Libby Connors

MY PEOPLE, OUR PAST

Ruby Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994.
Kathie Cochrane, *Oodgeroo*, University of Queensland Press, 1994.
Adam Shoemaker, ed., *Oodgeroo: A Tribute. Australian Literary Studies Special Issue*, Volume 16, no.4, 1994.

As a child, on the rare occasions when television brought the voices of Aboriginal people from the north and west of Australia into our home, I was struck by the softness of Aboriginal speech. This was the '60s and '70s, when mining developments, changes in the cattle industry and state incursions were once more disrupting Aboriginal homelands. When I commented to my father about the way Aboriginal people spoke his response was one of pity — how could such people take on the might of the forces arrayed against them? This was long before Aboriginal Pidgin was acknowledged as a dialect in its own right; then, to white urban Australians, it was a mark of low education and poor speech.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of Ruby Langford Ginibi's new book is her use of urban Aboriginal English interspersed with words from her Bundjalung lingo. *My Bundjalung People* is a sequel to *Don't Take Your Love To Town*, Ruby's much praised autobiography. It is structured around four journeys by her and her "adopted" daughter, Pam Johnston to the mission where she was born and the surrounding districts where she had grown up. The traditional lands of the Bundjalung extend from southern Queensland through the now popular tourist destinations of northern New South Wales, Lismore and Byron Bay, south to Evans Head.

She journeys to discover her family and in so doing she traces the history of her people after European contact. In this sense the book is also a lament for lost languages, traditions and family members, the victims of white colonial violence, exploitative labour practices and state incarceration. Her message is to expose historic injustice and reclaim aboriginality, and the unsubtle political message concerns white guilt, which she promotes openly and unrelentingly.

The historical evidence that Ruby presents is, however, open to other interpretations. There is a wonderful passage from a nineteenth century grazier, Cunningham Henderson, which Ruby quotes at length because it relates to her grandfather, an outstanding cricketer. Ruby says the passage was written in "the mid-1800s," which I thought might have been a typographical error, since this was a man in his old age retelling his experiences of grazing over a sixty year period. His references to war and social Darwinist philosophy, including his belief that the Aborigines were doomed, had a turn of the century, or later, feel to them. Henderson was a

paternalistic racist who had high regard and obvious affection for individual Aboriginals in the local district. He talks of an Aboriginal workman who freely left his employ and another who was a self-employed contractor, and when he writes that he "transferred" Sam Anderson to another property owner, Ruby interrupts the passage to complain bitterly that her grandfather "became a commodity that could be handed around from one white man to another"(98). Such an interpretation fits neatly with the theme of labour exploitation but does not do justice to her grandfather, who had sought out his new employer because of his love of cricket. Why does he suddenly become a "passive victim"? Given the standing of sport in male culture, his cricketing skill must have given him considerable local status, this was after all a man who would subsequently bowl Bradman out for a duck.

Ruby's family photos are another highlight of the book. Many of the contemporary ones were taken by Pam Johnston during her preparations for a photographic exhibition in Lismore in 1991. I loved the one of Ruby's relatives in the 1940s all dressed up for the Bonalbo Show, fashionably dressed and smiling at the camera with pride. This snapshot reminded me of a similarly posed photo of my mother's family at the Brisbane Show at around about the same time. Like many of the other delightful period photographs it could easily be interpreted as indicative of respectability, the desire for social acceptance and pride in achievements. Perhaps the next generation of the Bundjalung will be interested in exploring these elements of their clan history. For Ruby's generation, the breakup of families, the search for "stolen" siblings, and the fight against the victimisation that has resulted in the pain of incarceration touching many, many lives, loom too large. Part of this political agenda is to heal the psychological pain and rebuild black confidence by re-establishing clan links and rejuvenating lost traditions. It is an exclusivist strategy which seeks to wrest Aboriginal history and cultural production from the hands of white academics (and, no doubt, from white reviewers).

This quasi-separatist strategy stands in contrast to the politics of Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal tribe, whose traditional lands are only 100 or so kilometres to the north of the Bundjalung. When her son Vivian (Kabul) died before writing her biography, Oodgeroo asked her friend of thirty-five years, Kathie Cochrane, to undertake the task and to dedicate it to "the many non-indigenous Australians who have worked in many different ways to restore human dignity to the descendants of the original people of Australia." Yet Oodgeroo was in the forefront of the Aboriginal movement for self-determination, and devoted much of her life to building Aboriginal confidence and restoring pride in tribal culture.

As an historian, I found that the strength of Cochrane's biography lay

in its account of the political backdrop to the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the struggle to set up a local branch, first in the hostile atmosphere of the Cold War and then during the even longer repression of the Bjelke-Petersen era. As Kath Walker, Oodgeroo was a key player in the push for the 1967 referendum and the on-going campaign against Queensland's notorious Aboriginal Act. Although she led the moves inside white-dominated organisations for the rights of blacks to control their own movement, Oodgeroo was an experienced political activist who also appreciated the need for white support.

Her political history personified two principles essential to successful social movement activity. Firstly, she always sought to maintain communication with the white power structure even while she was fighting it and was prepared to use white organisations and funding to achieve her goals. Secondly, she always rose above the internecine warfare that besets all social movement politics, as people advocating different strategies and directions come together under one all-embracing cause. For example, despite tensions between Kath and the One People of Australia League (OPAL was sponsored by the Department of Native Affairs) in the 1960s, she withdrew her senate nomination for the 1983 federal election in favour of Neville Bonner, a past OPAL supporter (*Oodgeroo: A Tribute,* 172). While this may have been admirable political sense while she was alive, I would have liked her biography to offer some analysis and reflection about how she had felt about some of the movement's internal politics and directions. The brief treatment of her withdrawal from the Queensland Tribal Council in 1971 was particularly frustrating in this respect. Had her health been otherwise, would she have fought her removal by the young males? Since questions of gender inside the Aboriginal movement have recently come to prominence as a result of Aboriginal legal services' refusal to take on domestic violence cases, discussion of Oodgeroo's position on these touchy matters would have been extremely valuable.

The same might be said of Cochrane's treatment of Oodgeroo's personal relationships. Her childhood, family and first marriage are sensitively detailed but her relationship with the Cilento family ends abruptly. Oodgeroo's view of this relationship would have been invaluable not only in off-setting the family-authorised version in Sir Raphael Cilento's recently published biography, but in helping us understand the woman herself. Cochrane tells us that the young Cilentos and Kath got on very well and that they used to visit her in her home at Buranda. Was this just another case of the domestic servant believing she was accepted into a family while the family continued in fact to view the relationship in hierarchical terms? How a woman as intelligent and perceptive as

Oodgeroo ended up in the traditional dilemma of the pregnant domestic servant is an enigma not resolved by this biography.

These misgivings should not overshadow the inspiration and pleasure of this biography of a truly great Australian. Interspersed with Oodgeroo's own writing and a wonderful collection of family snapshots, with the added pleasures of an essay by Judith Wright on the reception of Kath Walker's poetry in the 1960s and four of Oodgeroo's recent official addresses it is an important book. Her speeches about poetry were by far her most powerful, and while the overtly political ones became quite turgid in her later years, the speeches about Aboriginal writing have freshness and passion and consequently their political message hits home.

Having so enjoyed Cochrane's biography I picked up *Oodgeroo: A Tribute* reluctantly. With contributions from Australian and overseas academics and even the federal minister for Aboriginal Affairs I was worried that this was going to be more about self-gratification and proving academic credentials than about Oodgeroo. My lack of generosity turned out to be quite unfounded. Although it is actually published as a special issue of the journal, *Australian Literary Studies,* the contributions are wide-ranging with much that is of interest to the non-specialist and specialist alike.

The articles by Oodgeroo's relatives and friends which begin the collection are a fine complement to the biography, contributing more details to the profile of this intriguing woman. Of particular interest was Roberta Sykes' piece, which pointed to Oodgeroo's sensitivity and support for fellow women in the movement.

The second part of the book consists of criticism of her poetry, in which her literary supporters defend her work against the rigid canonical values of the 1960s, the aesthetics of post-structuralism and against those who attack her work as not truly Aboriginal and post-colonial. Bob Hodge explains in literary terms what is also apparent in Oodgeroo's politics — that she was successful because she articulated an "emerging, contradictory and shifting Aboriginal subjectivity" and also constructed a place for the sympathetic non-Aboriginal reader.

The third section reviews her tireless work in the fields of education, political activism and theatre. Here too there are many warm accounts by people who worked alongside her, some, like Alan Duncan, over very many years. Even Robert Tickner's contribution, while it dutifully cites his commitment to the reconciliation process, makes some telling points about Oodgeroo and against his own party. In 1969, Oodgeroo stood for the ALP in the electorate of Greenslopes but failed to win the seat. The reason? Traditional left *male* supporters had

voted against her while many women in the Liberal Party had voted for her. She soon left the party.

Appropriately, as the last essay in the collection, Adam Shoemaker's article points to the integrity of Oodgeroo's career by explaining it as "a performative one in the Aboriginal tradition," an interpretation which incorporates the writing, educational and political streams of her life. Shoemaker takes as his prime example the *Rainbow Serpent* performance at the Brisbane Expo in 1988. Oodgeroo co-wrote *The Rainbow Serpent* with her son Kabul, but had to weather a great deal of criticism. She pressed ahead with her involvement in the face of the hostility of many in the black movement towards any collaboration in a bicentennial celebration. For her the key issues were overcoming racism and educating white Australians about Aboriginal culture. Here was an opportunity in the middle of a white festival with an audience estimated at 3 million not only to promote Aboriginal culture but also to critique western values. The *Rainbow Serpent* performance asserted Aboriginal sovereignty and promoted ecological values in the very heart of the Australian pavilion.

I put down these books with a sense of sadness that I never met this woman. I had grown up in the same part of the world, visited her beloved island often, participated in the same social movements unaware that she had played such a significant role in establishing them in the 1960s. She had been at the centre of so many important political struggles and yet been loved by all. These accounts of her life and work are fitting tributes. No doubt there are many more yet to be written.

❧

Paul Turnbull

A WORLD TOO FEW IMAGINE

Pat Keating, *Worlds Apart: Life on an Aboriginal Mission Station*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1994, ISBN 0 86806 516 1.

Every year the Christmas small-talk at our family gatherings turns to Aboriginal people. This is predictable, given that I am interested in the shared histories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Australia, and that my sister and her partner have worked for nearly a decade as health professionals with the Yonglu communities of eastern Arnhem Land. My parents have stayed with them, met their adoptive Yonglu families, and a couple of years ago returned from a tour across the Northern Territory mightily impressed by Aboriginal tourism.

Yet before long, these Christmas conversations take a familiar, dismal track. Aboriginal peoples in Northern