

The Australian Friend

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Roads to reconciliation



Editorial

Equality is a core Quaker testimony. We believe that all people have equal access to the Divine Light, and that all should be treated with compassion and respect. But what happens when a group in our society has long been treated unequally? What is the road forward?

In this issue we are looking at roads to reconciliation with our Indigenous people, who were for many years not even considered equal before the law. This reinforced an attitude in our society, sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious, of regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as less able or less worthy. The law has changed, but attitudes are harder to shift. Years of discrimination and exclusion have led to social and health problems in the Indigenous community which successive governments have failed to resolve, despite some good intentions.

What are Quakers doing to implement their testimony in this situation? Many writers stress that it all starts with listening, leading to better understanding. From this sharing may follow – the example of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people uniting to care for land is a good example. Political actions such as silent vigils and writing letters to politicians are also typical Quaker responses.

Hopefully there is a future in which Non-Indigenous people will take delight in Aboriginal culture and find strength in a closer relationship with country, and Indigenous people will share in the advantages and challenges of Western culture. We would welcome further articles on Roads to Reconciliation.

For our next issue our theme will be Spiritual Journeys. Sometimes a physical journey will take us out of our comfort zone and open us to the Divine light. But there may be no physical journey – there may be a life crisis which jolts us into spiritual growth, or there may be a slow and gradual development of spiritual awareness. We hope many of you will feel able to share your story with us.

THE AUSTRALIAN FRIEND EDITORIAL TEAM

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Cover photo: Melbourne weekly vigil for reconciliation

Indigenous spirituality and culture

CLÉMENCE OVERALL | CANBERRA REGIONAL MEETING



Clémence Overall and husband Mark Wotherspoon

A view of the expansive Lake George came into sight as my husband and I turned towards Silver Wattle Quaker Retreat Centre. We were going to attend a three-day workshop on Indigenous Spirituality and Culture.

As an American living in a new country, I was eager to learn about the realities of Australia, especially the realities of Indigenous people. As we veered onto a narrower road that sneaked along the edges of the Lake, I wondered what I could learn in only three days about the Aboriginal world – so distinct and unfamiliar to me.

Farther along, the landscape became spacious and hauntingly beautiful. Mobs of kangaroos munched contentedly on grass. Canberra was far behind us when we finally bumped up Silver Wattle's driveway. A quiet prevailed and I relished the stillness, but there was a crisis: there was no facilitator for the workshop. The facilitator was ill. But the workshop couldn't be cancelled. People were flying in from all over the country.

At dawn the next morning, I stumbled into the quiet of Silver Wattle's lounge room to find David Carline, an Aboriginal Elder from the south-west

Queensland Kooma/Gwamu People, already stoking the fire. He greeted me warmly, offering me a cuppa and some fresh bread. He was there, far from the demands of his community in SW Queensland, to write the Backhouse Lecture for next year. Overnight he was elected the facilitator for the workshop. He only had one day to reorganise it. He and the staff spent all last night contacting people and this morning setting up the agenda.

David recounted the problem quietly, speaking as if he had known me for some time. His candor was disarming. He threw more wood on the fire for me, then put on his wool cap and left, after telling me that he had done what he could for the workshop now he was going to sit in Silence by the sacred fire and wait for discernment.

He left me in Silver Wattle's warm lounge and leaving behind questions that I had seen played out in so many cultures: Where does a person – a person of any culture – turn to gather strength? Where is it a person turns to make sense of things?

Overnight David secured not one but four other workshop leaders. He opened the workshop by gently leading us through basic aspects of the Aboriginal

culture – a culture originating more than 50,000 years ago. He explained how climatic differences created the distinct belief systems belonging to the Salt Water People, the Desert People, the River People, all of them containing the elements of the earth, water, fire and air. All of them are traditional owners of the earth guided by a complexity of totems and skins. David's totem is the Emu People – and that leads him to certain ways of communication and to a special respect that needs to live and breathe on Emu Country; it leads him to keeping in touch with continuing cultural knowledge and a willingness to share.

David sifted through stories and legends of spirits descending into the earth and returning; ancient stories including mortuary rites involving memories of the deceased as they go to their *Dreamtime*. He explained how his ancestors 'Cared for Country, surviving the intense heat and bitter cold, eating in the order of the seasons, never taking too much.' He referred us to Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu* that provides true insight into caring for country.

His voice remained melodious as he narrated stories of an historical pillage that left behind a world where



Silver Wattle and Lake George (Weereewaa) from the hill

most Aboriginals are now under the age of fifty. So many die – crushed by the disease of alcohol, diabetes, heart disease; by despair leading to suicides; crushed by the loss of children taken by child protection, by the Stolen Generation’s heartache and by the grief triggered through so many being incarcerated. And others expire, shattered by the mere psychological impact of a continued, covert genocide.

‘There are many young men’, David told us quietly, ‘who are third generation of living on the dole – without work, without skill, without a future. They are forced to be sitting around and have lost the *Dreaming*. Their eyebrows are locked together. Shoulders hunched – they walk crunched over at the middle. They have perpetual frowns.’

However, this blight was only part of the story. For example, in David’s south-west Queensland community, families united to protect the river. In a documentary, *Ringbalin—Healing the River, Dancing the Spirit*, we learned how the community worked together not only to preserve the river as a resource for water but also in order to maintain the continuation of spiritual and cultural connection that the river and land gives people – that connection

being as crucial to survival as water.

David used the words ‘the river’s emotional language’ to describe this connection. Those words made something shift in me. I had been living in the Australian bush for over a year. When David spoke of the river, he was referring to something I had only begun to sense: a reciprocal relationship with the bush. I had always looked at nature as a one-way street—with me directing the relationship. Now, looking out the window at the gentle hills of Silver Wattle, I questioned my perspective. I sensed the landscape guarding me as much as I was considering it. Something was developing.

Not just water but land was also being protected by David’s community. His niece, Cheryl Buchanan, and her People worked to save huge tracks of land. First the Kooma Traditional Owners Association, KTOA, worked side-by-side putting in fences to stop river erosion and to keep the cows, sheep, and pigs from harming the area called Murra Murra/ Many Hands. Later, under Buchanan’s leadership, they reclaimed the 30,000 hectares of adjacent land on Bendee Downs. They fought and won the IPA status (Indigenous Protected Area) to protect

it. They named it the Happy Frog Conservation, hired an Aboriginal ranger to oversee it, and opened the doors to programs in land management, water resourcing and Aboriginal culture.

As David spoke and the day progressed, a comfortable feeling was growing in the room. I felt relaxed in this room of strangers. I observed in all of us a certain quality of attention emerging. Was it David’s melodious voice? Or the strong but reposeful presence of the other facilitators and Silver Wattle staff that was influencing us? Or perhaps it was just the mere relief of leaving behind a hectic world where so much of the time many of us are working at top speed yet can never quite get on top of things. It seemed that by just sitting there I was learning about Aboriginal culture while gathering vital, yet less visible resources.

However, there was still more factual information to absorb. Two other facilitators, Shane Montimer from the Ngambri Mob and Andrew Cooper, an archeology cultural anthropology PhD student, placed David’s stories into a modern legal context. Shane explained the way that present Western law defines Aboriginals as Squatters on their own land – living on land claimed

Indigenous spirituality and culture

Continued from previous page

by the British. Professor Lilenthal from the University of Malaysia, over Skype, broke down this untruth step by step by deconstructing the British laws.

Noy's legal maxims, (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_maxim) he explained, serve as a foundation to law and to our legal system. In the case of Australian Aboriginals, the system has broken its own maxims. For example, one of Noy's maxims is *if you try to introduce another maxim to another country through **wrongdoing** your maxim will never apply*. Therefore, colonising using genocidal tactics among Aboriginals infringed upon the legal foundation.

Noy also maintained that *laws are based on custom. Custom is created by social consent. Laws won't work **without consent***. So colonial title claims don't hold because they introduced foreign customs reflective of their own feudal systems to justify actions. These feudal systems were contrary to pre-established economic, social, and legal systems. The Aboriginals already had their own systems for conveying land titles that were in use since ancient times. They have *Allodial Titles* that transferred from person to person through descent, not through a feudal system.

The facilitators emphasised the land because they wanted us to understand the fusion of the spiritual and the legal and its impact on lives today. Andrew Cooper brought this to life when he shared his own journey as a PhD student. This eight-year journey took him from working as a cultural heritage consultant for a mining company in Western Australia to his role as an observer in the Aboriginal Land Rights

Movement with the Yindjbarandi Corporation.

Andrew's PhD studies originally focused on seasonality and resources, especially water resources, before colonisation. His work questioned the accepted theory that Aboriginal groups only lived near water. In the Pilbara region of Western Australia he saw this wasn't true. Aboriginal groups lived in all types of ecological systems and managed the entire landscape.

He found himself trying to discover what the truth was for the local Aboriginal groups. He went on ethno-flora and -fauna expeditions with Elders and learned about the complexity of systems, such as totems and skins. Concurrently, as the Elders guided him through parts of Western Australia, the consequences of Noy's broken maxims became increasingly apparent. Mining companies not only ravaged the land, but also through coercion and palm greasing, they managed to split the community. However, part of the community united, insisting on their cultural heritage and land, and challenged the companies in a painstaking legal process.

Andrew spoke of his experiences being a witness to the legal process and in the dispute between the Aboriginal Corporation and the mining company. Andrew concluded his talk by showing a short film which explained the entitled land claim process – *Ask the Baby* (<https://vimeo.com/143156394>) directed by Frank Rijavec. This poignant documentary highlighted many of the difficulties experienced by the Aboriginal community. Andrew highly recommended viewing another

entire feature length documentary also by Rijavec called *Exile and the Kingdom* (<http://www.isuma.tv/yindjibarndi/exile-and-the-kingdom-part-1>).

That evening Shane, Auntie Jenni, an Indigenous activist also from the Ngambri mob, and her niece Whyriana welcomed us in the long tradition of 'country'. It was a clear night as we all gathered outside near an old gum tree and a dried creek bed. It was cold so Shane was wearing a possum coat, standing by the fire. Whyriana handed us handmade headbands and Jenni narrated stories with Shane, describing how the white invasion decimated the Ngunnawal land while germs and guns slowly began to extinguish a People in the Silver Wattle/Ngunnawal region.

The fire was a sacred fire, made specifically from indigenous woods and ashes from a great leader. The smoke curled around us. Shane and Jenni instructed us to walk around the fire and to wave smoke towards ourselves. This was a cleansing, an ancient practice used by many Indigenous peoples. Unlike some ceremonies, in this cleansing the atmosphere was not solemn. Instead there was friendly chatter and jokes, a sense of ease with one another. By this fire, far away from the clutter and distractions of life, somehow I felt all of us moving towards a place of trust where we could all speak and listen with something deeper than our social lives or jobs.

A few days later another experience showed me a simple way to strengthen that trust or to find quiet in a hectic day. Another facilitator, Douglas Amarfio – a teacher, a dancer, an artist – also



David Carline performs a smoking ceremony at Silver Wattle

shared how in his initiation he had learned ‘to read’ the land and was able to discern burial sites, Coroboree sites, and ancient trading grounds. As he spoke he was weaving a basket. He explained calmly that the basket was for the spirit and body of his child lost a day ago in a miscarriage. To bury his child he would sing the unborn into a tree. He would place the basket facing the direction where the child was meant to be born, at the spot in Silver Wattle where the two rivers meet and, then, his child’s spirit could be in peace. Watching him weave the basket was disturbing but brought us in touch with something bigger than the room.

He didn’t speak much. Instead he took off his shoes and led us barefoot through the surrounding hills. He would stop at a spot, looking each way, *reading* the land. He looked at rocks, how they were lined; and at trees, especially scarred trees; how did they relate to the stars, to the sun? These are navigational tools; signs to how and where people used to live. Walking and listening to the world outside was his method of teaching people about country and culture.

Douglas walked then stopped, looked, and listened intently to creatures I had never known before coming to

Australia: kangaroos on the hillsides, flocks of parrots soaring from tree to tree, frogs croaking, then cockatoos piercing the air with screeches. But the way we walked, then paused as a group to listen intently made this new world seem familiar, as if we were returning to something we already knew. I realised that simple everyday sounds can move us deeply if we stop to listen; that when I let my mind relax, listening can be so much more invigorating than dissecting my own thoughts day and night; that listening intently connects me most deeply to others. Walking with the group and listening to the nature at Silver Wattle opened up an unsuspected space in me.

Despite the intensity of three days and my doubts, when we finally drove out of Silver Wattle, I felt fresh and rejuvenated – in love with the world. Facts of law, land rights and Aboriginal history had expanded my world and helped me to make sense of this society. There were many commonalities between the destructive impact of colonialism on Australia and the Americas as well as shared means for coping with the devastation. Douglas’ basket weaving brought to mind the intricate cloth weaving that has been practised throughout the world for

hundreds of years. And Shane and Jenni by the fire recalled burning of incense in ceremonies in the East and West. These glimpses reminded me that our common humanity naturally seeks ways to cultivate clarity and calm and community that endures.

On another level, ironically, it was the rocky start of the workshop that taught me the most. Because of the openness of the Silver Wattle staff and the Elders I was able to observe them facing a difficulty with poise, positiveness and discernment. This set a tone of trust for the entire workshop. Within the context of this confidence—knowledge and experiences were shared from different points of view rather than one facilitator’s interpretation. The impact of multiple views was powerful. A much more potent workshop had been delivered than previously imagined. That experience reminded me that oftentimes, it’s the chaos, the so-called failures that bring depth and growth to our lives. Or as Leonard Cohen says so succinctly in his verse,

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the Light gets through
That’s how the Light gets through*

AF

The vigil and reconciliation

JOHN MCMAHON | VICTORIA REGIONAL MEETING



In 1997, five Victorian Quaker women launched what they called 'The Vigil'. Sitting on stools or standing near steps of the former post office, in the heart of Melbourne, they raised a banner with words 'Quaker silent vigil, supporting justice for (first) Australian Aborigines, (later) First Peoples of Australia'. One vigil worker handed out leaflets, the front side of them quoting Paul Keating's words about Colonists' (and assimilationists') massacres, tortures, imprisonment of Aborigines, and stealing of their children. Then seven dot point paragraphs proclaim respect for Aboriginal leaders, for disparate Aboriginal traditions, support for treaties, sovereignty, and land rights as pathways towards reconciliation.

About four different groups of Friends have worked at the vigil from 1997 to 2017, Margaret Spong and I have known them all, as we have continued in vigil service for about 17 years. It was sometimes difficult to get three Friends together: two to hold up the banner, with another to hand out the leaflets and be available to answer questions, on all Mondays of the years, from 12 noon to 1pm. Moreover, the vigil position was a hard place for holding Aborigines in the Light, during what was supposed to be a 'silent

vigil'. When trying to talk to strangers, our thin voices competed with buskers' music, such as a three-piece band, or a digeridoo. However, the liveliest vigil meeting ever, was held at this location in 2015, led by young Quakers, who had gathered for the Yearly Meeting. Many of them chased passers-by to hand them a leaflet, rather than the more passive old Quaker, who just held out one in a hand. One young Friend, with a leaflet, chased a male stranger, who was dancing in time with the three-piece band. Other young Friends displayed their own banner labelled 'Quakers for Peace'. The usual hundreds of people passing by thought that all these young participants were combining with the band for some celebratory occasion. Consequently, they accepted hundreds of our pamphlets, and tried to make sense of our message. On another occasion, a group of about 12 over-weight Pacific Islanders paused to read our pamphlet, then, forming a circle, they joined hands with us, and sang a song, in their language, about the rights of Indigenous people. Of the few walkers who stopped to talk to us about Aborigines, I especially remember one young English woman. She walked past several times, before plucking up courage to take our pamphlet. Having read it, with tears in her eyes, she tried

to give us some money. I wanted to know what had caused this grief, and she simply said that since coming to Australia, she had been boarding at Redfern in NSW.

Amongst its objectives, the vigil listed reconciliation of Aborigines with non-Aborigines in Australia, and suggested respect, courtesy towards Aborigines, construction of treaties and sovereignty, as ways forward. Although addressed mainly to non-Aborigines, I expected the Aborigines themselves would find some interest in these pathways supporting reconciliation. But I can remember only three male Aborigines, who came to discuss reconciliation with us, during my 17-year period. One came from Western Australia, and threw a handful of our leaflets into the dust. Another stood with us, or sat on our stools, for parts of two sessions, and he also came to my 80th vigil birthday party, but he disagreed about having the vigil. And a young Indigenous male, training to be an actor, also spent one session with us. He spoke to me about his profession more than reconciliation, and claimed that he had really come to listen to the busker music.

Stan Grant in *The Australian Dream*, Issue 64 of the 2016 *Quarterly Essay*, outlines various Aboriginal populations,



with different types of reconciliation. He writes that, 'A decade ago the late academic Maria Lane observed two diverging Indigenous populations: An Aboriginal woman, Lane saw the emergence of a fledging "Open Society" – opportunity- effort- and outcome-oriented – by contrast, with an "Embedded Society" – risk-averse, welfare- and security-oriented'. She further claims that 'the two populations are linked through kinship and continuing interaction'. Bess Nungarrayi Price, a Northern Territory MP, claims that '65 % (360,000) Aborigines now comprise the Open Society.' This 65% is three times more than the numbers of the Embedded Society, living in urban and regional areas, who are largely welfare dependent, (22%), and another 13% are languishing in remote areas.' Grant claims that mainly white or brown skinned Indigenous peoples of the stolen generation have staged a peaceful revolution from the 1990s, the same period as the vigil, to reject assimilation, and develop the Open Society. 'Assuming equality, armed with their cultures, and a White education, they have both endured and challenged racism, developed friendships with other Australians, and used these connections to gain access to market forces.' Grant proudly highlights the resilience of his

forebears, undergoing sacrifice, to help create a strong, confident, and self-assured Aboriginal middle-class. And as a reconciled Australian, he chooses what the Indian philosopher, Armatya Sen, labels as a multi-layered identity, featuring a strong Indigenous culture, his job as a journalist, loving a white wife, and a love for Shakespeare and European classical music.

Also, following Sen, Grant is critical of remote and vulnerable Aboriginal communities, with their people having a single Indigenous culture. Grant contrasts the Open Society with the welfare dependent Embedded Society. He claims that over the same period as the peaceful Open Society revolution, the Embedded Indigenous people 'commit suicide at rates ten times more than that of the rest of the Australian population, or were graduating from juvenile detention to adult prison.' Grant wrote: 'In a year of suicide, torture, the screams of black kids behind bars, broken lives and broken faces, deaths in lonely cells, I keep asking how can this happen in Australia, in a country like this? But it is happening and it keeps happening, to one generation after the next.' However, there are some happy Embedded people, who also claim a single Aboriginal identity, as a type of reconciliation. Moreover, Grant

writes that 'even amid dysfunction and disadvantage, there can be [for himself] a comfortable sense of belonging [with the embedded population]. I know them – they are family – and they are generous and loving and loyal'.

Although largely neglected by Indigenous people and other Australians, the vigil has brought together its workers, and they have extended their friendships to members of both these types of Indigenous societies. They have dialogued with strangers about the cruel Colonist, and assimilationist destruction of culture, during stolen generation periods. In Quaker meetings, they aroused some support for the stricken Indigenous people, and helped Concerned Australians sell their books, which were critical of the Government Intervention in the Northern Territory. Their prayers and behaviour will have helped urban placed Aborigines to look beyond their resentments, to establish friendships, gain access to market forces, like their Indigenous brothers and sisters, of what Grant with Lane calls The Open Society, and make Australia 'a place to call home'.

AF

Caring for Country in south eastern Australia

SHAREE HARPER | VICTORIA REGIONAL MEETING



Some of the most positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have been forged during get-togethers to care for the land – when Traditional Custodians and local environmental and land-care groups share their knowledge and passion in a combined effort to restore tracts of land and ‘care for country’.

At first contact the introduction of hoofed animals to south-eastern Australia radically changed the landscape. One could say that the introduction of sheep and other such livestock to Victoria caused something similar to the Irish potato famine for the Aboriginal people. Murnong and other ‘root vegetables’ were a staple part of their diet, and these were soon eaten out by the introduced animals and the soil was compacted so that they could no longer grow.

Furthermore, some traditional knowledge of plants was lost from Aboriginal communities when they were forced onto reserves and unable to access some of the plants used for medicine, food, weaving and tool-making. Some of this knowledge, however, was written down by early explorers, officials and interested individuals and now, through the work of ethnobotanists such as Beth Gott, this historical information is brought together so Aboriginal communities

are able to access and reclaim this lost knowledge.

When Beth Gott was asked in an interview what she found particularly satisfying about her job, she replied: being able to return traditional use of plants recorded in scattered old sources to present-day Indigenous communities. Through her pioneering work and through books such as *Dark Emu* non-Indigenous Australians are slowly coming to understand that the land was not ‘pristine wilderness’ when Europeans first arrived but a landscape that had been carefully managed by Aboriginal People for tens of thousands of years. That indeed the biodiversity of so-called wilderness can only be maintained if these earlier management practices are followed. To this end some ecologists are trying to understand how Aboriginal people’s careful, mosaic use of controlled fires to alter the vegetation created space and the essential conditions for many plants to reproduce and thrive.

Understandably the use of fire can evoke fear in those who are more familiar with wild, uncontrollable, destructive bush fires that have led to catastrophic events. Yet Aboriginal people, using generations of knowledge of when and how to burn, carefully used controlled, low intensity, burns in mosaic patterns to increase the supply of plants that provided the staple part of

their diet – the tuberous roots of lilies, orchids and yam-daisy (murnong). Such burning, referred to by some as fire-stick farming, provided space for these small herbaceous plants to grow, enabled many seeds dependent on fire





Beth Gott in the Aboriginal garden at Monash University's Clayton campus

Left: *Microseris lanceolata* – Murnong or yam-daisy. Picture courtesy of Royal Botanical Gardens, Sydney

to germinate and added ash to the soil thus increasing fertility. The subsequent increase in plants also increased the biodiversity of animals in an area.

Beth Gott has spent over three decades researching how Aboriginal People of South Eastern Australia utilised plants for food, fibre, tool making and medicine which she has recorded in databases. She not only returned knowledge back to Aboriginal communities but spoke with present-day Elders to record knowledge that had been passed down. Thus there has been a respectful exchange of information; with Beth Gott always

acknowledging that it was Aboriginal Intellectual Property.

In searching Beth Gott's databases I was delighted to see that one of the people who had carefully recorded the early use and care of plants by Aboriginal People was one of the earliest Quakers to visit Australia, the botanist James Backhouse. An Aboriginal Elder of Melbourne had told me she had heard of good relationships between her ancestors and some Quakers around 'first contact'. She did not know the Quakers' names but they must have been Backhouse and Walker.

Now Elders, the keepers of

traditional plant and land management knowledge, are starting to enter into Land Use Agreements with various levels of government to once again care for their country. Aboriginal Land Councils have rangers who combine traditional and contemporary land management practices to care for land, and these and local environmental and land care groups are working together to restore and revegetate large tracts of land and to protect and care for State and National Parks.

AF



‘Pay the Rent’

DUNCAN FREWIN | QUEENSLAND REGIONAL MEETING

Up to the 1990s, it would be fair to say that Queensland Quakers’ relationship with Indigenous people was within a general framework of charitable work. That is, givers gave from their abundance and receivers were expected to be grateful. The meeting was active in advocating for justice for Aboriginal people, but unequal power relationships continued unchanged.

Some time in the 1980s, however, when I was a new member of Queensland Regional Meeting, Susannah Kay (later Susannah Brindle) challenged us to consider the relationship we settler folk had with the land and with the original owners of that land. The catch phrase of the time was ‘This is Aboriginal land: pay the rent!’ After some soul-searching, Susannah decided she had to pay rent for her land in the Atherton Tablelands.

Susannah enjoyed telling the story of how she began to Pay the Rent. Having made her decision, she went blithely down to the local Aboriginal land council in Atherton to say ‘I’ve come to Pay my Rent.’ The people in the office were baffled (the campaign was not prominent in Atherton), and suggested she was at the wrong office, that rentals were handled by the town council office. The explanations and conversation that followed led to a warm welcome. The outcome for Susannah was new friendships and a lasting relationship with the traditional owners of the land around her home.

With some prodding by a couple of members, the idea slowly took root

for other Queensland Quakers. By the end of the 1980s the regional meeting had agreed to pay our rent by setting aside an amount equal to (later twice the amount of) the council charges on our property in a special fund. To this fund individual members could contribute their own amount. Since we were unclear about who to pay (several tribal lands overlap – a common situation) and since furthermore our members live throughout Queensland in the countries of many groups, we set up a committee to work out guidelines – the Pay the Rent Committee^[1]. The committee distributes the fund to Indigenous individuals or Indigenous-owned or -controlled organisations in Queensland, for their own purposes^[2]. The important principles for us are that the money is kept under the control of Indigenous people and that we do not ask for any accounts or reports. The people or organisations find us through personal contacts, or are suggested by other of our contacts in the Aboriginal community. We later agreed that the Meeting House itself should be available free of charge for any Indigenous organisation that wanted to meet there.

Our rent can never be more than a token, but it does challenge us on issues of accountability and control. Tenants are accountable to landlords for paying the rent and for taking good care of the premises. Landlords are not accountable for how they spend the rent money. Seeing ourselves as tenants has transformed our understanding of the relationship between settler Australians

and the traditional owners of the land where we live.

First, it has led us to see that we need to recognise prior sovereignty of the traditional owners and the uncomfortable truth of our history. That is still a struggle for some of this meeting, but they are engaging with the issue. Then, recognising the continuing commitment of the traditional owners to their/our land has also deepened our commitment to caring for the land. This works out in our care for the forest that fills our inner city block, but it spills over into our general approach to environmental concerns. Finally, by NOT asking our landlords to account for how they spend their rent we are learning to trust. Some Indigenous people have mentioned that it is the trust we have tried to show that they appreciate. Others mention the acknowledgement of the truth of our history.

Finally, we have learned that the most important thing is to listen to Indigenous people. Only if we truly listen can we build relationships based on respect. And in the end, the purpose of paying the rent is the relationships that we build. We ask ourselves if they are built on mutual respect, on appreciating what we offer each other, on seeing that until we are all free and equal in dignity we are all oppressed and fettered.

We do not pretend this transformation is easy or complete. Answering even straightforward

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Listening To Aboriginal People

DAVID PURNELL, | CANBERRA REGIONAL MEETING

The Committee on Racial Equality (CORE) began in 2007 on the initiative of Waratah Rosemary Gillespie. Based in Canberra, its initial focus was on the Northern Territory intervention and its impact on Aboriginal communities. The group includes Quakers, indigenous people, and other concerned citizens. Since it began it has examined and acted upon issues such as sovereignty, treaty, stolen generation, justice, language, constitutional recognition, and closing the gap. Apart from making occasional public statements, it has met with politicians and bureaucrats to make representations. It has also supported the gatherings at Silver Wattle arranged by the YM First Nations Peoples' Concerns Committee.

In 2015 the group decided to take a new direction by offering a listening space to Aboriginal people to share their stories in a supportive environment. The intention was to encourage reflection and conversations among those present, but not to make decisions. The Canberra Local Meeting agreed to be part of this outreach, and from August 2015 until now there have been six events held on Sunday afternoons for two hours each. Here is a list of those who have shared:

- **George Villafior**, an Aboriginal lawyer, told of his journey from Wagiman (Darwin), via the North Queensland Land Council, to working on care and protection of children in the ACT. He described the ongoing confusion created by attempts to achieve land rights and native title, and affirmed the importance of Australians learning and listening more before making major decisions on recognition of the first peoples.

- **Lara Pullin Gundungurra** (from Lake George/Weereewaa) spoke of her activism in connection with the

Aboriginal Tent Embassy for 25 years, and in supporting sovereignty. She also referred to difficult interactions with police over a range of issues in recent years.

- **Murrumu** (Yidindji Nth Qld) explained that his people were excluded from the constitution of the Commonwealth in 1901, and that he was now resuming his tribal identity after years as a journalist. This involved giving up his 'western' identity and asserting the sovereignty of the Yidindji people in negotiating a treaty with governments for shared use of the land.

- **Samia Goudie** (Bundjalung) was born in Canberra but removed from her mother at birth to grow up in an adopted family. She connected with her mother many years later, after searching for a long time. Her own life journey has taken her around the world, and she now heads the Aboriginal medical education program at the ANU Medical School, encouraging the development of more Aboriginal doctors and more awareness among other medical practitioners.

- **Guumaal Ngambri Mingku** also known as Shane Mortimer, used words from the Guumal language (Lake George) to open the meeting. He described the early interactions between European settlers and local Aborigines, the forced re-location and break-up of Aboriginal families, and their survival in spite of great injustice. Shane outlined in detail the way the legal system has systematically deprived first nations peoples of their rights and lives, and raised the question whether genocide had been committed.

- **Douglas Amar Amarfio**, child of an Aboriginal mother, spoke of his early childhood in Canberra with a white stepfather/anthropologist, and his later time in Papua New Guinea being nourished by the local food and

feeling part of a culture in contact with the land. After that he was in several dance companies (including Bangarra) which toured and helped him learn about links between his people and the environment. He is now keen to help those in the ACT understand the ancient links with the original custodians, and how the Griffin plan for Canberra took into account the landmarks that were of significance to the first peoples.

- **Judith Kelly** from the Amangu/Yamatji nation in the Geraldton area of WA, was adopted by a European family in Perth and did not realise she was Aboriginal until in her teens. She finally met her birth family in 1989 and keeps contact. Her life has been a series of awakenings to her true identity. Her experience as a mother of sons has led her to a very cynical view of police harassment. She has moved to Canberra and become active in the Tent Embassy. Her call is for Australians to 'come back to the land' and listen to the wisdom and knowledge of the original people and nations of this country.

There has been a very positive response to each talk, and an opportunity for questions and discussion after each speaker. Over 40 people (including many non-Quakers) have attended each event, and the series will continue this year. The meetings have enhanced our understanding of the severe impact of European settlement on generations of first nations peoples, whilst at the same time emphasising the resilience and generosity they have shown. The CORE group has found it very helpful to be able to discuss the issues raised by the speakers and to be better informed about what steps we might take to advance justice for the first peoples of our land.

AF

Jigalong – a place to slow down

TERESE DOUGLAS | NEW SOUTH WALES REGIONAL MEETING



I have a pair of Dunlop thongs stained with red earth from a visit to Jigalong four years ago. They are not particularly attractive but are very durable. And maybe that sums up the life of the Martu people who have made Jigalong their home.

Jigalong is a remote Aboriginal community where few people just 'drop in'. Permission from the local council is needed. But this doesn't always work. Although I was there as an official visitor for three weeks I never received my permit.

Life was very slow: from the road speed of 20 km throughout the community to the pace of everyday living. As a volunteer adult literacy and numeracy tutor I probably had 10 people visit our makeshift classroom.

But the rhythm of life actually lulled me. My walking pace slowed, I gained weight and just enjoyed the sitting and occupying myself on the off chance that someone might come by with a request for help.

The classroom was at the back of the community/council chambers. We had fly screens with no windows and the concrete floor was covered by the red dirt that blew in regularly. My morning routine was to sweep it out the doorway as the council manager would come by with his pie and sauce for breakfast. Although Indigenous he was not a local Martu man. But he did work alongside the council made up of locals. His council chambers also had red dirt throughout as well as people and their dogs wandering in at any time.

The council's executive secretary

had spent many years living in various remote communities. Her dog came to work every day with her and sat under her desk. This larger-than-life woman was not able to utter two sentences without swearing. I was staying with her and another volunteer as there was no other accommodation left for us. We made a strange trio. One: a diminutive retired academic from Canberra who would spend his winters volunteering in order to escape the cold of Canberra and rent out his home. Two: our host who had had unsuccessful lap-band surgery and loved the remote communities but really couldn't stand most of the people living there. Three: me, a middle-aged adult educator from Sydney. Each of us had a passion to use our skills in a positive way to assist in this remote community.

But life is a lot more complicated than that, and three weeks is really nothing! As a volunteer with Indigenous Communities Volunteers (ICV) my resumé was held in a database for requests from any indigenous community across Australia for people with specific skills their community may require for short or long term projects. ICV did the selection process and paid for initial training, transport and accommodation. My role was in response to a request from the Martu community to have adult education available, as many of the residents had little high school education.

You may have heard of the Martu people. They are seen as the last indigenous Australians to have lived a traditional nomadic life. Their lands

were chosen for testing rockets in 1960s and so all people were required to move off the land into settlements in order to be accounted for safely. The ABC has made a documentary (<http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2010/03/08/2839911.htm>) interviewing some of these people. Jigalong was a government outpost and many indigenous people had already drifted to it by the lure of western ways. Martu land stretches across the Little Sandy Desert and today people live in a number of small communities stretching across hundreds of kilometres. That the communities are still closely linked is evidenced from the movement of people for funerals and other family events.

So this brings up one of the many challenges of working with the Martu in the 21st century. Schools are not set up for children who move from one locality to another because of family business. There is an assumption by the educational bureaucracy that people will be committed to stability for the sake of children and their education for a few years at least.

Many (NGOs) non-government organisations come to Martu full of great ideas and with generous pots of money. I met workers from one organisation that was called 'Building Communities' who decided to put on a sausage sizzle on a monthly basis. They didn't seem to see the irony in this: how could community be built once a month for an hour or so? How could outsiders build a community in a remote area? Why would the Martu

have trust in yet another organisation's plans for them? And of course why is there an assumption that the Martu aren't already a strong community? I came to believe that many NGOs are required to tick off their connection with an indigenous community and that Jigalong was the one many chose. In fact, I was invited to attend an interagency meeting. The main focus was how to create a database of the NGOs working in the area so they could communicate with each other. I remember my initial reaction was to question how would this actually be working towards anything of value for the local people?

And it is not only NGOs that come bearing gifts. Being located in the iron ore rich Pilbarra region, Jigalong is subjected to many large mining companies wanting to share their largesse due to government requirements. I was shown the incredible 'men's shed' built by BHP for the locals. This shed was more like an airport hanger. It was a forlorn but pristine building surrounded by a large wire fence. It was felt that a building this good needed to be protected. But at the time of my visit it had not been used and there were no plans for its use. Another great plan was to have a job expo in the main street of Jigalong. Nothing eventuated from this idea either.

So how do people actually live and what is their source of income?

All families receive some form of government assistance. There are

limited jobs in the community such as working at the large store, the school, the council centre, the health centre or the car mechanic's. There was also a local church and some other government services. One of the most popular and successful programs has been the collaboration between national parks and wildlife and the local people who are able to assist with such skills as controlled burning, locating waterholes and identifying flora and fauna. This has been so successful that discussion regarding a women's only group was underway. Also there were many women who would spend their days at a shed painting. These works were then sold through a cooperative (<http://www.martumili.com.au/>) in Newman. The artists would also tour across northern Australia meeting up with other artists. Sometimes geologists doing exploratory work would come to the community and offer to pay for the services of any local who could assist with guiding to remote locations in order to find new mineral deposits. People might take this opportunity if they needed extra money.

But on the whole people lived a very quiet life. Some would play cards in the heat of the day gambling their allowances. Many would stay indoors with the air-conditioning to watch TV. I realised from one of my students that many people don't tell the time: the school bells designate when things need to happen such as when the store will be open and when it is time to collect the kids.

Where does Reconciliation fit

into this? I left Jigalong with some confusion over the value of what I had contributed in my short stay. I know ICV volunteers often felt that because we had been invited in by the community that somehow we were on higher moral ground than the 40 plus NGOs that decided what they thought was the best action for Jigalong. I loved the slower pace of life and remember my mixed reactions to a trio of motor bike riders who dropped into town one day on their way around the state. They had no idea that the road would be covered with red dirt (despite being on the edge of the Little Sandy Desert!) and thought they would be able to stay a while in Jigalong. They were surprised that they were not given permission to stay, not realising that this is one of the few powers the community has. I knew it was my privilege to spend just a short time in this remote community so distant both in location and lifestyle from most of Australia.

When I left, journeying through the sparse bush to the mining town of Newman and on the plane full of miners leaving for anywhere else but this hot harsh region, I realised that it was in the stillness and slowness that I actually glimpsed Reconciliation. It isn't always about doing something, it can be about learning through just being and listening and watching.

AF



QSA Notes

Indigenous projects

JACKIE PERKINS | QSA ADMINISTRATOR



Some attendees at a Kornar Winnmil Yunti annual camp. Photo: Kornar Winnmil Yunt

Although not as numerous as projects supported overseas, QSA continues, as it has from its inception, to work with Australian Indigenous projects in many states of Australia. Since QSA moved to Sydney, support from its Aboriginal Concerns Fund has been extended to the Purga community in Queensland for its native plant nursery project, to the Kapalulangu Women in Western Australia, the Eleanor Duncan Health Centre in New South Wales, and the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre in Alice Springs to name a few. A common factor in these projects and the current ones, is that the links to them have come from Quakers who have seen or heard about the work they are achieving and think that they would welcome additional financial support and interest shown from QSA.

One current project in South Australia, also suggested by a Friend, is with Kornar Winnmil Yunti. QSA's original

support began in 2012, and supported a second camp for men from around the state to come together to encourage conversations and to explore, understand and improve their state of physical and mental wellbeing by re-connecting to their Aboriginality and spirituality. The camp was underpinned by Indigenous concepts of wellbeing, that addressed physical, emotional, spiritual, cultural and community needs.

As a result of the feedback from the participants, a project was formed to provide not only an annual camp, but also regular smaller groups in different locations to give more sustainable support for men who needed it. This help has been successful in bringing about a reduction in domestic violence, which has been of benefit to the whole community, and QSA was pleased to be supportive of this evolving process. An important aspect of the project is that communities can invite the program

into their community, rather than the program being imposed, as is often the case. Kornar Winnmil Yunti feels this aspect is fundamental to the successful outcome of the project due to its implied message of self-determination and respect. A sustainable formal network of Aboriginal men's groups and programs across South Australia has made it possible for Kornar Winnmil Yunti to offer on-going support to these groups in regards to training and development as well as other activities.

The next phase was to look more closely at younger males, helping them to come to terms with issues such as depression and to prevent youth suicide. Using groups that already existed was considered to be important, and so football clubs within the region were a useful link, as was the White Ribbon Campaign and its ambassadors in the state. A pilot project with a few clubs showed Kornar Winnmil Yunti that this

was a good way to meet Aboriginal youth, and that having men recount their own personal stories was a very powerful approach. A second project involving ten more clubs was equally successful. One attendee commented:

I just wanted to send you a quick email to thank you for the training day yesterday, I thought you were both brilliant – incredibly responsive, vigorous and enlightening discussion and you guys are gifted teachers. It was an honour to have the opportunity to participate. I am currently studying community development and it was wonderful to listen to you touch on grassroots/ bottom up approaches to community engagement and organising. I couldn't help but think that I'd love to do a voluntary placement at your organisation one day.

Thanks again and all the best, you are both doing unbelievably important work'

The success and merits of these projects, and comments from the participants, led Kornar Winmil Yunti to think and plan their next move, which was to find a way of supporting the women and children in the community also. A decision was made to employ an Aboriginal social

worker to specifically work with women and children, and QSA has agreed to support this for a six month trial period, beginning from February 2017. QSA's role has been to support Kornar Winmil Yunti by assisting with project design and evaluation processes where possible, and taking a keen interest in this and other aspects of their work.

Another new project has just started in Queensland, supporting Indigenous offenders through the Murri Court system. QSA is linking with another NGO called Five Bridges to provide this support, which is in three parts. The first is to support people physically with toiletries and clean clothing to enable them to give a good presentation in court, as many of the defendants are homeless. With this also comes funding for transport for some of the Elders who meet with the defendants and write cultural reports that may mitigate sentencing. While some payments to Elders are now and again provided, there is no provision for those frail Elders who really need a taxi for safe transport home at the end of a long day. All the defendants supported in this way must have pleaded guilty.

A second component is to provide an art and healthy eating program over four weeks, run and administered by

the Elders and the Court Co-ordinator. And the third involves cultural support for Indigenous prisoners. Funding will be provided to cover the expenses of the Cully Old Girls to make two or more trips from Cunnamulla to the South-East Queensland prisons to visit inmates from the Cunnamulla region. Some of the Old Girls will be related to quite a few inmates. These visits provide, in the words of David Carline:

face to face talking to people they grew up with and have always had in their lives, about news from back home, and encouragement for when they get out that people will try their best to help them get resettled. They let them know they are being thought of, they are not forgotten.

For Friends wanting to make donation to continue support of these and other Aboriginal projects being managed by QSA, please send your donations to our CUA bank account, BSB 814 282, account number 50585902.

AF

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development, and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The Purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are culturally sensitive, as well as being economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

119 Devonshire St Surry Hills, NSW 2010 Australia • administration@qsa.org.au
PHONE +61 2 9698 9103 • FAX: +61 2 9225 9241 • ABN 35 989 797 918



Know thy Friend: Anne Brown

INTERVIEWED BY PAMELA LEACH FOR *THE AUSTRALIAN FRIEND*

AF: Anne, tell us something of your background.

AB: I was born and raised in Melbourne and have lived in Melbourne and various parts of rural Victoria for most of my life. In the 1960s we spent four years in Papua New Guinea where two of our five children were born. Howard and I had been married in 1962 and had forty-one full, eventful years together. We lost our then youngest child in a tragic accident when she only a toddler. Years later we adopted a second son who came to us as a troubled ten-and-a-half-year-old. As a family we travelled a good deal, led by a keen sense of adventure. Perhaps this has contributed to making us the close family we are. I still strive to live with openness to the unknown. This, among other things, draws me to Friends: they are willing to live adventurously.

I was a primary teacher for 30 years before my career took a new direction. Having begun a degree in Archaeology and Aboriginal Studies I went to work at Victoria Archaeological Survey. My work gave me an opportunity to get to know many of the Victorian Aboriginal communities, spending time in their country, listening to and recording their stories, and importantly returning cultural resources to their rightful owners. It was a fruitful and rewarding time of my life. Much of my work involved compiling cultural heritage kits. Researching and writing material for schools I felt that I was contributing in some small way to righting the shamefully neglected history generations of Australians had been denied.

AF: What particular events or circumstances drew you to Indigenous people?

AB: My father was very accepting, always wanting to know about people and places. This influenced me a great deal. When I was about ten years old, we were traveling in northern Victoria, when we stopped to offer a man a lift. He didn't want one, but we sat together under a tree and talked. The respect that my father showed to this black scruffily dressed man made a deep impression on me. Not only was this the first time I had been close to an Aboriginal person, but also the first time I heard myself referred to as European. Until then Europeans were the New Australians who were filling up the spaces in my western suburban neighbourhood.

AF: What inspired you to write *Wimmera Journeys*?

AB: While preparing *Wotjobaluk Dreaming* I spent a great deal of time in the Wimmera District in western Victoria. A case study of the Wotjobaluk people and their country, the book aimed to demonstrate to senior students just what rich resources are available to those who would seek to know that other history and its relevance today. The many hours I spent with my friend and mentor Uncle Jack Kennedy as he walked and talked his country are among my most precious memories. It was at this time I first encountered the stories about the boy known as William Wimmera.

I have always been fascinated by the interconnectedness of truth, history and story. A kernel of truth is retold

with all kinds of embellishments. I wanted to find out the truth about this boy, a nineteenth century part of the stolen generation. But in addition to William's story, it is a story of time, and of place and of the men who had such a profound effect on his life – Horatio Ellerman, the squatter, and the Anglican minister, Septimus Chase. These men did not fulfill our stereotype of wicked hard men intent on destroying the blackfellas and their way of life. That is too simple. It is my whitefella story as well. I wanted to somehow catch those disparate voices in retelling this story. Hence the book is a mixture of fact and fiction. For instance when living in Reading I had William live for a short time with a Quaker family. This allowed me to unpack some different ways of understanding Spirit. On the other hand archival letters record that when shown pictures of angels, the youngster had responded by describing the angels he had seen and that Jesus was his brother. Anglican Christianity had little understanding of this Wotjobaluk boy's spiritual experiences.

AF: Has your own Spiritual life been shaped or altered by your closeness to Indigenous people and cultural heritage?

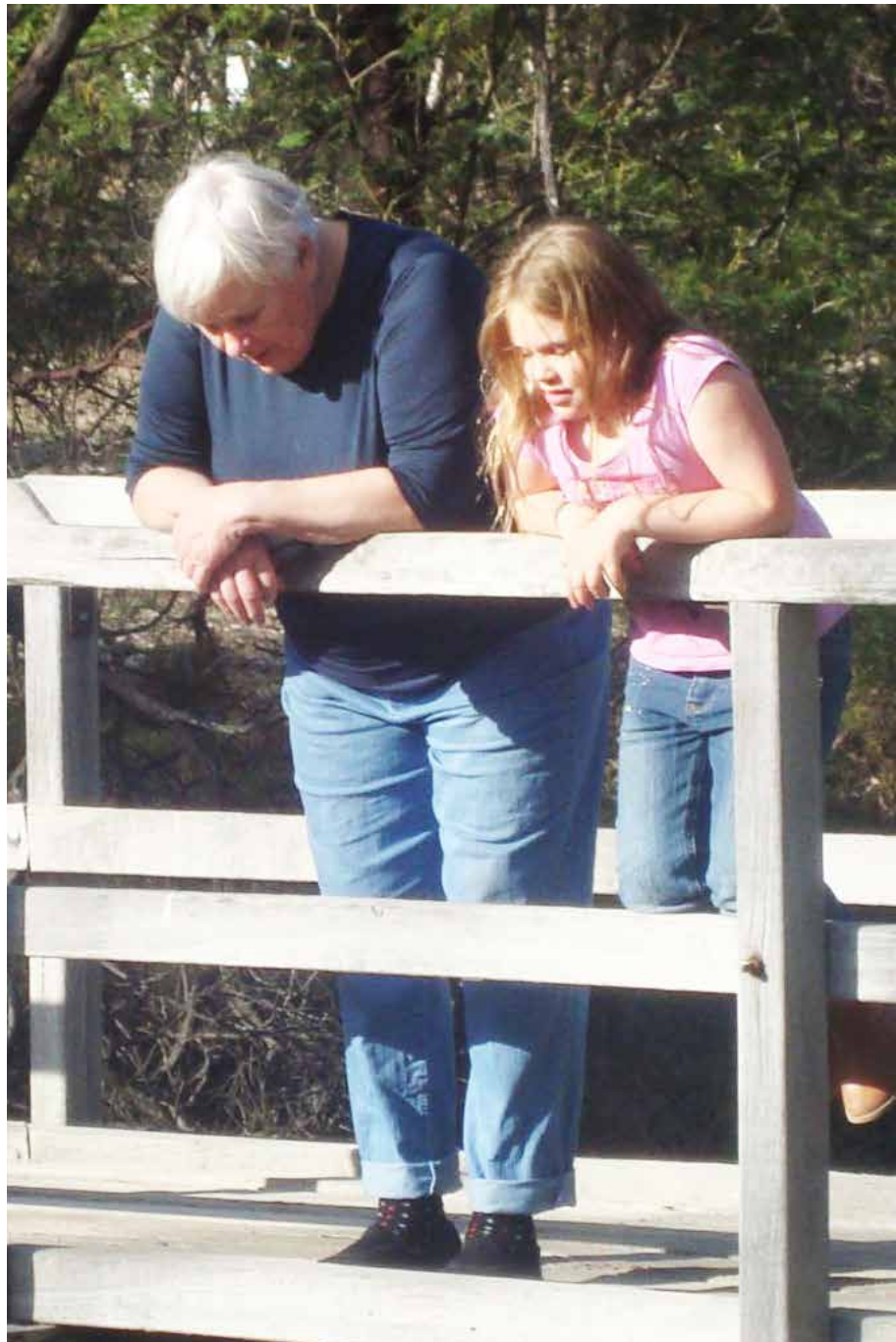
AB: Very much so. One of the reasons I was drawn to Quakers was that this group of people could accept that I found the Spirit in an ancient gum tree, or the bush. Once, when I was about 20, I was walking across a dry lake bed in the Mallee. I was suddenly stopped. I felt, streaming up through my feet and suffusing my body, an

indescribable warmth. It was a very powerful Spiritual experience that has stayed with me ever since.

These days my spiritual life is very important to me. In 2015 I went on a journey through Quaker country. I undertook a silent retreat at Swarthmore Hall, spent two weeks with Bamford Quaker Community and did two short courses in Ministry at Woodbrooke College. I was trying to discern what I am required to do in the next stage of my life. I felt clear that, with the help of the Spirit, I could contribute towards a positive, harmonious future for the new Victoria Friends Centre. I find this prospect very exciting and already such good things are happening. We have such a great opportunity for outreach while enriching the life of our Quaker community

One of the liberating things has been that ever since I had come to know Aboriginal friends I have been envious about their sense of Country and belonging. One of these friends was astonished. She put her hand on mine, and said 'It is not just ours, it is yours'. What a gift. That is where much of my Spiritual life lies. David Tacey gave the Tasmanian Peace Trust lecture in 2016 (see the review in this issue of AF) touching on precisely this treasure that Indigenous people want to give non-Indigenous communities.

I am doing Meeting for Learning this year. It is a wonderful experience. One of my projects is 'Meeting Meister Eckhart in the Australian Bush'. Each



week I go out in the bush to ride my bicycle or walk. I take a sandwich, a thermos, my camera, and my copy of Meister Eckhardt. I take pictures, read, write and reflect. It is very rich. I write in a rough notebook, a little diary, telling what I saw and experienced. I take lots of photos. When I get home I compile my scrapbook, with quotes from the chapter I am reading and my diary notes.

AF: You question the conventional understandings of 'salvation' that are imposed on the boy William in your book. Do you have thoughts

about where the cultural and political 'salvation' of First Nations people really lies?

AB: My initial thought is 'Who am I to say?' We each need to find our own journey. We whites have made decisions for Aboriginal people for 200 plus years; we never should have been involved with them in this way. We can assist as far as supporting legislation they want to see go forward, but we must stop presuming that we

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23



Spirit Country: The Aboriginal Gift as Non-Violent Resistance

DAVID TACEY

The lecture is available in booklet form from PO Box 451 North Hobart 7001 for \$10.

Professor David Tacey, the 2016 annual Tasmanian Peace Trust lecturer, grew up in culturally divided Alice Springs. He felt that 'the consciousness of Aboriginal people was closer to the divine than that of my own European-Australian culture'. He defines this as 'a collision of ego and soul' in which Aboriginal people have chosen to develop and foreground the soul. He traces this, as a transformation of personality, a transparency to the divine. It is *metanoia* in Greek thinking and what Christ called for.

The lecture calls for, not an adoption of Aboriginal perceptiveness, but a return to our own cultural sources of reality. When we are sensitive to the depths of our forms of spirituality we understand that Aboriginal people want to give to us the gift of deep listening, *dadirri*. We might wonder why they would want to give it to us. David explains that Aboriginal law expects that a way of touching the humanity of invaders will be found so that they set aside warlike behaviour. Echoes of 'Love your enemies' and the Peace Testimony?

Colonisation has damaged the balance between 'welcome to country' and 'do no harm'. With mutual respect an exchange of non-violence/loving relationship can be offered and received

based on shared spirituality. David derides the slickness and superficiality of New Age industries, also political correctness which has vested interests in protecting itself from spirituality.

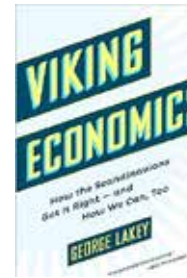
A special aspect of David Tacey's writings are quotes from elders from remote communities about the yearning they have for deep communication with Westernised people. They believe this may come when we go back to the roots of our spirituality – perhaps Celtic or Judeo-Christian – to when the earth seemed alive. Some writers, such as Catholic nun Veronica Brady and poet Les Murray have also identified the opportunity for renewed connection with the 'ground of our being'.

This lecture will resonate for Quaker readers wanting to connect with First Nations peoples on a spiritual level. Not so clear is how urban Indigenous people carry the culture and religion that more remote people practice and whether they will be ready to share. David's experiences will help to make bridges at a time when there seems more hope for real understanding and respect between us all.

'The elders who bear the gift of listening and pattern thinking seem like voices crying in the wilderness, and yet despite their lack of visibility and the muted response, their work is in the spirit of the great liberation movements of the last hundred years. The gift shares with Ghandi, Mandela and King the idea that only an activation of the spirit will set people free.

KATHERINE PURNELL

Tasmania Regional Meeting



Friends heard much that resonates with issues raised by Charlotte Meacham when she visited Australia in the early 1970s. Her report, 'Listen to the Aborigines' was based on statements Aboriginal people made to her. It appears in spoken and written forms on the Quaker Learning Australia website (<http://www qlau quakers org au/listen-to-the-aborigines/>).

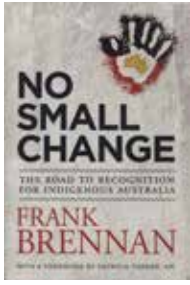
Viking Economics

GEORGE LAKEY

Viking Economics: How the Scandinavians got it right – and how we can too by George Lakey, published by Melville House, New York and London, 2016

The sub-title of the book – How the Scandinavians got it right, and how we can too – illustrates the positive intent of the author. George Lakey, a Quaker for many years and a veteran of such groups as the Movement for a New Society (in Philadelphia, USA), focuses on the nonviolent options available for all societies in bringing about a better world characterised by equality, shared social justice, healthier citizens, and smarter environmental policies.

From long-term personal experience living in and visiting Scandinavia (his wife is Norwegian), George Lakey has a deep appreciation of the struggles needed to give the people there the strength to resist pressures to conform to a neo-liberal agenda of competition, consumerism and corporate power. Travelling through the historical and contemporary experience of the Nordic countries (Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland), the author highlights occasions when the people empowered



themselves to overcome difficulties and ensure the continuation of societies that value equality, support entrepreneurs and workers, use co-operatives to enhance productivity, encourage full participation in life-long education, and create effective work/life balance.

The book then turns to the relevance of the Nordic model to the USA (and other western countries) by posing a series of questions and giving comprehensive examples of how the approach could work elsewhere, despite different historical and cultural factors. George Lakey concludes with a call to action – ‘The next step for readers of this book might be to support the progressive social movements emerging around us and to embrace the value of design, to project the contours of what a political economy could look like that would support their cause’. I highly commend this book.

DAVID PURNELL

Canberra Regional Meeting

No Small Change – The road to recognition for Indigenous Australia

FRANK BRENNAN

No Small Change – The road to recognition for Indigenous Australia by Frank Brennan, published by University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 2015

I bought this book after going to a talk given by the author, Frank Brennan. I was impressed by his concern for

Aboriginal people and culture, and by his knowledge of the Constitution. He stressed in his talk that the Australian Constitution is a legal document generally read only by lawyers. It sets out the relative powers of the federal and state governments. It is not a policy statement. How then can changes to the Constitution help towards reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

The first part of the book deals with the 1967 referendum. The book was published in 2015, and written when Tony Abbott was Prime Minister, and when it was hoped that a referendum on Aboriginal recognition in the Constitution could be held in May 2017, the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum. This no longer seems likely. The 1967 referendum made two small changes in the constitution. The first was the removal of Section 127 which provided that:

In reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted.

As Aboriginal people already had the right to vote, it was obviously ridiculous that they could not be counted to determine fair electoral boundaries.

The other amendment was to section 51(26) which gave the Commonwealth Parliament power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:

the people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws.

The words ‘other than the aboriginal race’ were deleted. This provision in the Constitution came out of the White Australia Policy. It was intended that people of colour would no longer be allowed to enter Australia, and that it might be necessary to pass special laws to manage those already here. Aboriginal people were in a different category – no more were likely to come, and those already here were to be the responsibility of the State Governments.

Fortunately, by 1967 public sentiment towards people of other races was changing. The policy of the government was now to assimilate them. This policy had its shortcomings, and assumed the superiority of the dominant white culture, but it did at least require that everyone should be equal before the law. For this, it was necessary for Aboriginal people to be full citizens of the Commonwealth.

In legal terms, the 1967 changes to the Constitution were minimal. But they were to have unforeseen consequences. They were, in the words of the title of the book, *No Small Change*.

Two significant events were already underway. In 1966 the Gurinji people led by Vincent Lingiari had walked off Lord Vestey’s cattle station demanding better conditions and recognition of their traditional land rights. And in 1963 the Yirrkala people had petitioned parliament for title to their traditional land in the Northern Territory in an attempt to stop the mining of bauxite which threatened their traditional hunting and fishing areas.

Neither of these groups wanted to assimilate. They wanted to be able to

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

continue their traditional way of life. In 1970 the Yirrkala people took their case to the High Court. They hoped that the new powers afforded to the Commonwealth by the 1967 referendum would enable the court to grant them title to their land. They lost the case, the court ruling that there was no law under which it could make this grant. However, many people involved in the case believed that this reflected a deficiency in the law. Land Rights was thus on the agenda.

In 1974, Gough Whitlam handed to Vincent Lingari lease documents over the lands belonging to the Gurinji people. But the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act was not passed until 1975 by the Fraser Government.

Land Rights legislation would not have been possible without the 1967 referendum, or without the change in public sentiment which made the success of this referendum possible. The latter part of the book considers what further changes are now required.

The first area of concern is the racist provisions which are still in the Constitution. Section 25 provides that:

if by the law of any State all persons of any race are disqualified from voting at elections for the more numerous House of the Parliament of the State, in reckoning the number of the people of the State or of the Commonwealth, persons of that race resident in that State shall not be counted.

Brennan believes most Australians would support the removal of this provision.

More difficult is the amended section which enables the Commonwealth to pass laws with respect to the people of any race. Many people took this to mean that the Commonwealth could only pass laws for the benefit of 'people of any race'. This, however, is not the plain meaning of the words. Brennan cites the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Act of 1997 which took away the provision of protection for sacred sites, and which the High Court allowed. Various amendments to this section of the Constitution have been suggested, such as a provision for 'making of laws or measures for the purpose of overcoming disadvantage'. However, some Aboriginal people are suspicious of laws intended to overcome their supposed disadvantage, especially when such laws are made by white people.

The other issue is whether there should be a recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution, and what form this should take. A start has been made here with the passing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Act 2013, which states:

The Parliament, on behalf of the people of Australia, recognises that the continent and the islands now known as Australia were first occupied by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Parliament, on behalf of the people of Australia, acknowledges the continuing relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their traditional lands and waters.

The Parliament, on behalf of the people of Australia, acknowledges and respects the continuing cultures, languages and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Brennan suggests that this acknowledgement should be inserted in the Constitution, followed by a clause enabling the Commonwealth to make laws with respect to:

the cultures, languages and heritage of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their continuing relationship with their traditional lands and waters.

I found this book very informative, and finally, encouraging.

When the terms of the 1967 referendum were drawn up, no Aboriginal person was involved in the process. (Indeed, it was not until 1965 that Charles Perkins became the first Aboriginal person to graduate from university.) It is an encouraging sign that there are now many Aboriginal leaders involved in discussions about further changes to the Constitution, and that no referendum is likely to go ahead without strong Aboriginal support. In the end, the letter of the law is less important than the spirit of the people who make the law.

RAE LITTING

New South Wales Regional Meeting

‘Pay the Rent’

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

questions such as who the traditional owners are can be confusing – there are no simple answers. Giving up the concept of ‘worthiness of the recipient’ and replacing it with an aspiration to justice, can lead to uncomfortable compromises. In one instance, we were approached about providing the Meeting House free to a group of Indigenous counsellors in the public service who wanted to meet for their own healing. They were offered government office space but felt it would not facilitate the healing. We had to search our hearts for the just response. Was this an Indigenous controlled organisation? Were we letting the government off the hook? What did love require?

Power relationships are also unsettling. Some of our members still struggle with giving up the power that goes with giving out of charity – I find myself having to check my thinking every time we meet. Charity is deeply ingrained in my settler sense

of selfworth. The concept of Aboriginal sovereignty is another stumbling block for some Friends. What does Aboriginal sovereignty mean for this nation-state? What may we have to give up? Trust is also a big step. Some of us struggle to trust. We long to know that ‘our’ money is being well spent. Yet despite all these hesitations, resistances, reservations, I dare to say there has been a shift, no matter how large, for every individual member in the direction of equal power-sharing, respect, trust. And this has made it worthwhile.

Finally, I would like to return to Susannah’s vision. Paying the Rent corporately is important, but it does not replace the direct personal contact with the traditional owners of the land around our home that Susannah forged. That sort of personal contact was Susanna’s opening to a deeper understanding, a greater growth in the Spirit. For myself, I see the Pay the Rent Fund is a sort of default position beckoning me to the next step, establishing a relationship

with the traditional owners of the place where I live.

I recommend to other meetings or individuals that you consider how Paying the Rent may help you in pursuing the work of the Spirit among us.

[1] The committee this year consists of David Carline (who attends by phone hookup), Sue Doessel, Duncan Frewin, and Sitara Gare.

[2] Examples are: providing travel costs for a group of women from western Queensland who travel to south-east Queensland to visit prisoners from their community; travel costs for frail elders who work in the Murri Court in Brisbane; a group taking at-risk young people for bush camps where they are taught to be proud of themselves and their culture; Auntie Jean Philips’ Vision Trust supporting individuals and families in need; and supporting the grass-roots community work of two Aboriginal members of our meeting

AF

Know thy Friend

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

know what is good for them, such as the Intervention. This is partly why I have laid down my activism. I don’t feel called to politics at this time. I certainly hope all my friendships flourish. We can no longer impose our will on other people. This does them violence and

hurts our relationships with them and our own wellbeing too.

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is ‘thank you’, that will be enough. Meister Eckhart

Anne Brown’s *Wimmera Journeys*

(2015) is published by Xlibris. Orders@Xlibris.com.au It is a powerful account of a boy whose path takes him from western Victoria to Reading, England in the 1850s. It is dedicated to William, or Warranook, and to Uncle Jack Kennedy.

AF

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MailingList@AustralianFriend.org

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