

standing, such as we find in the poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal dating from the rise of Indigenous literature in English in the early sixties.

Thus we have moved to what I call The Period of Reconciliation, which was signalled by the autobiography/biography of Sally Morgan, *My Place* (1987). Activist literature is being replaced by a literature of understanding, a literature not committed to educating individuals as to their place in Indigenous society, but to explaining Indigenous individuals to a predominantly white readership. It is significant that in 1988 creative writing was replaced in importance by the 'life story'. Three books published then continue to sell well and reflect this transition: *My Place* by Sally Morgan, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* by Ruby Langford Ginibi (1988), and *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward (1988). A form of literature akin to biography and autobiography, often this is a heavily edited literature written and revised in conjunction with a European and its message is one of understanding and tolerance, which may be a good thing in regard to an Indigenous place in a multicultural Australia and with the stated aim of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation of bringing all people together in mutual understanding in what will be a new republic. As such, it is not concerned with the future aims and aspirations of the Indigenous people. The closing words of Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* reveal the accommodation found in this literature:

We will be making sure that our  
 Kids will be given every opportunity  
 In their lives to get a good education,  
 So that they can take their place  
 In today's society as Lawyers or Doctors,  
 Or etc.—and be equal in the one human Race!

Mudrooroo. The Indigenous literature  
 of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka. South  
 Melbourne, Hyland House: 1997. **The Songlines**

# I

*Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
 of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
 the wanderer, harried for years on end,  
 after he plundered the stronghold  
 on the proud height of Troy.*  
 (Odyssey)

**M**ANY KNOW OF THE LONG EPIC POEMS, THE SONGLINES of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which mark the beginnings of European literature and which have been lovingly translated time after time, version after version, into the English language. To the ancient Greeks they became sources for tragedy and a practical guide to all aspects of life, and long after them they provided a literary form to be imitated, a seed-bed for the novel and for the film. They still serve for inspiration and have achieved a universality which will always be there.

But how many know of the long epic poems, the songlines such as these verses from the *Djanggawal* epic, that belong to Australia?

Let us rest on our paddles, brother,  
 Let us rest, for I am tired.

What is happening there, brother,  
 My body aches with tiredness,  
 I worry because of our sacred emblems;  
 I am tired because we threw them away.  
 Now we are close to the shore;  
 Now our journey, our paddling is over.  
 We land on the beach at Port Bradshaw.  
 This is our country, plant our flag here,  
 We have arrived, O brother.

*Terra nullius, terra nullius*, a stark and unpeopled land which the brave British pioneers, some perhaps with a copy of the *Iliad* in their pockets, occupied with much bloodshed, capturing her as the ancient Greeks captured and took Troy. Who now knows the songs of Troy, or the epics which they might have sung? They are gone and forgotten, perhaps after being long ignored, or sung by the Trojans in captivity until a new generation knew them not. So to the victors belong the spoils and this is what has happened in Australia. Our epics in many places have disappeared and those that survive survive in obscurity, the fodder of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. It is a shame that our epics are ignored, as they are truly Australian and arrive at the land or come from the land and move over the land. They in effect removed the stigma of *terra nullius* from this continent long before the British invaders arrived and thus were political because they civilised the land and made it known.

I may declare that these are the world's forgotten epics and are hidden in a darkness of obscurity from which they should emerge. Of course, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they cannot be dated or given single authors, although it is said that they were first sung by our ancestors who passed them on to present and future generations who were living and would live in the countries through which they passed. The *Djanggalawul* epic, for example, is sung by the Djanggalawul ancestors and details their adventures and how they peopled and sacralised the land. The *Two Men (Wati Kadjara)* epic, which stretches from the Kimberley in north-western Australia to the southern coast of South Australia, is sung by the two Iguana men who marked out this part of the continent. This latter epic is the longest I know and is sung

section by section throughout the Western Desert. It has never been collected in its entirety, and when I asked the anthropologists, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, about this songline and if it still could be collected in its entirety they said that it was too late. If this is true, it is sad, for the length of this songline, this epic, is tremendous and the number of verses must be far more than in any other Australian epic.

The recording and translating of such an epic is a heavy task and would necessitate spending years in travelling the songline and exploring the verses of the epic, as well as getting to know the details of the land about which it sings from the custodians of the sections of the songline, for these epics do not belong to a single community or clan, but pass on from clan country to clan country and from custodian to custodian; but the effort would be worth it.

As far as I know, the only two people who once spent considerable time and energy in making the epic oral literature of parts of Indigenous Australia available to be read with some continuity were the two ethnologists or anthropologists, Ronald and Catherine Berndt; but they devoted much of their time to the smaller areas of northeastern and north-central Arnhem Land where the songlines are much shorter. They did marvellous work and it is sad that their two books, *Djanggalawul* (1952) and *Kunapipi* (1951), are long out of print. Also, we must remember—and it is an important point—that they were not poets or even linguists, but social anthropologists and more interested in the content and surrounding rituals and ceremonies rather than in the poetry of the languages.

The *Djanggalawul* epic is praised by Ronald Berndt as including some of the most beautiful literary efforts of Indigenous Australia. Similar to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they were poems set to tunes which outlined the adventures of the Djanggalawul. Not only this but their divine origin is stressed in that they are said to be the original songs sung by the ancestors in the Dreaming. This is important in that this meant that the epic, owing to its divine origin, has kept to its form and content to a great extent, and thus may be an important source in understanding pre-invasion Indigenous society in Arnhem Land, for although the prose accounts may change over time, the importance of the tradition has

been kept in the epics, in that to change a song or verse, in effect, is to render it ineffective and false. Thus, the epics were passed down from generation to generation, being memorised to keep to an exactitude of original form and content.

Ronald Berndt states that the epics of northeastern Arnhem Land have a unique place in Indigenous Australia in that they are longer and expressive of greater detail than those found in other regions. He declares that in structure and approach they differ; but I find this hard to accept in that, as far as I am aware, other songlines remain untranslated in their entirety. Until, if still possible, this is done, it must remain in the realms of speculation, although in his other book, *Kanapipi*, the brevity of some songs indicate a desert origin and source though he seeks to prove otherwise; but then, until a desert songline receives such detailed study as the Berndts have done on Arnhem Land epics, we must reserve our opinion, keeping in mind that brevity is the soul of wit, and that the length and detail of individual portions of an epic do not make for such judgements as to the wonder of the poetry therein.

Ronald Berndt declares that the songlines are poetry in their own right and express the spirit of the culture to which they belong, as perhaps no other medium can do. He writes that they are inseparable from that culture, expressing as they do the Indigenous sense of the beautiful and their feeling of strength, goodness and the vividness of their way of life. But what he does not go into—perhaps it was too early in the acceptance of Indigenous Australia—is that they have a universality for all Australians in that, for a unique Australian nationality to be created, these epics must be accepted as the basis of an Australianness which does not rely on recent European and American cultural imports; that we, as Australians, must hear our land talking and changing us, as the Djanggawul were changed in those Dreaming times when they came and brought a culture and language to the land with less disruption than our recent newcomers.

In describing the epic, Ronald Berndt writes that the songs are not merely traditional, but are sacred in that they stem from the Dreaming ancestors. They are thus divine

compositions. They set out, as do most of the songlines, although the ancestors differ, to describe in detail all the incidents that took place after the Djanggawul paddled away from their island of Bralgu, landed on the Australian mainland and explored it until they reached Milingimbi, where the Yirrkala section of the epic ends and where Ronald Berndt promises to extend the epic in a later publication, though I have not been able to find this and which possibly lies unpublished in his papers. He, in his examination, mentions the amount of repetition which he says is beloved of the Indigenous songman, but which may be a signifier of oral poetry in general. In fact, in reading aloud Indigenous epics, the repetition gives that swirling of the senses which the musical language of poetry can create and leads to an understanding of why such epics were labelled, by the Berndts, 'song circles', in that themes and lines occur and recur until they are fixed not in the mind but in the unconscious in a general liberation from the prosaic into the truly poetic.

As in some if not all Indigenous epics, there are inside singing words which are different from those in everyday use. This poses problems for the translator in that we are not given a simple text, but a complexity in which there is not only the open meaning available to all, but other meanings residing in the text. Perhaps this means that a translator of any and all Indigenous epics would have to be an initiated member of the clans which own the particular sections of the epic; though, in the spirit of reconciliation, this would have to be worked through by the translator poet. What would and could not be done would be a literal translation so beloved by linguists, but the work of a poet who would with close collaboration produce a text of a beautiful aesthetics, as has been done by those poets, such as Alexander Pope, who translated the Greek epics.

Ronald Berndt, as a social anthropologist, produced texts which were not poetic. They hint at the aesthetics inherent in the epics, but they suffer from a prosaicness of language that detracts from the poetics, which is what I am concerned with in this book on Indigenous literature. I feel that, first of all, there must be texts of sufficient aesthetic attractiveness that they will be read as poetry, as language

in motion, rather than as static texts detailing the dry facts of culture and society. Such texts have their place, but I declare that they are not poetry, that with the interest in Indigenous culture readable texts must be produced as a source of inspiration for the poets of Australia who I feel are slowly, if not quickly, growing tired of a suburban inspiration which ignores the bush and the land. In furtherance of this approach there is a book which when published quickly sank into obscurity. In fact, in seeking to do a detailed study of one area of Indigenous poetics, the author produced a dense text of German thoroughness which might be studied as a biography of a son of a missionary, but then, perhaps, we are all victims of our times and must avoid rendering an account. The volume I am talking about is *Songs of Central Australia*, by T.G.H. Strehlow (1971).

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has produced glossy booklets of absolutely no literary merit and with few readers. The Council stresses the importance of Indigenous culture and history and then hires European scholars to do their work, resolutely ignoring Indigenous writers and even those Europeans who have produced worthy books which now languish out of print. Indigenous culture, especially that termed 'traditional', is ignored while contemporary and urban manifestations, more often than not based on imported cultural models, are sanctioned. Culture in itself is defined as what a person thinks and feels and any formal attributes of Indigenous culture and literary forms are ignored. In fact, in the Berndts' last book, *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (1989), Indigenous form is ignored and they produce a rather ungainly volume which is really another anthropological text, rather than a literary one. It is prosaic rather than poetic and the land writes according to the Berndts rather than being allowed to speak, rather than being allowed to be an inspiration for Australian writers in form as well as content. They stress the sociological aspect of their material, ignoring any universality in Indigenous oral literature while stressing locality. 'However, notwithstanding its common human qualities, such land-based mythology is not necessarily amenable to being removed outside its own

socio-topographic context, ...' (p. 426). It might be argued that the Berndts, by publishing a haphazard collection of myths and stories, have done precisely this.

In the last section they turn their attention to contemporary Indigenous literature. They attack those Indigenous writers who use the past in their work and even declare that the oral literature of the past has little relevance for contemporary Indigenous writers and that the land cannot speak through their work. I wonder if the Berndts would say this about the continuing use of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for literary inspiration and why the old Indigenous literature on which they have done so much work is not allowed to have the same status in contemporary Australia. Of course, the songlines are locality-based and not only this but they are owned by local clans; but if a writer wishes to write about a country crossed with songlines and wishes to use either the form or content to give a relevance to his or her work, should he or she be banned from doing this? In fact, the exclusivity of the Berndts' position may be challenged and has been by Galarrwy Yunupingu who comes from Yirrkala, the place where Ronald Berndt took down and translated the *Djanggawul* epic many years ago. Galarrwy declares:

*Those people who are Aboriginal and Australian-born have the main rights. Those cultures should be dominant, instead of Australia being multicultural. It's an insult to say multicultural. You're trying to hide behind other cultural groups. This is Australia—it should have a culture of its own.*

(Weekend Australian, January 6-7, 1996)

This is my position and where else should Australians go for cultural inspiration than to Indigenous culture? It is about time that we gave away such words as 'appropriation' and 'misappropriation' and set out to build an Australian culture and literature which is based on and in Australia, that is, on the land and on the songlines which make known the land. Universality should be the aim rather than an exclusivity which will not work and which will only allow the songlines to become forgotten. Culture is never static and the past is there to be used and built upon. Thus,

Strehlow in his monumental *Songs of Central Australia* stresses the universality of Arrenthe song-poetry which he sees as poetry in its own right and able to stand with other world poetry. This is different from the Berndts' narrow anthropological approach with its emphasis on content and an ignoring of form.

T.G.H. Strehlow was the son of the German missionary, C. Strehlow, who founded Hermannsburg Mission in Arrenthe country in Central Australia and then proceeded to christianise what both father and son call 'Pagans'. This meant in practice that Arrenthe culture was damaged and the authority of the elders undermined. T.G.H. Strehlow in his introduction does not recognise this, but attacks other ethnologists who worked in the region. This detracts from the value of the book and if it should be republished might be removed, or drastically pruned, as really not being relevant to his subject matter. He also ends his introduction with the assertion: 'In accordance with the Arranda rules of tjurunga inheritance, these traditions would be regarded as becoming my personal property after the deaths of their owners.' This assertion a few years ago was denied by Arrenthe elders who wished for the return of their sacred tjurunga, which they saw as still belonging to their community. I write this paragraph to show that the place of T.G.H. Strehlow in Arrenthe history is not without controversy, though this does not detract from the great value his volume has for all students of Indigenous literature. He, it seems, at the time was the only person in Indigenous studies able to write such a book and I doubt that its value will ever be surpassed. It says a lot that such a volume, the only one of its kind, should be allowed to remain out of print, especially when there is an institute of Indigenous studies with a programme of publishing books on Indigenous studies.

The volume begins, as I feel it should, with the rhythmic measures and music structure of the songs which Strehlow discusses as songs, then chants and finally concludes that they are poems along the lines of *Beowulf*, the old European epic. He points out that the songs are akin to chants, with the words being as important as the music. It is interesting to learn that, in Central Australia as

in other regions, the Arrenthe songmen memorised thousands of songlines with intricate rhythmic measures which often are difficult to transcribe onto paper. There are many examples of these rhythmic measures in musical notation and from this important first section we learn about the rhythmic underpinnings of the songwords and also how the words are changed to fit the measure.

Part Two deals with the language and verse structure of the songs. Strehlow writes that Arrenthe couplets or quatrains tend to consist of two individual lines which stand in a complementary relation to each other, with the second line either identical in rhythm or construction with the first line, or balancing it antithetically and rounding off the couplet with a contrasting rhythm of its own. This parallelism and antithesis also characterises the song language. To illustrate this, Strehlow translates the first five couplets of the 'Ankota Ancestor Song':

I am red like a burning fire;  
I am covered with red down.  
I am red like a burning fire;  
I am gleaming red, glistening with ochre.  
I am red like the heart of the fire;  
Red is the hollow in which I am lying.  
A tjurunga is standing on my head;  
Red is the hollow in which I am lying.

Strehlow makes the point that, as in most other regions of Indigenous Australia, such songs—and this is an important point which should be remembered—were the property of the fully initiated males of the local totemic clans and were believed to contain magic virtues which gave power over nature and the environment of the locality where they were first sung.

They were first sung by the ancestors, who insisted that they be passed on from generation to generation unchanged. According to the Arrenthe elders, the magic residing in the couplets came from the ancestor who first called out his name, then the place where he originated, the

trees or rocks growing near his home, the animals nearby, any beings who came to visit him and so on. He named all these and by so doing gained the power to control them. In each instance, he not only gave them a name, but also described them in the couplet. In this way a series of couplets, associated by time, space and story, was sung into being, and this songline the ancestor left behind for the benefit of those human beings who were to be reincarnated from himself. A songline will contain the name of the ancestor and of his sons, if any. It gives the name of his home and describes the scenery, such as the rocks and trees, hills, creeks, around his birth-place. The songline also relates his journeys and his quests for food, and finally concludes when the time comes for him to pass to his final resting place.

Strehlow gives an example: 'The Bandicoot Ancestor Song of Ibalintja'. The first six verses give a general description of Ibalintja in the rainy season when the country is green with yams and purple with everlasting. It was in that season that the ancestor emerged from the sacred soak or waterhole in which dwells the Latjia yam. The soak is what is called an increase site and it is from here that the yams originated to flow over the countryside. The songlines continue on to describe the coloured soils of the soak. Songline fourteen introduces us to the bandicoots who emerged from the bottom of the soak. Songline twenty-two introduces us to the great ancestor Karora himself, and songline thirty introduces us to his sons and also refers to a ceremony. Ibalintja is also a sun totemic site and in songline thirty-three the sun makes an appearance. Songline thirty-seven introduces us to the *tuatanga*, or sacred pole, which is used in ceremonies. Songlines forty-three to forty-four concern the bandicoot ancestor, Tjenterama, who in an encounter with Karora's sons is lamed. The next two couplets are centred on the arrival of two more bandicoot ancestors, while the remaining songlines bring the series to an end with a flood of dark nectar from the honeysuckle blossoms. The ancestors are swept back into the soak or waterhole where they are at rest until called forth in ceremonies.

The songline series is much more complex than I have

indicated as there is an entire story or stories encoded in the verses. Still, one can glimpse the profound beauty of the poetry and how it encompasses the subject matter of the myth:

Lo, the dweller in the deep pit;  
Lo, out of the deep pit it is overflowing far and wide.

Lo, the mate of the ilbalba grass;  
Lo, out of the deep pit it is overflowing far and wide.

Lo, it ties together a pole;  
Lo, it coils around it ring upon ring.

Lo, the purple everlasting;  
Lo, out of the deep pit they are overflowing far and wide.

Lo, the milk bush;  
Lo, the maiden's friends.

Lo, the ground where he lies stretched out;  
Lo, the down-flecked painted ground.

'The crimson soil is grating under the heel;  
'The white creek sand is grating under the heel.

White creek sand!  
Impenetrable hollow.

White limestone band!  
Impenetrable hollow.

Rich yellow soil!  
Impenetrable hollow.

Red and orange soil!  
Impenetrable hollow.

Plain studded with whitewoods!  
Impenetrable hollow.

White saltlake!  
Impenetrable hollow.

They are frisking about at the back of their nests.  
In the thick arabera grass, in the thick arabera grass.

Lo, they are running out of the nest—  
They all are running out.

The bandicoots are rushing through the grass;  
In and out of their nests they are rushing through the grass.

On the cracked swampflat the fur is brushed;  
By bandicoots the fur is brushed.

On the cracked swampflat they are brushing their fur;  
The bandicoots are brushing their fur.

Crooking their little claws they are raking grass together;  
With balled paws they are raking grass together.

They are snoring now—  
Half-asleep they are snoring now.

There are mounds upon mounds of anthills;  
There are masses and masses of termites in the anthills.

The great ancestor Karora  
Is gazing about watchfully.

Lo, the great ancestor, tall and broad-shouldered;  
Lo, the great ancestor, in the pride of his strength.

Lo, the great ancestor, in the pride of his strength;

Lo, the great ancestor, with his rippling muscles.

Lo, the great ancestor, in the pride of his strength;

Lo, the great ancestor, proudly keeping to his own home.

Lo, his skull, hard as white quartz;  
Lo, his skull, firm, hard and strong.  
Lo, the bloodwood tree, hard as white quartz;  
Lo, its hollow trunk, hard as white quartz.

Lo, his knees, firm, hard and strong;  
Lo, his knees, hard as white quartz.

Lo, the great ancestor of the painted ground;  
Lo, his limbs, firm, hard and strong.

The whirlwind is encircling his waist;  
Stripes from his shoulders, the whirlwind about his waist.

The pendent ornaments are reaching to the ground;

The hairstring ornaments are reaching to the ground.

Set free you may talk loudly;  
Teased in sport you may talk loudly.

The sun is exulting in his might;

The sun is hurling his spears of fire.

They are sliding away in a sitting position;

The flaming face is torturing them.

They stumble, sneak away on hands and knees;  
Blood in a gushing stream flows from their noses.

The sun spears them with his rays;

The sun speeds them on their way.

Lo, the tnatantja pole;

Covered with rings and stripes.

Lo, the kauaua pole,

Covered with rings and stripes.

Let the feather-top gleam in the sun;

Let the feather-top tremble in the breeze.

Like a pillar of sand it is towering upwards;

The tall ceremonial pole is towering upwards.

Like a whirlwind it is towering upwards;  
The tall ceremonial pole is towering upwards.

Karora himself is towering upwards;  
The tall ceremonial pole is towering upwards.  
He is frisking about at the back of his nest;  
In the thick arabera grass, in the thick arabera  
grass.

'Are you indeed a bandicoot;  
Are you one indeed?'

'I, Tjenterama, have now grown lamed,  
Yes, lame, the worawora flowers are clinging to  
me.'

Nodding sleepily, he keeps on listening;  
Fast asleep he is resting without stirring.

Raging and irresistible—  
Like a whirlwind he attempts to overwhelm me.

The sound of the bullroarers, the sound of the  
bullroarers is drawing nigh;  
Covered with bullroarers, covered with bullroar-  
ers, they are drawing nigh.

The sweet dark juice is flowing forth;  
From the centre of the chalice it is flowing  
forth.

From the slender pistil it is flowing forth;  
The sweet dark juice is flowing forth.

From the wrinkled cup it is flowing forth;  
From the centre of the chalice it is flowing  
forth.

'Let our sweet sap sound from afar like a  
torrent;

Let our sweet sap rush along like a torrent.'

'On the fringes of the cracked rolling plain,—  
On the fringes let the flood of nectar roll along.'

'Let our sweet sap encircle them with rings;  
Let the flood of nectar encircle them with  
rings.'

'Let our sweet sap ooze forth from the ground;  
Let our dark honey ooze forth from the ground.'

'Let our sweet sap rush along like a torrent;  
Let our sweet sap sound from afar like a  
torrent.'

'Let it break strong intertwined roots in its  
course;

Let the flood of nectar break down the thicket  
in its course.'

'Let our sweet sap cast him out and away;  
Let our sweet sap ooze forth from the ground.'

'Let the rararara flood encircle them with rings;  
Let our sweet sap encircle them with rings.'

'Let the flood of nectar encircle them with  
rings;

Let our sweet sap encircle them with rings.'

Of course, in such an English translation, often the meaning is unclear as the cultural matrix in which the songlines emerge is not known; but if the poem is read the cadences roll forth and images of Central Australia spring into the mind. Again, most English poetry, especially today, is written in the straightforward language of everyday usage. Poetic language has not only been stripped of its archaisms, but often its rhythm. This is not the case with the songlines of Central Australia. Strehlow in his investigation comments that the language of the songlines is highly artificial and has never been a spoken language. He says that it preserves many archaisms and obsolete words and phrases. This of course means that the songlines were formally learnt over a number of years, as he later observes. It took years of training and hard work for an Arrernte man to understand and value his own literature; though, once that he did so, he could then gain aesthetic enjoyment not only from his own group's songlines, but those of his neighbours.



Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* is a huge and unwieldy volume, but it is the first and the only one which treats so extensively the oral poetry of an Indigenous community. It is a sad fact that, despite the founding of many Indigenous studies courses in Australian universities, it has been left to wallow in obscurity like some beached whale. For those who are interested in the Indigenous oral literature of Australia and Australian culture in general, it should and must be read. In fact, in contrast to the Berndts' reservations about the worth of Indigenous oral literature beyond the locality of its production, Strehlow declares: 'In point of language, rhythms and forms, Central Australian poetry is highly developed; and the themes of which it treats are of universal interest to mankind' (1971, p. 657). In fact, the importance of poetry to the Arrenthe people is stressed by Strehlow who declares that in Arrenthe society it was the poet, the knower of sacred songs, who had prestige. He ends his huge volume with an appeal which echoes my own: that if Australia is to develop a truly national culture, it is to the land and environment that Australians must go:

*It is therefore to be hoped that a perusal of the ancient material that constitutes the aboriginal sacred songs of Central Australia will not prove entirely unrewarding to our future poets: the imagery found here does harmonise with the outward shape and inward spirit of our continent.*  
(1971, p. 729)

## Indigenous Literature in English

# 2

*Aboriginal writers have a responsibility here, a very important responsibility, to take that message not only to white people but to Aboriginal people as well, so that we can foster within our own communities a very important concept. That concept is that if we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and not as individuals.*

(McGuinness & Walker 1985, pp. 43-54)

**I**NDIGENOUS LITERATURE IN ENGLISH BEGAN AS THE expression of an Indigenous minority living on the fringes of the majority community. It was the writing of an oppressed people that until the last two decades was completely under the heel of the oppressor. Until recently, they did not do things, but had things done to or for them, and any urge towards protest or expression was fiercely attacked as being the work of others, that is, radical whites. The majority accepted as fact that the Indigenous people were unable to decide for themselves. They had been declared wards of the state, a category usually reserved for children; but this was untrue.

The British colonised the island of Tasmania early in the nineteenth century, and then began a desperate war of resistance by the Indigenous inhabitants against the seizure of their island. Eventually, after a military