effects on nature, but had a deep respect for the balance which interrelationships between animals and humans require. "The fowls and fish of the world feed me, and eventually I will be the food of the worms of the earth, and then the fowls and fish will eat the worms and our circle will be complete," she confided. I wasn't startled because she was just voicing something we both knew, so we laughed.

But Oodgeroo's main talent was her writing, her sharing of her struggle and her ideas. These she has left as gifts for all of us. Her poems, through their different stages, mirror her own development and growth, as much as they also provide for us a sort of barometer for what the public would, at various times, accept from her as a Black woman. She was canny about knowing how far she was going to be allowed to go, then drawing her bead right on that line and waiting until the line slackened a bit so she could push for a little bit more. Her advances laid down pathways for other Black writers whose duty it is to push the boundaries as far as they will stretch before they break and fall away. And when these artificial boundaries — which restrict the opportunities of Aboriginal people and cause ill-will between people who wish to live in harmony in this country, which is Oodgeroo's country — fall away under the pressure of people and time, let us hope that those who witness this great event remember to shout her name — OODGEROO — so that she can continue to teach.

NOTE

- 1 *Murawina: Australian Women of High Achievement*. Text by Roberta Sykes. Photographs by Sandy Edwards. Sydney: Doubleday, 1993.