

BLACK WOMEN'S ACTION IN EDUCATION FOUNDATION

BWAEF

The Roberta Sykes Action Foundation

OCTOBER 2006

UPDATE ON ROBERTA BY MARK MCMILLAN

Roberta Sykes

I have been grateful to Roberta and the foundation for the opportunities that they have given me. The opportunity to live and study in Canada and the USA has reshaped my direction in life. The one person who constantly gets this is Roberta herself.

Going to visit Roberta is not easy. Seeing the Roberta now and knowing the Roberta prior to her illness makes the visits surreal and difficult. However, it is much harder for her! Roberta is the one that remains there. Roberta is the one that waits for people to visit her. Roberta cannot go and visit her friends. Instead, she waits...and waits. When the visitors arrive it is the old Roberta that greets them. Although the 'shell' is different, the wit and humour of old is still evident.

On my visits to see Roberta, her questioning mind and her quench for what is happening always sets the tone for the visit. She inevitably asks about my family and how we are going. The genuine interest in my life is apparent in her questions. She still is insistent on letting me know what I can be doing better!

Roberta's intellect never ceases to amaze me. When we visit we usually do a crossword. Who knew that the capital of Bolivia is Sucre? Roberta did! Roberta loves to do the cross words. Sometimes she takes a while to answer, but she does answer.

Roberta is still very engaged with politics. When the paper is read to her, either the mainstream newspapers or the National Indigenous Times, the contents are still hotly debated. The same passion that made the foundation a reality is visible to

those she debates with about the news. She certainly makes you articulate your arguments very carefully!

She has so much history that she shares. It is fun listening to her recollections of the tent embassy and her experiences in Redfern. It makes me realise that her struggles have allowed me to have mine.

The change of the foundation name has been warmly welcomed by Roberta. I think that she was truly stunned when she was approached about the change.

It is hard to leave Roberta as it is almost like you are running away. However, what it does do is to make me think how can I work for Indigenous peoples harder because she not able to right now? It also makes me ask, how can she be more involved? The only answer I can have to that is, go and ask her? She will tell you!

IN THIS ISSUE

Profiles of Trustees	2
Student Report from Italy	3
Student Report from Canada	7
Fundraising Event - Sydney	8
Jilpia's Pilgrimage to the Great Sandy Desert ..	9
Saying Sorry Isn't Always Hard	11

Jilpia Nappaljari Jones

Jilpia is an Aboriginal Woman from the Walmadjari Nation, born in the Great Sandy Desert. She has experience in general, midwifery and ophthalmic nursing. She has many years experience as a nurse in Aboriginal Communities with her work and involvement with in the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program with the Late Professor Fred Hollows. After working with Fred Hollows on the NTEHP she went to work and study at Moorfields Eye Hospital in London with a Churchill Trust Scholarship. In 1995, she received an AM for her work in Birthing Choices and Eye work. Jilpia has spent many year advocating for the rights and interests of Aboriginal people and sees her self as a strong social activist for Aboriginal issues. She has a degree in Political Science and History from the Australian National University.

Jackie Huggins

Jackie Huggins AM (BA *Qld*, BA Hons, DipEd *Flinders*) is of the Bidjara (Central Queensland) and Birri-Gubba Juru (North Queensland) peoples. Jackie has a BA majoring in history and anthropology from the University of Queensland and an Honours degree in history and women's studies and a Diploma of Education from Flinders University. Jackie holds many leadership positions in organisations across the country. She is currently Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia; a Director of the Telstra Foundation; Director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History, Australian National University; Council Member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; Member of the Indigenous Advisory Board of the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research, Central Queensland University; Co-Chair of the Independent Inquiry into Release Policy and Practice in the Queensland Prison System (2004); and Member of the Indigenous Advisory Board of the State Library of Queensland. She was a former Executive Member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1994-2000); former Chair of the Queensland Domestic Violence Council (2001); former Commissioner for Queensland for the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1997); former member of the ATSIC Review Panel (2003). Jackie is on many editorial advisory boards and has published widely on Australian Indigenous issues, in particular history and women's studies. She authored *Auntie Rita* (with Rita

Huggins 1994) and *Sistergirl* (1999). Jackie is Editor of the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* and a member of the Editorial Board of *Life Writing*. In 2000 she received the Premier's Millenium Award for Excellence in Indigenous Affairs and in 2001 was awarded an Australia Medal (AM) for her work with Indigenous people, particularly reconciliation, literacy, women's issues and social justice.

Marcia Langton

One of Australia's leading authorities on contemporary social issues in Aboriginal affairs, Marcia was appointed Foundation Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne in 2000, after five years as Professor at Charles Darwin University. She has many years experience working as an anthropologist in Indigenous affairs with land councils, the Queensland government, commissions, and universities. Marcia has been a member of the Centre for Aboriginal Reconciliation, serving on the Legal and Cultural Issues Sub-Committee, was Director of the Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management, and has acted as a consultant to the Northern Land Council and the Australian Film Commission.

Her work in anthropology and the advocacy of Aboriginal rights was recognised in 1993 when she was made a member of the Order of Australia. She was named joint winner (with Larissa Behrendt) of the inaugural Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Teacher of the Year in 2002, and became a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 2001.

Marcia has published extensively on Aboriginal affairs issues including land rights, resource management, social impacts of development, indigenous disputes, policing and substance abuse, and gender and identity. She also contributes to film and art criticism. Internationally, she has worked on Indigenous rights and conservation and environmental policies, most recently in East Timor. Recent projects include a study of property relations and sense of place in the Princess Charlotte Bay area of eastern Cape York Peninsula, and a major ARC/industry funded study, now in a second phase, of Agreements, treaties and negotiated settlements with Indigenous peoples.

Lessons from beyond the classroom:

Snow, art and racism in Italy

Sophia Romano

Upon my arrival in Italy, I took a very exciting bus ride from the airport to the city of Trieste. The trip took about an hour, but had highlights such as seeing snow for the first time in my life and seeing the very pretty little towns on the way. On arriving at the bus station I tried to engage the taxi driver in saying I wanted to go to *Via Roma*, they told me that it was close and I could walk, this is when I discovered the extent to which my bag had been broken on the international journey. It no longer a right wheel, which meant I had to drag it through the streets, while people stared at me because of the horrible noise it was making.

My hotel was located on *Via Roma* and I finally made it these with some help from an old non-English, non-Italian speaking man. I began to look for my hotel – up and down the street I walked, there was no hotel matching the one I had booked in Australia. This is when I realised that it did not exist, well at least not in Trieste. I sat in the piazza for a while and cried as not only was my luggage heavy and broken, but it was –4 degrees and I had no where to stay. Finally pulling myself together, I found a Chinese shop and bought a new suitcase for 22 Euros, which is about \$40, and decided to stay in the first hotel I found. This decided, I made out a lot better.

Before I continue my tale of error I will tell you a bit about Trieste. Trieste is located at the top of the Adriatic Sea very near to Croatia and Slovenia, needless to say this means there is a good community of Eastern Europeans in the town, this adds to the already interesting culture of the town as it was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This influence can be felt throughout the town with the architecture being very un-Italian, and more like what is known as 'Mittle Europe', more German influenced. It is a port town with the largest piazza facing water in Italy, *Piazza Unita d'Italia*. On a clear day you can see way out to sea and in the distance you can see the mountains as the coast curves around.

A few days after my arrival, I was celebrating my 21st birthday. Alone, I decided I would break out of my self-deprecating and

depressed state of melancholy and go and have a nice dinner and a beer. I got out feeling okay except that again it was –4 degrees. I walked around for a while until I realised I didn't want anything to eat and the windburn I was sustaining on my face (due to the wind called 'La Bora', which is particular to Trieste and blows at speeds of up to 160 kilometres an hour) was unbearable. All of a sudden, I turned my head and something hard hit my face. I felt my hair and it was stiff and I thought someone had put something in my hair. But I was wrong - it was just that my hair had frozen. Upon discovering this I began to cry again, but not waiting to freeze to death I went back to my hotel and cried there till I was too tired and went to sleep. The saving grace of the day was getting a phone call from my lovely friend in Austria, who invited me when I had time to come and visit her.

Over the next few days, while still being quite hermit-like, I began to pull myself together. I went to the University on Monday (as I had arrived on a Saturday) and enrolled. I also went to the *Questura*, which is the main police station and tried to get my permission to stay. However, being me I faced problems at every turn! At the university I met a strange Albanian who proceeded to be overly helpful, bordering on weird and who began to follow me and turn up unexpectedly where ever I was.

After two days of standing in line for two hours, told me that I couldn't have permission to stay, as the Italian Consulate in Australia had not stamped my insurance. I was then obliged to go to the post office and buy more insurance and go back. Finally everything seemed to be okay. All I had to do was have my fingerprints taken and wait. I held my breath that it would all turn out okay. And it was, things got better, I found a flat with two nice Italians and also started to make acquaintances and even friends. It was mid-way through February and I hadn't started classes yet. In fact I had no idea when they started at all. I checked everyday, but if you have ever been to Italy you will understand. If not, I will inform you; Italians

REPORTS FROM STUDENTS

as a rule are not very organised. It may seem like it with their number taking and lines, but no.

Worrying about classes, I looked at the websites and went to the Faculty, I asked a woman in the information box one day when the classes would begin, she replied, maybe this week or maybe the week after that or maybe the week after that. Beginning to become not a little annoyed, I decided to go away. I had tentative dates for classes so I was fairly sure I would not miss them. I went to Milano for the weekend and for the first part of the week and saw some of the sights like Il Duomo and La Scala, the opera school and theatre. The following day I went to an art exhibition with some other exchange students in a town called Bergamo, an hour north of Milano in the region of Lombardy. We caught the train and were amazed on arriving there, the town (Citta Bass) was fairly standard and modern at the bottom, but up the top in the "Citra Alta" or High City it was another story all together. It was absolutely beautiful, a fairly wealthy city on top of a hill, which can be reached by a train on a winch or by stairs. We took the stairs, all 400 of them. At the top we marvelled at the beautiful entry to the historic centre and my favourite Il Mercato delle Scarpe or the Shoe Market. We went to the beautiful old piazzas and the Basilica Santa Maria della Grazie.

The exhibition we went to was very interesting and also very confronting, it was called 'War is Over'. Most of the works were by German artists with standouts from Gustav Klimt and Otto Dix. There were beautiful works by Kandinski and Paul Klee, but also some very emotive works like a film which looked at the touristic pull of the step of Nuremburg where Adolf Hitler made his famous address. The site has become a place that draws crowds of tourists, who, however tactlessly, give the Nazi salute. The most interesting and confronting pieces for me in the exhibition were the two rather harmless looking landscapes by Adolf Hitler himself. They were so mundane, that I would not even deem them to be art. I was very surprised by these works and found myself to be very torn over their exhibition. I found myself feeling bad for looking at them and also to see the signature of such a person was strange and I felt uneasy.

By this time it was mid-February and I was assured by a friend that classes would start in the first week of March. So I headed off to Firenze (Florence) for the weekend and then to Bologna for the rest of the week. Firenze is one of those places that if you are in Italy you should have to go to. The Uffizi, which I visited on the second day there houses works such as

The Birth of Venus, and many works by Carravaggio, as well as some by Raffaello, Leonardo Da Vinci and Michaelangelo.

Firenze is also home to l'Accademia where Leonardo's giant killer lives. In the afternoon of the same day I went with the family with whom I was staying and admired David from all angles. We all having taken art classes and the mother of the family being a lecturer in Museum Studies at George Washington University D.C., took turns at admiring the gargantuan work in silly ways. But all agreeing that in the end, the enlargement of the hands and feet were for reasons of perspective and all were completed, if not a little too large for reality with skill, beauty and attention to detail.

The following day caught the train to Bologna, in the region of Emilia-Romagna, a city of 400 thousand people of whom 100 thousand are students. This city was my first choice for my exchange, but when I got it I decided I didn't want to go there anymore. I changed to Trieste within weeks of finding out. My friends all went to Bologna or to cities surrounding it. For me, it has been a good choice to go to Trieste as I have been surrounded by Italians since I first arrived. My friends on the other hand have all stuck together and have not improved their language skills as quickly as I have. I am proud that I have been able to improve as much as I have, but I still have a long way to go.

Since coming back from Bologna I have held off on travelling. Uni has started and I have been attending classes, even if the teachers have not. The people I have met in classes tell me this is quite normal, either the professors are late or they don't turn up. The funny thing is the students wait, sometimes an hour and a half before leaving in despair. From my first few weeks of lessons I have learned patience and I have also learned that teachers here must be spoken to with very formal language. For my course I must tell the teachers who I am so as to get recognition at the end of the semester, so the first day I introduced myself to the teacher who actually came "Buongiorno, mi chiamo Sophia Romano. Sono una studentessa d'Australia, sono qui in scambio. Volevo dirle che frequentero le sue lezioni". This is probably the most formal thing I will ever say. To translate: "Good morning, my name is Sophia Romano. I am a student from Australia here on exchange. I wanted to let you know that I will be attending your lessons". It doesn't have the same ring in English, but nonetheless, it sounds very formal. Here you must speak to the teacher like you would address your Grandmother's friend who you are meeting for the first time ever.



View of Mount Vesuvius from Castello St. Elmo

This semester I am taking a course in International Relations and Cultural Anthropology. In one of the lessons for Cultural Anthropology the teacher asked me to speak about the Indigenous people in Australia. This would have been a great opportunity for me to create cultural understanding and let the students in my class understand a bit about Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, my language skills are not perfect, and while I could inform them that I myself am a member of the Indigenous community in Australia and give them a little information about Indigenous people in Australia now, I could not give them what I wanted. Also I was so embarrassed about not being able to convey my opinions, I said very little, then the professor gave me a sympathetic look and continued. I hope by the end of the semester I will be able to give them some more.

I have had very few negative experiences while I have been here. Very soon after I arrived here I realised that there was a fair bit of anti-immigrant sentiment and also a dislike of foreign workers. Around the town there are a lot of stickers

distributed by the Lega Nord, a party in the ruling coalition. The best way to describe them is Neo-Facists, their stickers read, "Trieste ai Triestini" which translates as "Trieste for Triestines". One evening when I was in the piazza I saw a man yelling in a megaphone about his dislike for Eastern Europeans and that he wished they were not here. I was very disturbed by this and hoped he did not have those sorts of feelings towards me. To compound and probably exacerbate the anti-immigrant sentiments, it is election time in Italy at the moment; the people will go to the polls in less than a week. All the parties are out campaigning and many are anti-immigration, anti-homosexual and anti just about everything there is to be anti! One poster reads "No sul matrimonio omosessuale" – not to homosexual marriage. While this sentiment exists in Australia, I was shocked to find it here as Europe I have always felt was liberal and more accepting of difference of life than Australia.

I continue to enjoy my stay here but it is with less naivety and with less seeing through rose coloured glasses.



The Amalfi Coast, with converted fort house.

Part Two:

My language skills improved greatly during April, this is mainly due to my trip of discovery down to the Province of Napoli (Naples). I call it that because, during Easter I went and met my Italian family; I touched my roots. I took the train for nine hours from Trieste stopping to change in Rome. Of course, being Italy the train was running late. One thing you must know about Italy is that the trains are always late, it is something that has to be accepted and there is nothing to be done about it. I had 10 minutes to find the platform (binario) and jump aboard. I found a seat, and for the first time in Italy someone spoke to me while I was on public transport.

Again due to my being in Italy the train was late into Napoli. I spoke on the phone with my cousins, who were to pick me up, at this point I was worried, would I know them, I had seen about two photos and being the first time meeting I was also worried how things would go. Would they like me? Would I like them? Did I have to speak formally to the elder members of the family? And more importantly, as the elections were happening that day, did they support the same political party as me? All my fears however were totally unfounded. When I descended the train, I walked only five meters before seeing a sign, "Welcome Sophia". They were lovely, took my backpack,

which weighed 14 kilos and we drove to the town where my Grandfather was born.

From when I first arrived, I realised that only one of my relatives spoke English, I was going to have problems; and what seemed more of a problem was that *i nonni*, the grand parents, don't speak Italian. They speak, Napolitano, which while being a dialect of Italian is very, very different. Meeting my Italian relatives, has been one of the best, the most fulfilling, interesting experiences I have had while in Italy. I felt that I had known them for my whole life and like I fitted there, like I never have anywhere else, they look like me, we have the same last name. This is not to say that I don't fit in Australia, with the Indigenous community, with my family, but it's different, at home I am still a bit strange.

I stayed for a week seeing all over Napoli, Piazza Plebiscito, Castello Nuovo, which has an amazing mark from a cannon, and Palazzo Reale, where the Italian Royal family once lived. I was excited to see here a photograph of Queen Margarita, for whom the first pizza is named. We went for a day trip along a long and very winding road to Positano, and the rest of the Amalfi Coast, which was once one of the four Ocean Republics (the others being Genoa, Venice and Pisa), back

before Italian unification, it still bears signs such as forts and towers on every headland. These have now been converted into attractive homes that I greatly envy.

I saw other places, much less famous, but none the less interesting, I saw where my Grandfather was born. Sadly the house has been demolished, with all that now remains being a lemon tree, which for me is fitting, to have at least a tree and not a parking lot. I met all the family including some of my

grandfather's surviving brothers and sisters. The trip was very enjoyable and probably some of the best time I have spent so far in Italy, everyone made me feel so welcome and included, it was very hard to leave at the end of the week, but I know I will be back soon. And in the end even my greatest fear was unfounded, when I found that everyone in the whole family was happy with the central left election win by Romano Prodi.

Ciao, alla prossima (till next time) Sophia.

Report of Exchange to the University Of Ottawa 2006

Lucille Schnierer

From January to April this year, I was fortunate to be able to do an exchange from the *University of Technology* in Sydney to the *University of Ottawa* in Canada. There were several reasons why I wanted to spend a semester abroad. I currently study Law and Communications and have a great interest in International Studies. I wanted to experience living in a different culture and learning in a different environment. This university offered subjects that were compatible with my degrees and was therefore ideal. This particular university was an interesting place to go because the city of Ottawa is officially bilingual and hence it is required that everything is accommodated for equally in English and French. This was a challenge occasionally as I don't speak French, but most of the time people spoke both languages and it was great to see the way they were able to accommodate both.

After four months I learnt a lot about Canadian culture, and in many ways it was similar to that in Australia. The people were generally quite open and friendly and willing to help when you had a problem. As it was winter when I was there it was snowing and the temperature often dropped to -30 degrees, so there were rarely many people out and about! Although this was a bit of a shock there were some benefits. I was able to try ice-skating on the world's longest outdoor

skating rink that was the frozen canal next to the university. We attended an ice hockey game (their national sport), and also went snowboarding about 30 minutes away from the university which was organised very cheaply for students, and was fantastic! I also tried some of their famous winter foods of Poutine (hot chips, melted cheese, and gravy), and Beavertails (sweet deep-fried bread with lemon and sugar). Which were good for some warmth but not so good for the figure! Other activities the university organised included a big dinner for the International students called 'Pot Luck', where everyone brought a traditional dish from their country. This was fun and a great way to learn about each other's cultures.

I lived in the university residence for the semester mainly with other International exchange students but also with some Canadians. This was an amazing experience because there were people there from all over the world, and because we were living in such close proximity and were there for the same reasons I had the opportunity to learn a lot about many different cultures and places and make friends from everywhere. At times there were challenges especially with language barriers, but overall this actually inspired me to learn another language (I am currently undertaking a course in Spanish).

REPORTS FROM STUDENTS

As for my studies the exchange was both beneficial and worthwhile. Studying abroad is a challenge because you are not familiar with the people, the campus, and the way classes operate: but this is all part of the experience. I was able to take subjects that weren't offered at my home university that were of particular interest to me, especially *Latin American Politics*. Apart from learning general information about how politics have developed in Latin America, I was able to do some more specific research on Guatemala and Bolivia and the success and failure of Indigenous groups in politics. I looked at possible reasons why Indigenous groups in countries like these where the majority of the population is Indigenous have succeeded or failed in gaining adequate representation and equality.

Also in another subject I undertook *Criminology*, of particular interest was the different methods of sentencing and punishment that are currently being tried in some Canadian Indigenous communities, such as Manitoba. As law is my field of study the effectiveness and acceptance of alternative methods of justice, such as circle sentencing, that may be necessary in certain areas for Indigenous people or communities was very interesting.

The other subjects I took were *Governance and Society*, which was primarily about Canadian politics, and *Global Identities and Social Change*, which was also interesting as it was addressing globalisation from a Canadian perspective. It was interesting to see how Canadians feel about various actions and decisions of the United States considering their relationship, and compare this to my own views from an Australian perspective. The subject of identity was widely discussed and I was able to do some research on how globalisation is benefiting or challenging different countries, societies, cultural groups and peoples.

Overall I thoroughly enjoyed all my courses and found that a lot of people were interested in Australian society and culture, in particular the position of our Indigenous peoples. This was especially so because Canada is also a very multicultural society, so people often wanted to know if Australians shared the same benefits and difficulties such diversity creates. Talking to other students about such issues was a great way to learn, and also share information from my own experiences.

I would like to thank the Black Women's Association for their support through generous funding that contributed to make my exchange possible. The costs of travel, accommodation, textbooks, winter clothes, and the various activities were

significant and I am very grateful because the funding made these things more affordable. Although the financial costs were significant, the personal gain from such an experience were far greater, and I would strongly recommend to other students interested in learning about different societies and cultures, and wanting to make some International friends to get involved in an exchange if they have the opportunity.

Thank you once again for all your support!

Yours sincerely: Lucille Schnierer



FUNDRAISING BBQ IN SYDNEY

*We would like to invite you to a
fundraising BBQ in Sydney.*

We are hoping that Roberta will be able to attend, and like the previous events in Canberra, this will be an opportunity to hear some excellent speakers and meet with new and old friends.

When: Midday, 2 December 2006

Where: 75A St Marks Rd, Randwick, 2031

Contact: Ruth 0404 968 116

Cost: \$25

BYO: drinks, vegetarian food, and a salad to share

Jilpia's Pilgrimage to the Great Sandy Desert, 2006



I, my husband and faithful cross bred Collie dog departed Canberra on the 2nd of July this year with our 4WD packed to the limit with camping gear and provisions. We have been performing this pilgrimage to my Walmadjari country every year for over a quarter of a century. This time we hope to penetrate the heart of my grandmothers' country in the middle of the great Sandy Desert of Western Australia. After visiting my old nursing friend at Wagga Wagga, once one of the stalwarts at the first Aboriginal controlled medical service in Sydney she now fulfils that role at the AMS in Wagga.

We camped the first night outside Hay on Thommo's favourite river, the Murrumbidgee. This is in Wiradjuri country and there are still a few trees by the river that they marked many

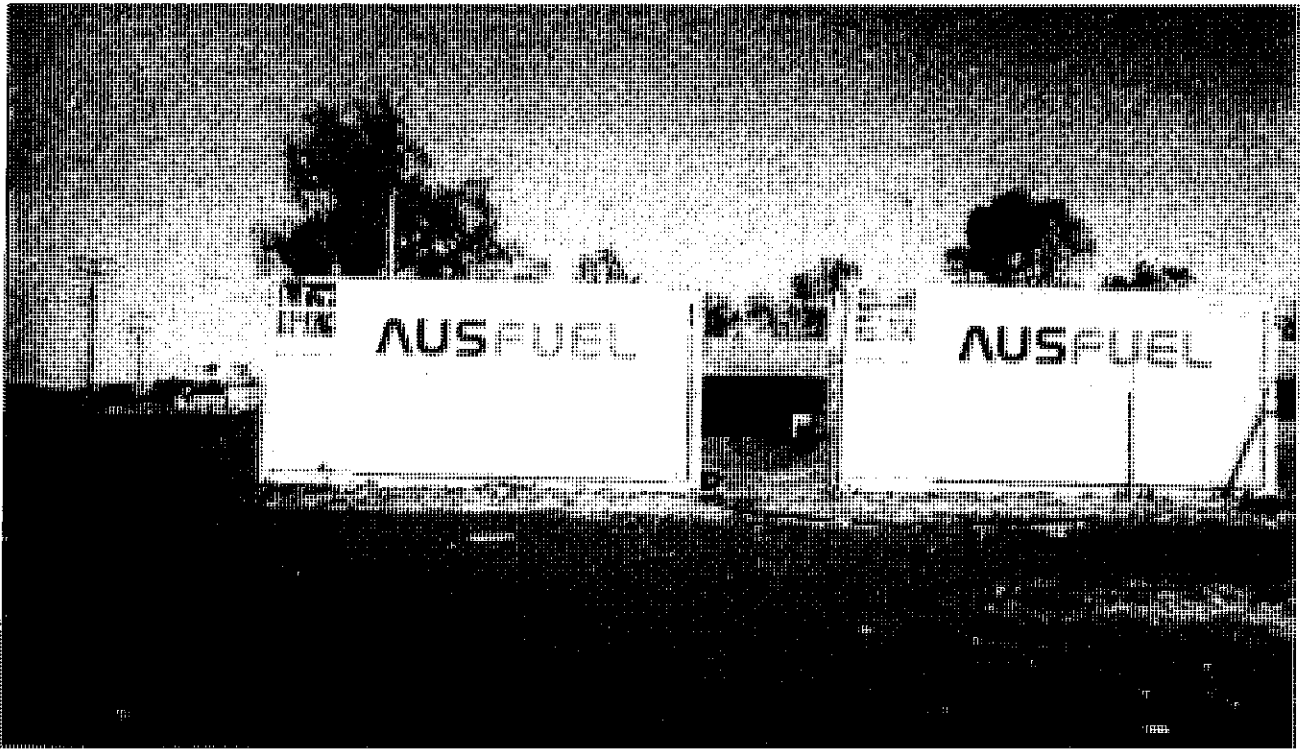
years ago. We fuelled up both ourselves and the vehicle at Balranald, then headed off to Mildura and Renmark to Adelaide where we stayed a couple of streets from Thommo's birth place. His cousins and friends are getting older and are beginning to accept that Indigenous people like me share a lot more with them than they ever imagined possible. It was there, that we were robbed of our camping gear such as a swag, tents, lighting and tucker box. And I thought South Australia was free of the convict stain!

On the way we paid homage to the Jesuit founded winery in the Clare Valley as well as other excellent vineyards. At Sevenhill, one of Australia's pioneer anthropologists, Frank Gillen is buried. Then up through the Flinders Ranges, Marree, Lake

Keep in touch!

The foundation is busily preparing a website with an on-line scholarship application form to spread information amongst student groups more widely. Information about the website will be distributed as soon as it is up and running. If you would like to receive an email alert please send us an email to Ruth.Nicholls@uts.edu.au

We are also aware that member's addresses change and at times it is difficult to keep track. If you are aware of a friends who would like to hear updates please encourage them to contact us via email or send a note in the post. Our mailing address is PO Box 447, Lismore, NSW 2480.



Eyre, which was dry again and to Oodnadatta. Along the dirt track from Oodnadatta we came across an old man with a buggy being pulled by two camels and on the buggy with his old retainer a sheep dog. We travelled along the track until we reached Marla Bore where the bitumen began leading to Alice Springs. After a restful couple of days we headed up to Tenant Creek to see a mate of mine, my tribal sister.

Barbara is CEO of the Aboriginal Controlled Medical Service in Tennant Creek. She had her son Adrian visiting from Melbourne. I knew him from a baby but he's head and shoulder above me now and still a delightful young man, who earns his living as a professional footballer. Barbara's partner is Elliott MacAdam, a minister in the NT Government.

To get to the Tanami road we cut through past Coniston, infamous for the 1928 massacre of my people. However the rains followed too so we managed to make camp among the lightning and thunder and broke camp early the next morning and skidded along the muddy road to Yuendumu. There we met two impressive young police officers who not only gave us friendly advice but seemed to have a good relationship with the locals. How things have changed! This rain had spread over the whole western desert so it was back to Alice Springs to dry out.

We were successful this time and reached Balgo where we filled up with diesel at \$2 a litre and headed to Mulan in my Walmadjari country in the Great Sandy Desert. This is the community which has been in the news quite a lot, my

people had to follow the government's direction of the SRA agreement, which was "keep the children clean and to go to school otherwise no petrol bowser".

Most of my people were at a meeting so I took photos of the new fuel browser. They sell opal and diesel, neither of which attract petrol sniffers. My relatives were either too busy or absent so we left Mulan to drive to my grandmother's country 200 Km to the southeast armed with a map of the Canning Stock route.

A couple of years earlier my uncles and aunts had guided us 75 Km south of Mulan where my grandfather's country lay. The creeks, mostly dry ran down from tabletop hills and led to occasional waterholes; which must have been life giving for those old people. There were no maps for this area. After a false start when we found ourselves blocked by this huge Lake Gregory, better known as Baruku, we crossed the floodplain of Sturt Creek and its surrounding sand hills. We made camp at a lovely lagoon on the creek called Nyarna. There was no one else for miles around, but at twilight people in two vehicles came and camped within 20 paces of us. Were they frightened of the "natives" further up at Billiluna? Or having traversed the Canning Stock Route 1500 Km from Wiluna was I the only 'real' Aborigine they had encountered and the mere process of gazing at me might make their adventure complete?

Next morning we chugged slowly along a single sandy and often corrugated track past Spinifex, acacia scrub, clay

pans, sand hills, rocky outcrops, grassland and even water soaks along the Canning Stoke route or as my people call it, Warntarri Purlumanupurra, "the old bullock road", I reflected how my people roamed across this country often in the heat of summer when the soaks and lagoons were dry. Later some of my uncles had helped drive cattle down this track.

But then across sand hills and Spinifex flats there was Gundingurra, the hills within whose folds my mothers were born. The first two hills were predictably like women's breasts. They were the sentinels but as we moved closer these bare rocky ranges opened into valleys and at the head of one of these valleys was the rock hole where my ancestral women had their birth. Its water was permanent sheltered from the sun by rocky ledges from which fig trees grew, while down the dry creek were shrubs and trees that fed my people.

This was Wajanturumanu. I had reached the heart of my country!

Introducing Michael Robinson

Michael is the most recent recipient of a scholarship from the foundation. Michael, a graduate from ANU, is commencing his PhD at the Graduate School of Business at the University of Chicago. We look forward to receiving news of Michael's studies in the near future.

Saying Sorry isn't Always Hard

Prof Larissa Behrendt

I don't think there were many Aboriginal people across the country who did not see the irony of Prime Minister John Howard apologising to the Vietnam War veterans for the shabby way that Australia treated them when they returned from risking their lives for Australia's foreign policy. The treatment was appalling, their ostracism unacceptable, cruel and negligent and it is only right that the contribution that they have made to their country should be celebrated and respected with the same enthusiastic way we have embraced all our other war veterans.

The apology to the Vietnam veterans is warranted and long overdue. Apologising for sending one of our most valuable resources – our young people – to fight an unjust war is ironic while at the same time we have sent the same valuable and precious resource off to what many have suspected is another.

But it is also a painful irony to the members of the stolen generations and their families who have had to live with the effects of the policy of removing Aboriginal children that

in many circumstances was unjust, had devastating legacies and the "protection" given to those children in state care was sometimes more barbaric than the treatment they received at home.

The Prime Minister has given a plethora of reasons as to why he could not apologise to the stolen generations:

- The PM has said that the removal of children was a past policy for which current Australian governments are not responsible so shouldn't they say sorry for something that was not their fault. The Vietnam war veterans were also the subject of past government policy (participating in the Vietnam war) and no current government was responsible for it.
- The PM has also said that he could not make an apology because of the legal implications. While this argument – that a simple official apology does not of itself justify a claim for compensation – has been discredited, by legal experts as simply untrue there was no such concern when the apology was made to Vietnam veterans. In fact, the PM says sorry all the time to other people who have been the victim of terrible policy or terrible events and the empathy for suffering has not been tempered by fear of legal consequences.

- The issue of an apology is often dismissed as being only symbolic and therefore not as important to members of the stolen generation as other more concrete forms of reparation. Leaving the fact that there continues to be insignificant commitment given to appropriate reparation, the need for concrete measures does not erase the need for an apology. Just as an apology would have meant a great deal to those who gave so much to their country by fighting in Vietnam and for years were treated so shabbily, acknowledgement from the leader of this country that there were unconscionable and unfathomable wrongs committed against Aboriginal children and families would also be an acknowledgement and a vindication. I still cannot fathom the callousness that can turn its back on those experiences.
- The official federal government response to the Bringing them Home report claimed that the policy of removing children was done with the best of intentions even if we now appreciate that those intentions may have been misguided. Young Australian men were conscripted into the armed services to fight a war in support of the federal government's foreign policy which blinded saw us follow the United States into what was a military quagmire. It was argued at the time that the entry into the war was done with the best of intentions. And the fact that it proved disastrous did not excuse the decision and its impact on the men and women who served there, it only further justified the responsibility of our country to acknowledge that contribution and commitment.

While in some ways it is a long bow to draw between the experiences of Vietnam veterans and those suffering the legacies of the removal policy, there is a comparison that can be drawn between the historical events of the past that the Prime Minister is happy to embrace and those that he will not. Those Australians who give their lives and fight on foreign soil to protect our way of life are embraced in a way in which those Australians on whose land modern Australia has been built and made rich. White farmers who battle the elements to build and maintain the farming industry form part of the romanticised images that John Howard will embrace as part of the character of Australia of which he is proud but the Aboriginal stock men and women participated in the pastoral industry and through their labour and land play no such part in his nationalism.

And more is the pity. The invisibility in the national consciousness has other consequences that simply making John Howard blind to the human tragedies when the victims are black. This week will see the 40th anniversary of the Wave Hill walk-off by the Gurindji people and the start of the modern land rights movement. And while this is an historical and important moment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders across the country, it will not evoke the self-reflection in many Australians that it ought to. And evidence of the lack of attention given to that important moment is that it coincides with the slow passage through parliament of changes to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act that will erode the rights of Indigenous people including the rights of the traditional owners and undermine the power of the large land councils – the Northern Land Council and the Central Land Council.

That there is little public attention given to these changes speaks volumes as to where fundamental issues concerning Aboriginal well-being sit in the current political environment. Heated public debate was occurring about proposed legislation that would see children locked up in detention centres off-shore, the continual stoush amongst the political parties about the industrial relations laws, the debates about stem-cell research and a national history summit have all diverted attention away from the changes to the land rights act. Many Australians seem to share John Howard's disinterest in the importance of the land rights movement and support his government's agenda of ensuring greater access by non-Indigenous people to Aboriginal land.

Perhaps too many people have been seduced by the rhetoric of "economic opportunities" for Aboriginal people as a result of the changes. The National Indigenous Council, Howard's hand-picked blacks, certainly helped perpetuate this myth with their endorsement of principles for land reform and a paper allegedly written by Warren Mundine that promoted many of the ideas that are being claimed as influencing this new legislation. It is one thing when white fellas lead the charge to take away the rights of Aboriginal people, it is another when that charge is led or facilitated by other Aboriginal people who hide behind their status as individuals not representatives and shirk any responsibility towards the Aboriginal people whose lives they are profoundly influencing.

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