

Fourth Art and Craft Across Australia Fair 1996 – First Australian Rhyming Verses
competition Peter Martin entry
Personally performed at the Cairns Convention Centre - 8 November 1996

THE LUCKY COUNTRY

Oh great spirit of the Land
a breath of hot air across the sand
In time your will, it will be free
and reveal the word, in time to see.
A sunburnt country so long defined
the romantic swaggie a track to wind
The office; a boring place to be
image and imagination, of land and sea.
But I see the swaggie out on the track,
as he winds his way across the outback
He's not so tall with no grand veneer
he is but a man of greed and fear.
He's the bottom of the pile in old Sydney town
where no one cared when he would frown
By choice, he set off across the land
to find a place - he would make a stand.
But in his swag, the hidden curse
born of heritage; bound by purse
where expectation was just to live
his brother and skin, with nothing to give.
Sweeping plains cast image to eye
with vision that travels as if to fly
He stands mute witness to all its glory
A tear in dust of memory and story.
Gazing across the hot desert plain
he feels the breath of the scream of pain
the drover rises to mount, and head back
Her eyes glazed, she remains in the sack.
Out to the north, a murmur is heard
where sound stops, like a notion deferred
the crystal clear pool, a resplendent hole
arsenic, the smell of another lost soul.
As Rosellas leave the land to fly
a splash of colour catches the eye
their crimson flash, an innocent expression
beyond the image; another confession.
Sporadic gunfire erupts from out west
some men doing, what's right and best
bodies buried to remove all trace
everyone knows; but nothing took place.
His head drops down with chin on chest
the shoulders slouch, back bends without zest

A sob erupts from the swaggie's lost soul
The tears, like a river - he cannot control.
He cries forever still trapped in print
when he was the romantic, out bush for a stint
The swaggie, the hero, blazing the trail
disturbing the earth in ignorance to fail.
The sunburnt country has done its time
print, like a bell that exists to chime
has been struck, and heard, in the swaggie's ear
the man, an expression of aimless fear.
It is time to cast off the colonial white sail
and seek the great spirit so powerful yet frail
for the breath that spreads across the nation
seeks not the purse, but the heart of foundation.
Captain Peter Martin
Peterjudy_Martin@bigpond.com

What do you think about a future referendum being held in Australia to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our Constitution?

To whom it may concern,

Please excuse my indirect approach to answering the question posed at the website. The questions so framed answers that I could not respond in a fashion that for me truly answers the question. And to answer this, I must tell a story.

I worked up in the Torres Strait area as a Great Barrier Reef marine pilot. So I spent some time on Thursday and York Islands to enjoy a rest break, some fishing and, at times, conversations with the local people. During one such discussion I asked a Torres Strait Islander where he played his music. He sang with such deep resonance and a passion that cast him into a separate but engaging space. He replied that he had recently performed at the Tamworth Country Music Festival. I then asked him if he played on York Island. He said he did but not much cause the kids aren't that interested. It occurred to me that whatever the local children were drifting towards could not be anything contemporarily significant. More importantly they were drifting away from a culture with far more texture and spirit than any other culture might offer. The only thing the white Australia culture ostensibly offers is the continuation of British administration and the protestant (and others) faith; both a borrowed culture in the white Australian tradition.

I returned to the residence at Thursday Island to sit for the evening meal with no less than three pictures of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II staring down on the group assembled for the evening meal at the grand wooden table. This group comprised people from India, Pakistan, Europe, Eastern Europe, and Malaysia with a small percentage of the group clinging to English heritage. The 'new' Australians amongst them held a myriad of views about Australia including a racist appreciation of the Aboriginal people based on little, if any, reading of Australian history and certainly no effective engagement with the greater mass of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples resident at the islands.

But this was about me. What is it to be an Australian?

Expanding multiculturalism has slowly absorbed large portions of the white Australian bubble where other cultures vigorously practice their culture and enrich the broader Australian perspective. The Chinese, in particular, are coming out from behind the 'towns' to proudly project their dragon culture, a culture that is also old but not the age of the longest living culture on the planet; one we stand alongside – but not with. But this new mix also leaves those brought up with white Australian cultural practices, most eloquently expressed in the guttural chant 'Oi, Oi, Oi', disenfranchised.

What is it to be Australian?

A separate but related story. Born in Mildura and following a short period in Albury - Woodonga we moved to Alice Springs when I was 7 years old. The town had a population of about 12 000 people and seemed to house all the qualities that could possibly be held in a small, isolated town: racism, bigotry, drunkenness, and extreme homophobia. But I do remember it being a place where we grew up as a family and there were many great outdoor adventures and activities (Bangtail Muster/Henley on Todd) to be had.

By the time I was 13 I had secured work at a butcher shop on the Stuart Highway earning a solid 75 cents an hour. Slave labour even then as people my age working at Coles, Woollies or Piggly Wiggly, was earning about \$2.25 an hour. But that was OK – the butcher shop was the cleanest in town for my effort and pride and the Butcher gave me an extra five dollars after working a 48 hour week during the school holidays – this to tip me into the \$40 pay bracket. What was not OK though was when the Aboriginal people used to come across the highway from the Todd River bed and order a couple of kilos of meat. He would give those 2.9 kg of bone with a sliver of red meat on it. Then he would dismiss them out of his shop. Obviously this impacted on me as I am still relating the story. Should I have? Done something then?

Before this time, as a young 8 year old, I had joined the Cubs and later graduated as a *Sixer* and *Lone Wolf* into the Scouts. It was in the early seventies, possibly about when the Papunya Tula Artists started, that a fellow by the name of Dick Kimber [and I remember his name distinctly because Kimba the White Lion was a favourite black-and white ABC television show at the time] took myself and a couple of other young Cubs out to Papunya for a large scout camp. There were Aboriginal kids our age everywhere and they, and their parents, showed us everything they could about their culture including hunting techniques and a corroboree. It was the most extraordinary experience I have ever had and one that sustained me through the racial experience in Alice Springs and beyond.

I soon after returned to Papunya with a school friend of mine, Gavin, who's Father was the onsite administrator – Mr. Voight. Once again we had a wonderful time learning bush craft and the ways of young Aboriginal kids. In the fullness of time I came to satisfy a desire I had from the middle of the desert that I should go to sea. I found myself living a separated life from my family then and the new family I created with my wife. I also came to know what it was like to be ostracized within a group where no matter what expertise, professionalism and personal qualities

I brought to that group, that profile would always be viewed from an abstract that was not my truth. I cannot empathize with the Aboriginal experience; to do so would trivialize the trauma of the impact European arrivals had/have on the Aboriginal people. But I do know what it is like to have a myriad of skills but be unheard, not understood and ignored. Fortunately I belonged to the greater mass of White skin so I could quietly find other ways to be comfortable in my own space. My sense of self was not destroyed, I could just drift into other places that were more accepting. My skin colour did not trap me in a social expectation. [Maybe it did!]

Alcohol abuse could have easily been a part of my life. But it wasn't. Had it been, then people could have viewed me through that prism of expectation and seen only the alcohol and not the person. Noel Pearson's work highlights the importance of culture not to be seen or governed by behaviours influenced by alcohol (and drugs). He argues that real culture is destroyed by these things. The resultant behaviour somehow becomes the culture as practised, then expected and reinforces perceptions of those looking from the outside – in. A drunk in any human skin colour is unpalatable but apparently some cultures 'can't handle their alcohol'.

My DNA is very British but not by birth. It is by virtue of the training system I willingly joined and participated in – the **Royal** Australian Navy – training also underpinned by a gentlemanly code that mirrors aristocratic behaviour, subtle but all part of the trade. One step removed from society by virtue of the sea going experience I chose to undertake, I was also not a 'Digger'. Aside from this DNA, I am a fifth generation Australian with no family, emotional, commercial or spiritual ties to the United Kingdom. What then, is it for me to be Australian?

I now lecture on cruise ships at sea and have done so many now that I have a good sense of what Australia and New Zealand offer to cruise ship passengers. While the ship will usually get a great welcome in the form of a Maori Hukka in New Zealand ports, there is nothing like that experience in Australia, not even at Darwin, which is usually the first port of call for southbound cruise ships. The comparison when highlighted – a most evident awkward silence that still resonates through time, identified by W.E.H. Stanner as the Great Australian Silence. In comparison we sense it anew. And what of the smoking ceremonies? Were they something the church copied from an ancient culture or is it just how the human experience seeks context with the spiritual domain? Is one culture's use of smoke any more or less sophisticated/primitive?

But what do these stories have to do with the constitution? They meld together with time such that I now find myself wanting to go back to Papunya; but I am not ready. And I am not ready because I have not yet learned enough to constructively address the answers you seek.

But I will return to Papunya. And when sufficient time has passed, I expect I will find a place to sit and pass time while others watch me.

T

hen I might be invited to sit closer to a group where at its center will be a man waiting for me. We don't know each other, and yet we do.

Perhaps he too was at that Cub camp as a young boy in the early 70s.

After some time I would like to ask him for **Acceptance to Country**. This is the reverse of the profile that still subliminally and perhaps unwittingly seems to seek Aboriginal alignment with the 'Administration' in the constitutional debate. While Patrick Dodson points out that the 1901 constitution was drafted in the spirit of *terra nullius*, the piecemeal approach to changing the existing constitution is still referent to itself and not the Aboriginal people. The inherent principle in this debate is that the Aboriginal people must be absorbed into our Administration and law – STILL.

Do we dare ask the custodians and long held spiritual owners of this land to find ways where we can acknowledge them? Is that not just an insult? And if the question of acceptance is one centered on the larger mass of population then what of longevity of our own brief history in this land? Does that also not matter? Lest we forget ... what? Or rather, Lest we remember ... if we dare! How do we incorporate the longest living culture on earth into a paltry assembly of words? And at a ... preamble! How do we bring great reverence to this longest living culture such that we can at last bring great dignity to that culture and, in doing so, deliver a like dignity to the culture that resides in the fabric of the existing constitution? If the argument for change centers on the pragmatism of political circumstance, then we are not ready.

How do we incorporate a non-secular culture into one where freedom of religion is enshrined as is a secular and pluralistic system of government? How do we manage land that is all things to the spirit of one group and all things to the power of possession and local voting rights to another?

And what of the nations identified at the Horton Map of Aboriginal Australia. Can we talk of Pemulwuy, Windradyne, Jandamara? Can we see the dark secrets of the interior innocently exposed in Mary Durak's classic work published in 1958: *Kings in Grass Castles*. Are we good enough to bear the burden of the past. And it is ours to bear as whatever happened before the constitution of 1901, shaped the fabric of that document to its inception, but missed Inglis Clark's message. Thereafter, the shared experience across time has only permitted change to that fabric by referendum – we have had choices.

Do we dare ask for acceptance to country to determine how then Australian story, reaching far back in time, copes with the glitch that is the arrival of Europeans? And then 100 years of frontier warfare. And beyond that, the anthropological study of another culture – a not so subtle way of setting one people apart from another. The continued silence, Mabo, Aboriginal deaths in custody, the Redfern Speech, the Apology; where do they fit? And today - where do I go to learn about Aboriginal navigation techniques as taught by Aboriginal people in whatever language, place or form they believe will make me learn *formy own good*?

How can I learn the complex communication methods used by the Aboriginal people to advance my understanding of theirs and other cultures?

As a 56 year old man born in this country of Australian (non convict/non Aboriginal) heritage, I do not identify with the Larrikin folk story as being contextual with the qualities of a progressive nation.

I no longer know what it is to be Australian.

But I know who I must ask for validation to be Australian.

Herein lies my answer to the question of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Peter Martin

DAVID HAROLD TRIBE POETRY AWARD – 2013

Peter Martin Entry

1 September 2013

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM

There's a man at the centre, down by the street
With names tattooed in concrete beneath his booted feet.
He's tall and proud dressed in good clip to bare
and his gaze is fixed in a timeless cold stare.
In steadfast resilience he stands watch on that pillar.
An icon to punctuate history and memory deliver.
That country, they say, was born through his bold sacrifice.
A finely crafted vision of a State's well considered device.
There's a call, lest we forget those proud sons of soil,
young boys, nay men, who fought an empire's great toil.
Slayed by the might of State crafted will and ambition,
and marched forth to songs sang with bold, proud rendition.
A long, searching cold stare reaches out from his face.
But memory surrounds him as if in warm embrace.
We say, at the going down of the sun and in the morn;
it's a call to remember, with grace and dignity to mourn.
While those seeking comfort at the centre of the street.
In good time will come knowledge that he is not yet complete.
For as a proud symbol resplendent with memories invoked.
He stands less as a hero and more iconic of history revoked.
It was Myall Creek that did it, kept everyone quiet;
not a word to be said after the seven met their plight.
Slaughter unchecked raged across the wide brown land;
crimson tide, drained like dust, through the pages of sand.
So how many years did it take to destroy and disperse
those of the land, who fought untrammelled by purse.
A great civilisation disposed and fractured from time long spent
caring for country and the power of soul now long laid to rent.
But there is a spiritual gasp that holds true across time.

Their eyes watch knowingly, commercial imperative sublime,
with patience to feel at last a maturity not yet conceived;
shaped by a story that begs telling, its burden relieved.
And there is talk of some words for an important preamble.

Something's missed sorting through scattered secret ramble.
Voices hark deep from a silence that does yet still condone.
And the man down the road at the centre, is suddenly alone.

Somewhere, deep in the heart, ceremony raises dust and songs bear witness with ancient
voices that resound like thunder.