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THE TEACHER FROM MOUNT MARGARET

25 YEARS OF SERVICE TO ABORIGINAL EDUCATION*

May O'Brien wanted to become a teacher while she was still a small girl. There is nothing unusual in that. Other girls also want to be teachers when they grow up - but few have ever faced the problems and difficulties of May O'Brien. She would have given up long ago in the face of white prejudice and hostility, if it had not been for her unrelenting determination to reach her goal as a teacher.

It is easy now for Aborigines to become teachers. They get plenty of help and encouragement. But it wasn't like that when May was born at Laverton in the 1930's. At that time, she claims, white people used to say that the Aborigines in the Eastern Gold-fields were "the worst in Australia" - and they were treated as such by whites.

She left that hostile atmosphere when she was sent with other Aboriginal children to the Mount Margaret Mission.

There were no qualified teachers at Mount Margaret but the mission staff realised the importance of education and did what they could for the Aboriginal children. It opened up a new world for May.

The staff received Correspondence School lessons for their own children. They copied these for the Aboriginal children, but because there were too many children for full-time lessons they were split into two groups, one being taught in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Each group thus got two hours schooling a day. It wasn't much, but the grounding in basic subjects was good, particularly in English.

In those days, the only way out of the mission for a girl was through marriage, but Mary did not want to marry at that time. She wanted to teach.

Then there came a number of changes in government policy and attitudes towards Aborigines. There were better opportunities

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for young people. Alvan House was opened in Perth for girls who wanted to go on to secondary school, and May was one of the first students accepted. For a teenager from a remote mission it was a strange, and almost terrifying experience.

City white people who had no knowledge of Aborigines or of what Alvan House was all about had tried to stop it being opened. The girls knew this and they were frightened before they even reached the city. They had no idea what kind of treatment they would get.

May had to attend the Old Perth Girls' High School. On her first day she was terrified.

"My first impression of that first day was of the huge assembly hall full of millions of pale-faced kids," she recalls. "I felt terribly alone. There were other part-Aboriginal girls there, but I was the only one who was recognisably Aboriginal."

But she found there was nothing to be afraid of. Her classmates were kind and helpful, and May now says her high school days were "wonderful". She felt embarrassed at times because she was much older than most of the other girls, and she was just beginning high school when some girls were going to work. But she kept going because she knew she had to if she was to achieve her ambition.

From high school she went on to Claremont Teachers College. She graduated, and became a qualified teacher. She was sent to her first school - Mount Margaret. She was back where she had started.

That was in 1954. People in the Goldfields who had told her over and over again that she could never become a teacher were astounded. They found it hard to believe that an Aboriginal girl could become a qualified teacher.

May stayed at Mount Margaret school for five years. It was a difficult time in many ways. The school was still in its pioneering days, for it had been officially established only in 1949. She was strict with the children, and some mothers complained that she was no different to a white person. May was only a young girl, but she told the mothers firmly that if they wanted their children to be educated, they were not to interfere. It worked. She earned their respect and later they expressed their pride in having such a good teacher of their own.

It was at Mount Margaret that May's determination to help her own people began to extend beyond just teaching. She helped in the local health program to combat eye disease, and did all she could to help improve conditions of living among the Aborigines.

From Mount Margaret, May was transferred to Mogumber, where she found it a surprise to be working among Aboriginal people who had lost most of their customs and culture away from the tribal influence.

She had two happy years at Mogumber and then came the big plunge into an ordinary city primary school, at Mount Hawthorn, Perth. As usual, she expected problems because she was an Aboriginal, but happily found there were none. She was welcomed and helped by the headmistress, Miss Harbeck, and found the staff friendly and willing to assist her if necessary.

Because May had previously taught at Aboriginal schools, she was nervous about teaching city children. In fact, her Mount Margaret experience was of value, because she was once again among children who were migrants and, not knowing English very well, had the same kind of problems as Aboriginal children.

May's friends tried to persuade her to go on to university to become better qualified, but she made her choice to become a good teacher and was satisfied with it.

But about twenty years of teaching in city schools ended last year when the Education Department decided that her experience and ability should be used to assist Aboriginal education as a whole. She now has an office in the Aboriginal Education branch of the department, acting as a liaison officer between the department and schools with a large number of Aboriginal children, and as a liaison officer with Aboriginal parents and organisations.

She is a member of the National Aboriginal Education Committee which means she has to go to Canberra every three months for a meeting. She has travelled all over Australia studying Aboriginal education. In addition, she is a member of several organisations working for better conditions - not just education - for Aborigines.

For her work in Aboriginal education May received the British Empire Medal in 1977.

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