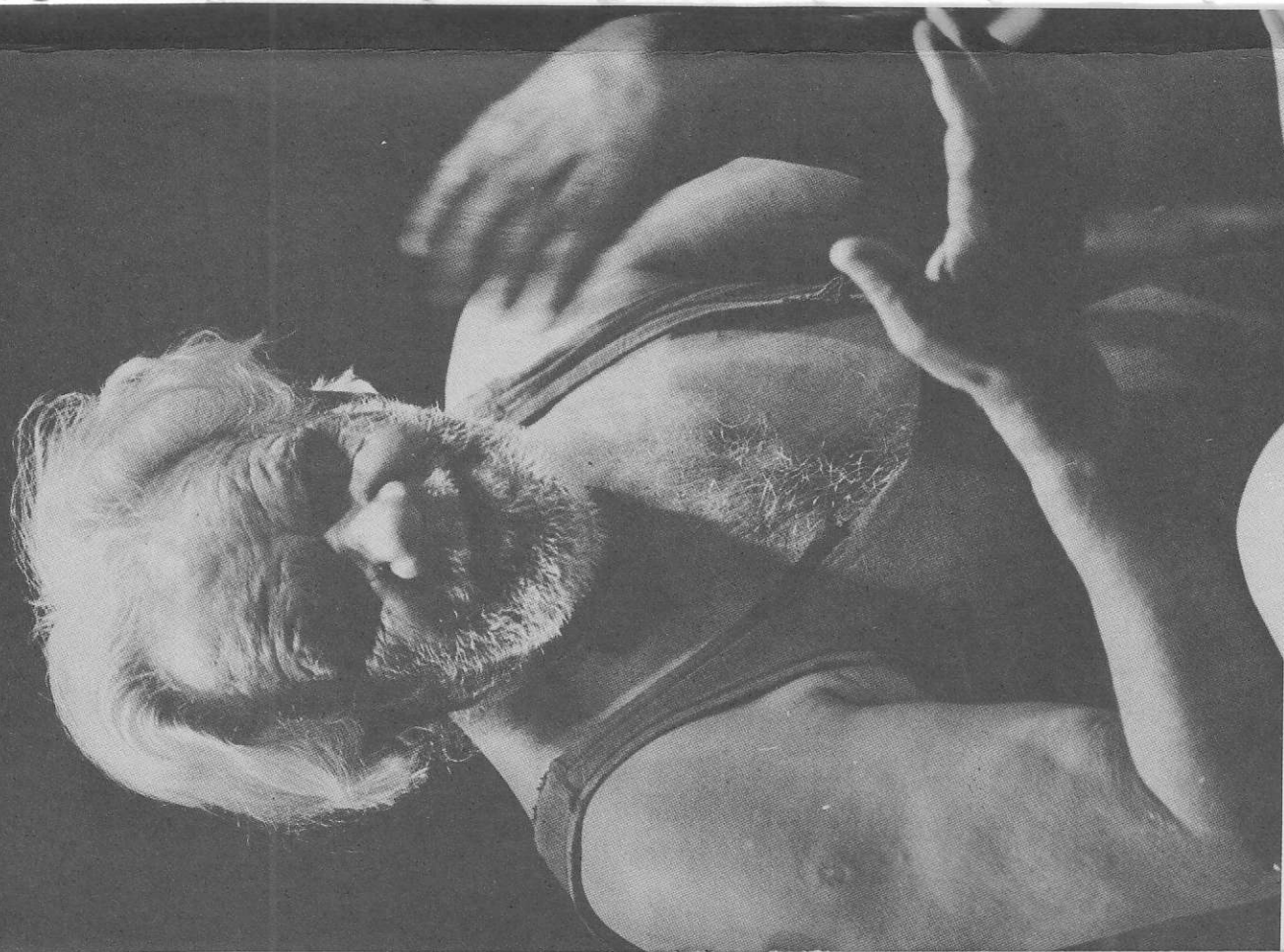


JACK DAVIS was born in Perth in 1917 and brought up in Yarloop and the Moore River Native Settlement. He spent several years living on the Brookton Aboriginal Reserve where he first began to learn the language and culture of his people, the Nyoongar of the South West of Western Australia. Later he worked as a stockman in the North West which brought him into contact with tribal Aboriginal society. He began writing as a child and taught himself the complexities of the English language by reading his one book, an English dictionary, in bed at night.

He was director of the Aboriginal centre in Perth (1967-71) and in 1971 first chairman of the Aboriginal Lands Trust in W.A. He was also managing editor of Aboriginal Publications Foundation 1972-77. He is a member of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra and is currently on a steering committee planning a new course for Aboriginal writers at Murdoch University. Since retiring from Aboriginal politics and welfare work he has resumed his writing and the study of the language and history of the South West. In 1977 he was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to literature and the Aboriginal people of W.A. In 1982 he created the role of Uncle Worry in *The Dreamers* for the Swan River Stage Company. In 1983 the production was revived by the National Theatre Company of W.A. and taken on a six months national tour by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust.

Jack Davis has published two books of poetry, *The Firstborn* (1970) and *Jagardoo (Poems from Aboriginal Australia)* (1978). He lives in Perth.

Published with the assistance of the Literature Board of the Australia Council.



Jack Davis as Uncle Worry in the National Theatre Company of W.A. production of *The Dreamers*, on tour 1983.
Photo by Geoffrey Lovell.

Kullark
(Home)
The Dreamers

Jack Davis



CURRENCY PRESS • SYDNEY

Geoffrey Lovell

CURRENCY PLAYS

General Editor: Katharine Brisbane

First published in 1982
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 452 Paddington,
N.S.W. 2021, Australia.
Revised 1984, Reprinted 1984, 1988

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National Library of Australia card number
and ISBN 0 86819 092 6

Cover design by Kevin Chan
Filmset by Meredith Trade Lino Pty Ltd, Burnley,
Victoria
Printed by Colorcraft Ltd., Hong Kong

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I gratefully acknowledge the debt I owe to Andrew Ross who directed the original productions of both *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*. His collaboration and friendship are deeply appreciated by me.

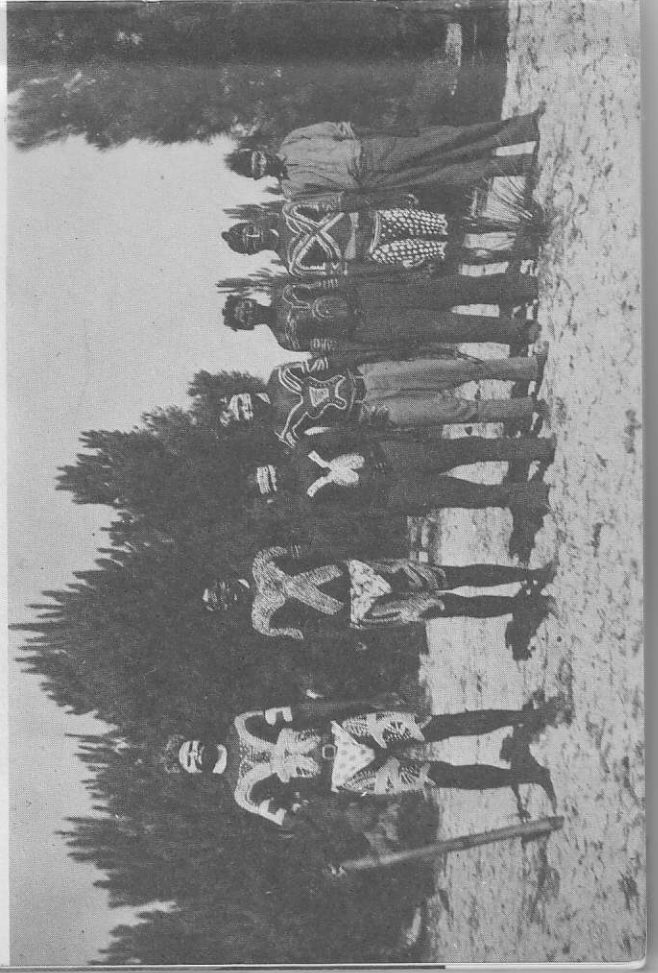
Perth, 1982

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Corroboree group from the South-West in the pine plantation at Moore River Native Settlement in the 1930s. South West and Northern traditions were married in these corroborees which were probably the last that derived anything from South-West traditions. Photo from Jack Davis' collection.

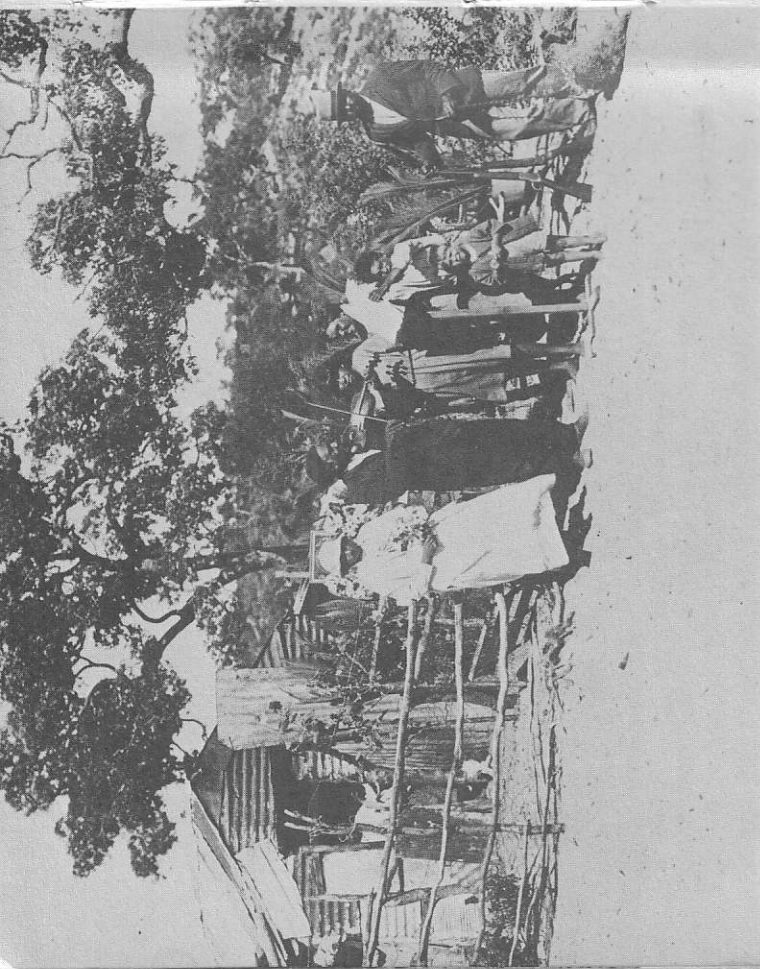


An Invitation to Debate

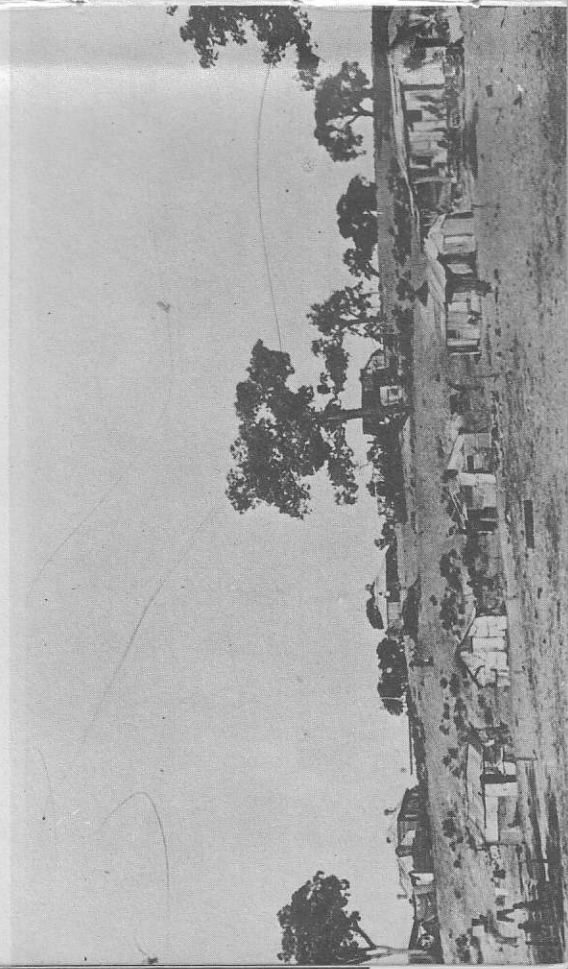
H. C. Coombs

The Referendum in 1967 which enabled Aboriginal Australians to be counted in the national population census and which gave to the Commonwealth Parliament concurrent powers with those of the States to legislate with respect to Aborigines marked, I believe, a turning point in Aboriginal history. Their involvement in the campaign for a positive outcome and the resounding affirmative vote justified political action and gave hope and promise that by their own efforts they could win back the right to live in health, dignity, and respect, in this, the land of their ancestors.

Since then there has been a swelling tide of Aboriginal activism reflected, if not matched, by a growing awareness among non-Aboriginal Australians of the iniquities we and our ancestors have inflicted on them and of our need to extend to them the justice their wrongs demand. This Aboriginal activism takes many forms. It is not only expressed in political organisation and protest action. It can be seen in an increasing competence with which they seize opportunities to manage their own affairs. The Aboriginal Land Councils, the Aboriginal-controlled legal and medical services, Aboriginal community councils, Aboriginal-controlled independent schools, Aboriginal owned and managed cattle stations,



Above: Palm Sunday at the Moore River Settlement in the 1930s. Below: A view of the Settlement looking up the hill from the football ground. Reproduced by kind permission of the Western Australian Government Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority.



bear evidence to this capacity. In the Government administrations and other public authorities Aborigines are demonstrating increasing executive capacity.

This successful activism has been made possible by the rapid emergence of an Aboriginal intelligentsia: men and women who have seized upon what our society can offer them in education and access to the ideas of our civilisation but have retained their Aboriginal identity. It is remarkable the degree to which these men and women have chosen to seek their careers and the measure of their achievement in the service of their own people and in the institutions they are creating.

Important among this intelligentsia are the Aboriginal artists. Aboriginal society has always been rich in creative achievements in the arts and this creativity has continued uninterrupted in the places where their traditional way has been maintained. But, as more of them come to regard English as their first language and as the political need to express their contemporary experience becomes more urgent, new Aboriginal art forms emerge. Naturally these forms take over much of the structure of those of our own society. But in purpose, in content and in style, Aboriginal artists make them distinctively their own. Aboriginal poets, novelists, playwrights, historians, social scientists, now make a characteristic contribution to the stream of Australian writing.

This contribution has a quality which makes it important to non-Aboriginal Australians. While it expresses the essence of Aboriginal experience it does this not only for them. It is consciously and unconsciously directed also at us. It is an invitation as well as a contribution to a debate, a discourse, a mutual search for understanding and respect: a search from which some sense of shared identity may one day come.

Jack Davis is an important member of the Aboriginal intelligentsia: as poet, playwright, administrator and political activist he serves the future of his people. And this play is a good example of the invitation to debate of which I have written. It presents simply but effectively

aspects of contemporary Aboriginal experience and intersperses these with episodes from the history of black-white confrontation in Western Australia — episodes which are given little attention in our official and academic histories or on the occasions of our anniversaries. But they are episodes which have not merely shaped the Aboriginal condition but have left their marks on the psyche of white Australians. I hope this play will encourage many of these to take up the invitation to discourse, to explore with Aborigines the history of our occupation of this continent and to seek out the means whereby we can come to share it justly.

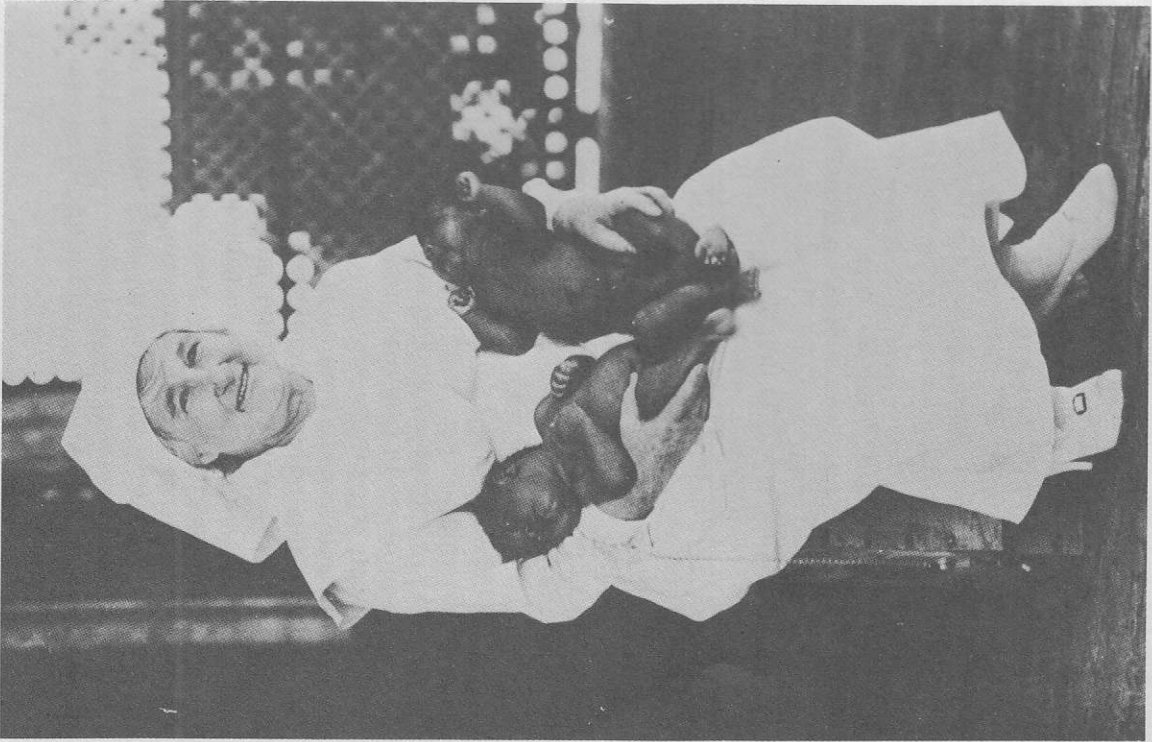
Canberra, 1982

The Aboriginal Heritage

Ronald M. Berndt

Jack Davis's two plays epitomise the tragedy of the *Nyoongah* (Nyungar) South-West Aborigines viewed through the eyes of an Aboriginal, tinged with bitterness. Time has not healed the wounds resulting from initial contact — except that today they take a rather different form, and their treatment has more curative possibilities.

In *Kullark*, the main action takes place against a backdrop of a people living within their traditional culture, independent, willing to make concessions in respect of the arriving strangers, yet ready to defend their own interests. We see a panoramic progression that leads rapidly to the devastation of the Nyungar (*Nyoongah*) people and their social and personal subjugation to incoming European settlers. On their part, the new settlers were ignorant about the Aborigines, fearful of their strangeness and careless in their dealings with them. They saw in the Aborigines and what they possessed virtually nothing of value — except the land they occupied. It was inevitable, therefore, that controls over Aborigines would be imposed and strengthened through legislative enactment. Before the surviving Nyungar knew what had happened to them, they found themselves on mission and government settlements or relegated to the fringe of townships — an underprivileged and deprived



Matron Neale with two Aboriginal babies at the hospital, Moore River Native Settlement, in the 1930s. Reproduced by kind permission of the Western Australian Government Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority.

people, whose stakes were pegged out more within the broader Australian society than within their own. But the echoes of their Aboriginal past resounded through the years and are heard today within their suburban dwellings.

In *The Dreamers*, Jack Davis takes up this latter theme — the squalor and meaninglessness of some contemporary Aboriginal living, combined with nostalgia for a traditional Aboriginal past. Superficially, this is how many Aborigines who saw the play interpreted it. 'It is too close to home,' some remarked. 'Won't this simply reinforce the stereotype Europeans have of urban Aborigines?' Davis's message, however, is less short-sighted. In *Kullark*, Aborigines were still on the receiving end of what was for them a catastrophe with continuing repercussions. *Kullark* is, in effect, a review of the present plight of the Nyungar seen in historical perspective — seeing it through *their own eyes* and injecting meaning, their meaning, into what they and their parents had experienced.

The Dreamers called for far more courage. Seeing the Nyungar *as they are*, or as they think they are, with all the pathos and humour, is no easy task. Not many of us, within the context of such a situation, would willingly stand back and look at ourselves. But *The Dreamers* is something more than this. It expresses a kind of symbolic resurrection. The intermittent reappearance of an Aboriginal traditional dream of how things could have been, intermingled with the reality of what it became, suggests an interplay between two themes, bestowing upon each a kind of immediacy. One is hope for the future through continuing involvement in the wider Australian society. The other is a dream of a recurring image that underlines the significance of an Aboriginality which cannot and should not be cast aside.

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At first European settlement there were probably at least 6,000 Nyungar people, perhaps more (in other assessments, up to 12,000). They occupied, roughly, all the inland and coastal country of the south-west of Western Australia, from a line drawn diagonally from Mullewa to the north toward Kellerberrin and south-east to a little beyond Esperance. The whole area was divided among about thirteen dialectal/language territorial units, later consolidated under the general label of *nyungar*, meaning 'man' or 'person'. Members of these groups were greatly attached to their land through mythological and ritual ties, and knew intimately every part of this country. Unlike their neighbours to the north and north-east, they did not circumcise or subincise, but they kept open trade-routes with adjacent groups. To cope with the cold winters of the South-West they wore specially prepared kangaroo-skin cloaks, and constructed bark-covered huts. They also used a unique hammer-like implement called a *kadjo*. There was a rich and colourful culture, with a complex social organisation about which only the broad patterns are known, the details having been lost or considerably modified over the years.

Because the first Europeans were so light-skinned, the Nyungar believed them to have come from the traditional island of souls of their own ancestors, and called them *djangga*, 'the dead' — their own dead relatives returning. Ironically, the coming of 'the dead' meant death to many Aborigines.

At first, the relationship between Aborigines and Europeans was fairly friendly; but before the second year of settlement was out an Aboriginal was shot (in November 1830), and another killing followed. Yagan and Midgegooroo (Mijitjiroo), among others, headed an avenging party to compensate for those deaths, and a European was killed. Difficulties multiplied quickly. The Governor, Sir James Stirling, was at a loss to know how to contain the situation. Armed protection was provided for the European settlers, and Aborigines were driven from their traditional hunting grounds.

To begin with, it was a struggle between Aborigines and invaders for natural resources. The Aborigines were seeking food, which was becoming increasingly scarce. Attacks by Aborigines became common, and so did reprisals. Out of the situation emerged two broad categories of Aborigines: those who aligned themselves with the newcomers and those who did not. While the dividing line between them was blurred, those who worked for the newcomers received food and clothing and in some cases money, and alcohol was available to them. The 'unaligned', although they lived outside the settled areas, were being inevitably drawn toward the points of contact and clash. During 1832-33 conditions in the new Swan River colony deteriorated and armed conflict became fairly frequent. Yagan is said to have led many forays against the settlers, burning crops and grass, killing cattle, and to have been implicated in another European spearing. Midgegooroo, his companion, was captured and later shot at the Perth gaol. Yagan met his death through treachery in 1833. A new settler took his head and other parts of his body and had them dried. The head is said to have been sent to England.

The scene then shifted to the Murray River district, a setting for what became known as 'the Battle of Pinjarra' (1834). It was really an ambush. One European party drove the hapless Aborigines towards a ford above what later became the township of Pinjarra. Sir James Stirling, leading the other party, approached from the other side. The Aborigines, caught between the crossfire of the two parties, had little chance to escape. Some thirty of them, including several women, were killed. Many women and children were taken prisoners, but afterwards released by Stirling. Desultory fighting continued, but by 1838 the hard core of Aboriginal resistance was crushed. Rottnest Island was established as a prison for Aborigines in 1839, and the first decade of European settlement ended with an enforced 'improvement' in the relations between the opposing parties. The

Aborigines realised that they had no chance of defending or recovering the land they had lost.

In the 1850s, 'ticket-of-leave' men and parties of convicts intermingled with Aborigines and supplied them with alcohol for favours they received: but this, along with prostitution, had been taking place from the beginning of contact. By this time, the mixed-race population was increasing and children were being removed from their parents. Dispossessed of their lands, the Nyungar had become paupers. The measles epidemic of the early 1880s left scarcely a 'full-blood' Aboriginal in the South-West. Traditional Aboriginal culture had virtually disappeared *as a living reality*. By the early 1890s, other Aborigines were drifting into the alienated areas and intermixing with the remaining local inhabitants. A.O. Neville, a former Commissioner of Native Affairs for Western Australia, wrote in 1948 that he had been present at the death of the last 'full-blood' South-West Aboriginal, and that those full-bloods in this area (that is, in the late 1940s) had come from outside the district. Such was the scene in which Aborigines had to build a new life.

However, they had little opportunity to do so in their own terms. They were a conquered people, lacking direction, because everything they had cherished had been removed from their keeping. Instead they became chattels of the Europeans, to be moved around at will, to be reprocessed and eventually 'civilised'. While government policies toward part-Aborigines were ambiguous, mostly they were classified with Aborigines in general terms. Many of their children were, for various reasons, taken away from them and sent to institutions. The majority of people of partly Aboriginal descent found themselves living on settlement reserves, or occupying camps on fringes of country towns under the 'supervision' of the then Western Australian Department of Native Welfare and perhaps of missionaries as well. One such settlement was at Moore River. This differed

from an earlier one near today's Welshpool at the foot of the Darling Range. In 1901 that served as a refuge for the remnants of the South-West people, who were free to come and go as they pleased.

Neville, appointed in 1915 as Chief Protector of Aborigines, was responsible for establishing the Moore River settlement in 1916. Carrolup had been opened in 1915, and its residents were moved to Moore River in 1922. Such settlements were 'closed'. Aborigines regarded them as 'prisons', which they virtually were. As socio-economic conditions deteriorated in the South-West in the 1930s, more Aborigines were moved to the settlements. Increasing government control over Aborigines, culminating in the 1936 Native Administration Act, broadened the definition of 'Aborigine' and increased the power of the Chief Protector. It is little wonder that Aborigines have reacted so strongly against Neville and those Europeans who were employed on the settlements, believing them to be the prime perpetrators of their misery. Aborigines complained repeatedly about the appalling conditions at Moore River. Some tried to escape from its protective custody, but were usually soon rounded up and brought back. In 1928, the first all-Aboriginal deputations waited on the then Premier pleading that local and general conditions be improved. Little was done. By 1930 Moore River was overcrowded, understaffed and without proper facilities; and to exacerbate the situation, the entire Aboriginal camp at Northam was taken to the settlement by the police in 1933. Not only Aborigines were disturbed about this treatment and neglect. To the Moseley Royal Commission of 1934, Moore River presented a 'woeful spectacle'.

Neville, a central figure in this drama until 1940, has been depicted as hard and unsympathetic. Yet in the mid-1920s he was regarded as one of the most enlightened administrators in charge of Aboriginal affairs in the country. In August 1926 he contributed to the Perth meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science on 'The "Native Question"', and

in January 1936 he wrote an article entitled 'Relations Between Settlers and Aborigines in Western Australia' for the Western Australian Historical Society. Neville was scathing in his criticism of the treatment of Aborigines, and of mission settlements. Nevertheless, he was a man of his time, with preconceived ideas about what should be done for, to and by Aborigines — ideas which we today would call paternalistic. Also, he was caught within the network of his own administrative machine.

A national conference on Aboriginal welfare in April 1937 declared that a policy 'of the eventual absorption of half-castes into the white community and their education to that end' should be followed by all the Australian States. After attending this meeting, Neville concentrated his attention on part-Aborigines, and in 1947 published his *Australia's Coloured Minority*. At that time the emerging assimilation policy for all Aborigines was being promulgated. He was concerned about the position of people who were neither fully Aboriginal nor fully European: the lack of training available to them, the loss of their cultural background, and the persistently negative discrimination against them. In his opinion, they had no real future unless they became increasingly involved in the wider Australian society and had better opportunities for a general education. What is not generally known is that Neville was one of the early advocates of Aborigines having a voice in their own affairs, even though, by today's standards, what he envisaged was quite limited. Too many other Europeans stood between him and the Aborigines for his views to be adequately communicated to them. In any case, he virtually neglected consideration of traditionally-oriented Aborigines. One major difficulty was his contention that the only solution to the part-Aboriginal 'problem' was for them to be 'bred out', that they should be physically absorbed into the dominant Australian-European population. He was severely criticised for this. Moreover, he was taken to task by individual missionaries and mission bodies because the 1936 Native Administration Act made

no mention of missions, and subordinate legislation introduced the licensing of missionaries and their European helpers. As the late Professor Elkin remarked in 1979 with reference to Neville, 'I doubt whether he ever really got beyond the frontier attitude, any more than did Moseley in his investigation'.

Despite negative discrimination and prejudice, the Aborigines of the South-West continued to see themselves as being Nyungar, as being different from the non-Aborigines around them. That difference is sometimes expressed through language contrasts. Something of the traditional South-West dialects is remembered by a few of the old people. But what they speak now is really neo-Nyungar, made up of a combination of elements drawn from original dialects and English; and this is better called Aboriginal-English, as contrasted with *Wetjala* ('white fellow') or standard Australian English.

Gradually conditions have been changing. The old settlements have been abandoned, discriminatory legislation has been repealed, and more opportunities are now open in education, including tertiary training, and in economic and political affairs at national as well as at State levels.

* * *

One message *The Dreamers* has for us is that, while social conditions have changed radically, while opportunities have enabled Nyungar people to move out of the narrowness of their immediate past, the shadow of that European-induced past still rests heavily upon many. Disillusionment, poverty, drinking to excess and lack of education are not easily dissipated. Despite unemployment and a high level of delinquency among Nyungar youth, there are many positive elements that could presage a more rewarding and satisfying future. One which is not forgotten, that could not be destroyed even in the face of such a disaster as the Moore River settlement,

that maintained its significance through times of oppression and trouble, is awareness of Aboriginal identity. It defines the unique position of people of Aboriginal descent in the wider heterogeneous Australian society, recognising their place in that wider society but also their distinctive, long-standing ties with the country itself.

Jack Davis's dream is of an Aboriginal heritage — not in terms of the past as such, but as a symbolic anchorage for the present, a sure refuge within which people can be positively identified, providing emotional security, a sense of belonging, and a meaning to life. Pride in being Aboriginal is indelibly inscribed in his writing, indicating firm roots which go deeply within the total Australian scene, far beyond the recent past, into its very beginnings.

Perth, 1982