

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Stories of Life, Family and Country

EDITED BY
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FREMANTLE 
fine independent publishing PRESS

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Introduction:
Listening Through the Heart

*The taproot is the root of the tree that goes the deepest. In my family, taproots are really important because, as my mother always says, 'We didn't get here by ourselves. We have others to thank for that and we should acknowledge it.'*¹

Aboriginal people are familiar with the power of story. Our culture is shaped around stories, our history transmitted through them. Stories spoken from the heart hold a transformational power, they are a way for one heart to speak to another. They are a means of sharing knowledge, experience and emotion. A story spoken from the heart can pierce you, become a part of you and change the way you see yourself and the world. Listening to a heart story is a way of showing respect, a silent acknowledgement of what the speaker has lived through and where they have come from. Stories can also transform the speaker. Sharing the past can ease old pains, soothe deep hurts and remind you of old joys, hopes and dreams.

This anthology began as an idea driven by the need within the Aboriginal community to share stories of life, of family,

of deep things. A need to look back on our own lives and the lives of our old people. As Bill Jonas writes in his story:

I am now far away in time from my childhood. This not only means that I am getting old; I think it also means that I can now look back and see with some clarity how I was influenced by three people that I loved, who played a large part in my upbringing and who helped make me the person that I am today.

The stories in this volume are proud statements of survival — reflections of the burdens carried and of the many different ways to move forward. They provide an opportunity for other Australians to gain some understanding of our lives and our families. Through the reading of a single story we learn about the web of relationships that surround and enmesh that person. We come to know the parents and grandparents, siblings, friends and enemies.

The collection covers an astonishing sweep of history, from Dreaming stories as old as the continent itself, through the colonial era, to today. We see Australia through Aboriginal eyes, a view of history through lived experiences. The contributors to this anthology are men and women from all walks of life, from different states and tribal nations. However, they share the common thread of being the First Born and this connects them culturally, spiritually and historically. The actions of our ancestors in the Dreaming created common bonds of Law and Culture and these continue to exist today. We are also connected by our lived experiences as invaded peoples; all our families have been affected by the discriminatory policies of the past.

Because of this, it is important to provide a historical context that will help connect the stories in this volume to the larger policies and practices of the time, to help all of us as we sit and listen to these stories spoken from the heart.

A Nation is Born

The Australian Commonwealth was formally born in 1901 with the federation of the British colonies in Australia. The *West Australian* reported at the time that it was a:

... great event, which marked a new era in the history of Australia ... not only does today bring into existence a new year and new century, but it announces ... the union of the colonies of Australia under one Federal government, and the construction of a great nation under the Southern Cross.²

Life for Aboriginal people in this 'new era of history' would be characterised by repressive laws and an absence of basic human rights. The Australian constitution, the most important legal document in the country, only mentioned Aboriginal people twice. Firstly, to exclude us from the national census, and secondly to leave the power to legislate over Aboriginal affairs with the individual states. The message was clear. The new Commonwealth of Australia that was celebrated in the streets with the patriotic waving of red white and blue, was not going to interfere with the way the individual states handled their Aboriginal populations. The oppressive conditions that Aboriginal people had lived through in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would not only continue in the new nation, but in some respects would significantly worsen. In

1901 when most Australians gazed into the nation's future, Aboriginal people were perceived as part of its past. A dominant belief of the time was that the Aboriginal race was dying out and would gradually fade away in the face of western civilisation. According to Daisy Bates, 'civilisation was a cloak that they [Aboriginal people] donned easily enough, but they could not wear it and live ... The Australian native can withstand all the reverses of nature ... but he cannot withstand civilisation.'³

The product of this belief was the introduction of race-based legislation aimed at 'protecting' Aboriginal people and 'easing' their passage into extinction. Most states set up government boards and departments responsible for both implementing the legislation and the welfare and education of Aboriginal people. The Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*, was seen as the first of this new kind of legislation. Laws directed specifically at Aboriginal people had been around since the earliest days of the colonies but the 1897 Act was the first to provide broad-ranging legal powers to comprehensively regulate the lives of Aboriginal people. The Western Australian *Aborigines Act 1905* was largely modelled on the Queensland 1897 Act, and by 1911 every state and territory, except for Tasmania, had enacted similar 'protection' legislation.

Significant powers existed under these Acts to control the movements of Aboriginal people. Areas were set aside to function as Aboriginal Reserves where people could be placed, by force if necessary, and interned. The Acts not only took away our basic human rights, they contained provisions that criminalised our resistance to the enforcement of the Acts. In Western Australia, physically resisting being

relocated to an Aboriginal reserve was a criminal offence, as was leaving a reserve without written permission.

Federation had been about the merging of the Australian colonies into one nation, uniting under one Australia. However, while mainstream Australia was being brought together, Aboriginal people were being forced further apart. The sweeping powers of the protection Acts were increasingly used to systematically enforce segregation. In many ways this was a culmination of previous policies and practices. In both Western Australia and Queensland (two states with large Aboriginal populations) the prison populations had been previously segregated. Western Australia even created a prison solely for Aboriginal men on Rottnest Island, known to Nyungar people as Wadjemup. The British turned it into a place of death for Aboriginal people, with over four hundred prisoners, many of them far from home, dying on the island.⁴ As Ben Taylor remarks:

Life was cruel hard back then. They were the days when they put chains around our old fellas' necks. My poor old grandfather wore a chain. He was skinning a kangaroo and they reckoned he stole a sheep so they locked him up on Rottnest Island for a crime he never committed. It didn't matter if you were innocent or guilty; they just liked to lock you up.

In the nineteenth century a combination of frontier violence, imprisonment and other criminal punishments were used to control and police the Aboriginal population. These were replaced to some extent in the early twentieth century by legislative and institutional controls. The 1930s brought another policy shift.

From Biological Absorption to Cultural Assimilation

It had become increasingly clear that, rather than dying out, the Aboriginal population was steadily increasing. This rise became a cause of great concern to government administrators and there was a fear that 'Aboriginal people were breeding up to become a social menace.'⁵ In 1937 the Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities was held in Canberra. A.O. Neville, who'd been appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines for Western Australian in 1915, asked the conference 'are we to have a million blacks in the Commonwealth?'⁶ The fear evoked by a growing black population fuelled a shift in policy, and the 1937 Conference concluded that, 'The destiny of natives of native origin, but not of the full-blood lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth ...'⁷ This statement is often seen as marking the beginning of an assimilation policy based on a socio-cultural model. The previous policy had sprung from a biological model based on a form of pseudo-science, its central idea being to breed out the colour of Aboriginal people, thereby inventing a white Australia. A.O. Neville had been a passionate advocate of this process. Joan Winch recalls:

The Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, had been very angry when Mum married Dad, because at that time you were supposed to marry someone lighter in colour than you. The Aborigines Department was trying to breed out our colour so we wouldn't exist anymore. That's what white Australia was all about.

Issues of race have often played a significant role in

Australian politics. Even during the Second World War the Australian government thought it appropriate to request the United States to send only white troops to defend Australia against the threat of a Japanese invasion. The basic philosophy underpinning the idea of 'biological absorption' continued to be threaded through the policy of assimilation. However, as the *Bringing Them Home Report* observes:

Whereas 'merging' was essentially a passive process of pushing Indigenous people into the non-Indigenous community and denying them assistance, assimilation was a highly intensive process necessitating constant surveillance of people's lives, judged according to non-Indigenous standards.⁸

Being 'absorbed' or assimilated was premised on cultural death: loss of land, language, kinship, culture and identity. While Aboriginal culture had been under assault since invasion, physical extinction had come to appear unlikely, which was why cultural extermination was so vigorously pursued. The 1930s would see an unprecedented effort to pursue policies of cultural genocide.

In line with the increasing surveillance and regulation needed to implement the assimilation policy, the protection Acts underwent amendment in each state. By the end of the 1930s these Acts had become dramatically expanded, their powers even more wide ranging and far reaching. In Western Australia in particular, legal definitions of who was considered a 'native' broadened considerably. This meant that many people who had not previously been defined as 'natives' now came under the onerous restrictions of race-based legislation.

Surviving Assimilation

Governmental control over the lives of Aboriginal people tightened further. Detailed government files began to be accumulated and it became very difficult for Aboriginal people to avoid some form of government surveillance. Their movements from one area to another were increasingly controlled and restricted and many of the reserves that had originally been set aside for the 'protection' and 'welfare' of Aboriginal people now became virtual prison camps. Lighter skinned Aboriginal children were removed to missions or institutions where they faced indoctrination into Christianity and a white way of viewing the world. Their names were often changed to make it difficult for family members to trace them, and sometimes they were told their parents were dead or didn't want them. Their cultural and family ties were deliberately crushed in the aim of stripping them of their Aboriginal identity. Tjalaminu Mia, a Nyungar woman who was removed to Sister Kate's Children Home, remembers:

I became rebellious in the Home. I was fed a diet of Western religion, which I always questioned, so I was often in trouble. 'You are a wilful, disrespectful child and a bad influence on the other children.' That's what they liked to tell me because they didn't like me challenging what they were teaching.

The suffering that children endured in these institutions has been well documented in the *Bringing Them Home Report*. The practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families continued into the 1960s and early 1970s. Family life is and

always has been a central feature of Aboriginal culture so the impact was devastating. Removal was often accompanied by physical and sexual abuse, cultural dislocation and a loss of identity and self. For the family left behind, the loss was equally profound and long lasting. The legislation left parents with no legal recourse to gain either access to or the return of their children. Families lived in fear of the authorities, well aware of the power they held over them. In looking back at her parents' lives Violet Bacon reflects:

They were frightened of having their children taken from them and put somewhere where they'd have no control over what happened to us. I realised that throughout my growing years my parents had lived with this terrible fear, this awful certainty about their children's futures.

Living on reserves also involved many hardships. In some states it was illegal to leave a reserve without some form of official approval. Often employment would have to be secured before permission would be granted. For Aboriginal women it was doubly hard to escape this surveillance and control, as their employment options were more restricted than men's were. Young Aboriginal women could generally only gain employment as domestic servants and these positions were often fraught with danger, with rape and other forms of abuse being by no means uncommon.

Living conditions on reserves were often very harsh, with little food to go around and no access to medical services or education. Government departments responsible for Aboriginal welfare were notoriously tight fisted; in Western Australia and Queensland they even boosted their own funds by taking a percentage of the wages earned by

Aboriginal workers. The bulk of this money was never returned. Ken Colbung's mother died at the Moore River Native Settlement, infamous in Western Australia for its prison-like conditions. He recalls:

Normally they wrapped you in a blanket and buried you in that, but Mum never had enough money to pay for the blanket. That meant they just tipped her into the grave and then took the blanket back to the hospital, washed it, and gave it to someone else. Mum only owed them 3/6d on that blanket, it's in the records, but they still wouldn't give it to her, even in death. Jesus, what a bloody world we live in!

It is a great understatement to say that the policies and practices of this time were inhumane. There was an appalling and inexcusable failure to recognise the humanity of Aboriginal people. As Paul Keating said in his famous Redfern Speech, 'we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask — how would I feel if this were done to me?'⁹

For Aboriginal people struggling to survive outside the various government institutions, life was equally hard. Only certain types of employment were available and they usually involved physical or domestic labour. Much of the work was seasonal in nature, on farms and pastoral stations and in the pearling industry. In the south, workers were ill paid and often unpaid. In the north, you were lucky if you were paid anything at all. It was very difficult, frequently impossible, to secure employment in the off-season so it was an enormous challenge to keep large families together. Widespread poverty meant that living conditions were poor and this in turn provided government departments with an

excuse to remove children for 'neglect'. Lena Crabbe recalls:

It was hard keeping a family together then. The trouble with farm work is that it's seasonal; shearing, wool picking and all the other jobs only lasted a few months. There was no permanent employment. Nyungars were forced to follow the work, but it was a hard way to survive.

Yet even in the face of such obstacles, Aboriginal people continued to pass on their culture and languages, often in secret as it was frowned upon by the authorities. Passing on cultural knowledge in this era could be dangerous. However, proud Aboriginal men and women like Ben Taylor's father and grandmother passed on a love and respect for country and a connection to the Dreaming and Aboriginal Law within their own family:

My dad was a Nyungar man who was very proud of his heritage. He used to talk language and tell us stories around the campfire. My old grandmother used to do the same. She'd get us to make a fire so we could call in the spirits and she'd tell us stories and talk to us in the Nyungar language just like Dad.

Others braved the wrath of government authorities in other ways. Bronwyn Bancroft's father was Aboriginal, her mother white. In Australia in the 1950s this was a 'love that you read of in fairytales — defying boundaries, defying doubters, defying the White Australia Policy.'¹⁰ Similarly, Bill Jonas's grandfather Billy married Maude, an English woman. While the goal of the assimilation policy was to absorb Aboriginal people into white society, a black man

marrying a white woman was still a great shock to the social and legal conventions of the time, as Bill Jonas confirms:

Maude was thrown out of her family home when she married Billy. Not only had she married someone from the colonies and from a circus background, she had actually married a black man. Her Victorian parents must have felt very shamed by this. When Maude was about to leave England to join Billy in Australia she wrote to her parents expressing her wish to see them, and for them to meet their grandchildren, before she emigrated. She received a letter in reply saying 'You are always welcome in our home but those black bastards are not.' Sadly, she never saw her parents again.

It is a great testimony to the strength of women like Maude and Dorothy who were willing to face enormous obstacles to be with their loved one. Even in the most repressive eras of Australian history there have been non-Aboriginal people who followed the truth of their own hearts and saw Aboriginal people as fellow human beings — like the bishop who married Ben Taylor's mother and father. Under the absorption policy of the time a lighter skinned Aboriginal person was not meant to marry someone of a darker colour.

When my mum and dad wanted to get married, they faced the same problem as my grandparents, but the bishop of the day said. 'We are going to go ahead with this wedding. You and Queenie are going to get married.' The police and the Native Protection Board even tried to stop the wedding, but he told them to get out of his church.

World War Two and becoming a Citizen

The two world wars had far-reaching effects. When the First World War broke out in 1914 a number of Aboriginal people joined up and fought overseas. One of these was Bill Jonas's grandfather Billy, who fought in the 34th Battalion. When these warriors returned home they found they were not entitled to the same rights and benefits as other ex-servicemen. This scenario was repeated in the Second World War and Vietnam, despite the significant contribution Aboriginal soldiers made in risking their lives for their country. Phil Prosser enlisted in 1957 and recalls an incident a few years later:

I remember one occasion in Sydney when we were stationed at the School of Artillery and after work twelve of us went down to the Hotel Manly, only we weren't in uniform. When the waiter came to take our orders he said to the other guys, 'Look I am sorry, but I can't serve that gentleman over there because he is not allowed to have strong liquor.'

'He's in the army with us,' my mates said.

'Sorry, I still can't serve him,' replied the barman.

For many Aboriginal people, being unable to purchase a beer in a pub was a symbol of their lack of legal rights more generally. For Aboriginal servicemen the experience was even more bitter: you could give your life to protect your country, but you couldn't buy something as simple as a glass of beer. In Western Australia the restrictions on the supply of alcohol to Aboriginal people was one of the last controls to be lifted.

The wars brought change to the world. The Second World War in particular opened up opportunities that had previously been unavailable. Lack of manpower on the home front meant better employment and wages for Aboriginal people, as well as a less rigid enforcement of control and surveillance. It also brought international scrutiny and pressure for Aboriginal people to be given equal rights as Australian citizens. However, the Western Australian *Native (Citizen Rights) Act 1944*, which was touted as a progressive piece of legislation, did not break free from race-based thinking. Instead it created one of the great ironies of West Australian history by forcing Indigenous people to apply to become citizens in their own land. Under the 1944 Act numerous onerous conditions had to be complied with, like dissolving tribal and native associations except with respect to lineal descendants or native relations of the first degree.¹¹

Aboriginal people commonly referred to the certificates of citizenship as 'dog tags', a licence to be a human being. The passing of the federal *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* meant that, technically, all Aboriginal people were now Australian citizens. In reality though, a combination of various state and federal laws actually barred us from most of the rights a citizen was supposed to possess. The shell of citizenship had no substance until the 1967 referendum finally gave the federal government the power to legislate nationally on matters relating to Indigenous peoples. It was hoped that this would bring about a more progressive approach, but it wouldn't be until the 1970s that the race-based legislation in each state was fully dismantled.

Walking in the footprints of the Old People

In each of the stories in this volume you become aware of two realities unfolding at the same time. The first is the reality of the speaker: their life, views and feelings. The second is the reality of the past inescapably entwined in the present. We see how the policies of the past have affected Aboriginal people, and how families are still bearing the scars today. We also see continuing racism. While the framework of legislation and bureaucracy that was used to subjugate and control has been dismantled, many challenges still remain. The repeal of racist laws and policies does nothing to redress the deep impact they have already had. Moreover, some of this thinking is still active in the present, as Bronwyn Bancroft reminds us:

That's not to say I haven't experienced racism. I have, and when it happens it always sends an arrow straight into my heart. I wonder what makes that person think they have the right to speak or act in such an inhumane way. I never understand it.'

Racism and stereotypes of Aboriginal people have become embedded in legal, welfare and criminal justice systems, which in turn continue to create and reinforce systemic bias. Sally Morgan writes of her visit to an old colonial gaol in Western Australia:

One of the things I want to do while I'm here is to visit the old gaol to pay my respects, especially to the members of my own extended family who suffered there. A new gaol has replaced the old one now, it accommodates more than

a hundred prisoners and the majority of them are Aboriginal people. The old gaol still stands though, a silent testament to the past.

The old colonial gaol at Roebourne, which was the major prison for the north-west of Western Australia, now stands empty, but many of the descendants of those Aboriginal prisoners continue to be locked away in new prisons. The mass institutionalisation of Aboriginal people during the earlier assimilation period has had many intergenerational effects. Tjalaminu Mia reflects:

The kind of institutionalisation that I and my brothers and sisters experienced as children doesn't prepare you for life, it just prepares you for more institutionalisation. A lot of kids from homes ended up as prison inmates and this included my own brothers. They graduated from children's homes to stints in various institutions for youth, and finally into the maximum-security prison system for men. They were on a treadmill of hopelessness.

The massive overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in Australian prisons should be a national scandal. Instead, like the very poor health conditions many communities live in, it's become a tragedy that people have become accustomed to hearing about.

However, there is another side to this story, and that is the enduring power of our culture, languages and identity, which continues to flourish. Graeme Dixon and Lenny Collard bring us Nyungar stories of country. We see that beneath the cities, towns and suburbs lies the ancient power of our ancestors. Our spirituality resides in the land of this

continent, deep within the earth. Our old people, even when long dead, guide us. Bronwyn Bancroft, an artist commissioned to illustrate a Dreaming story about a woman called Dirrangun, experienced this strongly.

I was in the bedroom retrieving a brush when a huge gust of wind slammed the two outside doors. Both had been fastened back so this surprised me but I was not scared. The hairs on my arms just stood up higher than I have ever seen and I went to my desk and painted her. I sensed that she was guiding me — and that is an incredible feeling, to know that an ancient spirit is standing right next to you.

It is this spirituality and sense of Aboriginal identity that has nourished many people through hard times. We have also survived through our humour. In many of the stories we see humour used as a survival mechanism in the face of great adversity. As Beryl Dixon states:

... one of the best lessons I ever learned was to look back and see the funny side of things. Being able to laugh with friends and with family has helped me get through some very tough times. Laughter is a wonderful gift and I think we should all practise it more often.

Sally Morgan writes, ‘No one walks alone. We all walk in the footsteps of those who’ve gone before.’

We are living the historical legacy created by the actions of those who’ve gone before. For non-Aboriginal Australians this means walking in the shadow of two sets of footprints. One from their own ancestors who came across the seas. The other, the more ancient footprints of Aboriginal

peoples who, along with the land itself, were created in the Dreaming. All footprints leave historical legacies; they create a weight of history that must be understood, experienced, spoken of and listened to. The past is not a distant place, it's in the here and now. The heart of reconciliation lies in dealing with this legacy together, in a healing way that creates a different future. This book is part of what Sally Morgan's grandfather described as the 'middle ground': the space that connects different worlds and different histories. Reading these stories is in itself an act of reconciliation. Bronwyn Bancroft reminds us of the power of words:

I am proud now of who I am. I am proud of where I've come from. I am proud of what I've done and I'm proud of where I'm going. I am a Bundjalung woman who sees each new day as the beginning of the rest of my life. You can't change the past, but you can live a different future.

We cannot change the past in Australia and we do not want to contribute to a national history that obscures some of its darker realities. To deny these Aboriginal voices would be to lose something intrinsically vital to the fabric of our society, because our histories, at least from 1788, have become entwined. If we had never heard of Bill Jonas's talented grandfather Billy we would never have heard of the wonderful Maude. When we hear of Bronwyn Bancroft's father Bill we also hear of her mother Dorothy. To listen to Ben Taylor and Phil Prosser's stories is to also hear the words of an outspoken bishop and rector who went against the social conventions of their time. If we silence, obscure or flinch away from Aboriginal histories, we are turning away from an opportunity to learn not only about Aboriginal

people, but about ourselves. We cannot change the past, but we can change how we acknowledge, understand and experience it, and it is this that will determine the kind of future we create for ourselves and for the generations to come. If we listen from the heart and speak from the heart we can live a different future.

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11. *Native (Citizen Rights) Act 1944 (WA)*.