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REVIEW:

The Story of Fishing at Wreck Bay - as told by the people.
Ann Nugent and Alison Taylor. Canberra, Schools Commission,
1980.

D.R. Massey

The Story of Fishing at Wreck Bay is a booklet* produced for use in an Aboriginal Studies Unit at the Jervis Bay Primary School.** The unit is being developed because the Aboriginal parents of Wreck Bay wanted

authentic statements about Aboriginal culture and experience to be included in the school Social Studies curriculum.

(Nugent, 1979, p.34)

Nugent, the co-ordinator of the Aboriginal Studies Unit, described the project as an attempt

to develop an Aboriginal Studies Unit in a way that draws upon the capacity for self-awareness and decision-making within the community to the advantage of the Aboriginal children in the school situation. Part of the project is directed to increasing communication between the community and the school, so that the Wreck Bay children who attend Jervis Bay School will experience some continuity between their home and school life. One of the aims of the Aboriginal Studies Unit is to ensure that what is taught about Aboriginal history and culture in the school situation is relevant in terms of the Aboriginality of its pupils.

(Nugent, 1979, pp. 35-36)

* The publication was produced with assistance from the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. The Social Studies materials of which the booklet is a part, were prepared with the assistance of an Innovations Grant from the Schools Commission.

**The Jervis Bay Primary School is the school attended by the Aboriginal children from Wreck Bay.

In producing this booklet Nugent wanted to provide material that was not only authentic in the eyes of the people but also acceptable and appropriate for school use. This was achieved by involving both the Aboriginal community and professional educators in its design. Decisions about what was to be taught were made by the Aboriginal community while the design of the materials was the responsibility of the curriculum developer in consultation with the community and teachers.

To obtain information about the local culture and history of the community Nugent spent one year, part-time, recording the life experiences of the Wreck Bay Aboriginal people. The tapes were analysed and focal points around which curriculum could be developed were identified.

The topic which featured most prominently on the tapes was fishing, which thus formed the theme for this booklet. The story of fishing at Wreck Bay is, in fact, a history of the present community and it is this history which is recorded in the booklet. From the booklet we learn, for example, that

For thousands of years Aboriginal people have lived at Wreck Bay. Wreck Bay has always been known to the Aboriginal people as a good place for fishing and as a sheltered spot for camping. (p.5)

. . . .

The fishermen of Wreck Bay were very good fishermen because they knew all about the fish and their habits. The fishermen knew that when the wattle tree bloomed the bream would be travelling along the beaches and the whiting would be travelling north. (p.12)

. . . .

In the old days the people of Wreck Bay made their own nets. The nets were made of cotton and lasted only twelve months because the salt water of the sea rotted them.

To make the nets last longer the fishermen tanned them. To tan the nets the men gathered the bark and gum off the bloodwood tree and the banksia tree. (p.18)

. . . .

The fishermen had to send their fish to Sydney to be sold. In the early days the fish went to Bomaderry by horse and coach. The coach was drawn by two horses. Halfway from Wreck Bay to Bomaderry Railway Station the horses were changed over. At Bomaderry Railway Station the fish were put on the train and sent to the markets in Sydney. (p.28)

The text of the booklet is accompanied by superb illustrations by Alison Taylor*, which not only add visual interest and help to convey the ambiance of the community but also serve to provide information. For example, there is an illustration of a wooden rowing boat of the kind used by the Wreck Bay fishermen and an illustration of the Nowra Fishing Co-operative. The illustrations are sure to appeal to eight and nine year olds, the age group for which the booklet is intended.

The provision of information is one important aim achieved by this booklet. The booklet is also likely to arouse and motivate its readers and lead them to ask questions about the early families, methods of fishing etc. As such it will act as a stimulus to enquiry.

Nugent (1979), in writing about the Aboriginal Studies Unit of which this booklet is a part, stated that

The children of the community, as well as the children of the wider community, have a right to an understanding of the historic and cultural perspective of the Wreck Bay community.

(Nugent, 1979: p.42)

This booklet will, I believe, foster that understanding.

* To ensure her illustrations captured the atmosphere of the community Taylor, a third year Visual Communications student at the Canberra School of Art, spent some time at Wreck Bay, meeting the people and working with the school children in group situations.