



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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backgrounds of Indigenous teachers and learners are varied, there is nevertheless much that they share in their view of themselves in colonial Australia. "But Indigenous students and academics are also grounded in Western disciplines, through historical experience, through Christianisation, through the English language [and all that that entails]" (p. 220). As a result,

Indigenous students often feel the contradictions and tensions within having to align to one or the other, especially when they see weaknesses in examples and arguments on both sides of the divide ... How are students to suspend accepted thinking in one area without suspending allegiance to Indigenous interests? Can they take up other positions without being tagged either essentialist or assimilationist? If so, what are they? Not opening up theoretical propositions for more complicated discussion means that the dynamics of the Cultural Interface are sutured over in favour of the Western order of things and its constitution of what an Indigenous 'opposition' should be (p. 221).

Nakata believes that, "Currently professional preparation is inadequate in terms of equipping graduates to work the relevant elements of two knowledge systems together in the interests of better practice" (p. 222).

Nakata's concluding comments should be endorsed by anybody teaching Indigenous students or teaching courses that include Indigenous content: "The important thing, in my view, is not to be deluded about what we can achieve in higher education in relation to controlling Indigenous content or in shaping knowledge and practice to be uniquely and identifiably 'Indigenous' ... It is important ... that those concerned with the teaching of Indigenous content or issues in the disciplines orient students to approach this knowledge, not as the facts of Indigenous realities but as the context that provides the conditions for intellectual reflection and engagement with contemporary Indigenous issues" (p. 225).

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ROB RILEY: AN ABORIGINAL LEADER'S QUEST FOR JUSTICE

Quentin Beresford

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Indigenous Australia seems to fall on and off mainstream Australia's radar. Perhaps it is the Reserve mentality; if we can't see them we don't have to worry about them. However, modern media has changed all this – the treatment and conditions of Australia's Indigenous peoples can no longer be hidden or ignored. What began with Jim Hagan's famous 1976 speech to the United Nations on the treatment and conditions of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, engaging the world's media, was a signpost to many Aboriginal activists of the time. One of those young activists was Rob Riley. He was to become one of the most outspoken Aboriginal leaders to emerge in the late 1970s. However, as Beresford thoughtfully charts in this book, the significance of Riley's life and contribution cannot be understood without understanding the defining experiences of his childhood.

In the mid-1950s Rob Riley was taken from his mother at six months of age and placed into the care of Sister Kate's. Sister Kate's was a cottage home for Aboriginal children with fair complexions, or "quarter-castes". The children were to be biologically and culturally assimilated following the policies of the state of West Australia, and famously espoused by a former Protector of Aborigines in West Australia A.O. Neville. In practical terms, for children at Sister Kate's this meant they were to be denied all contact with their families and their Aboriginality denied.

Rob Riley's time at Sister Kate's was to profoundly influence him the rest of his life. When Riley asked why no family visited him he was told by staff that he had no family and was an orphan, and further, was belted for asking. Although Aboriginality was a taboo topic at Sister Kate's when the children attended the local school they could not escape the racist taunts, creating an "us" and "them" mentality. And at the age of nine he was sexually assaulted by three other boys at Sister Kate's. It is hard to understand the trauma the assault must have caused to Riley when the other children, "Homies", had become his family.

In 1964 Robert Riley's mother Violet visited him at Sister Kate's. Violet then spent the next two years

fighting to be allowed to have Robert come and live with her. She finally succeeded in August 1966. But this transition from institutionalisation and denial of identity to an Aboriginal family and community was not an easy one. Riley then spent three of his adolescent years at Pingelly Aboriginal Reserve where he was subjected to a racist bashing which solidified much of his own thinking on identity and race.

Riley spent his early adult life in various jobs, apprenticed as a Fitter and Turner, as a clerk at the Perth Law Courts and finally three years in the army. On his return from service Riley became a member of Black Action, an Aboriginal activist organisation and in 1979 found a job with the Aboriginal Legal Service. Here he spent time as a field officer and was famously involved with the Noonkanbah affair which launched him as major player in Aboriginal affairs. He was rapidly promoted at the Aboriginal Legal Service and was at the heart of the maelstrom that was the Aboriginal Rights Movement of the late 1970s through to the 1990s. This ranged from national Land Rights, the formation of ATSIC, Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Stolen Generation. However, the mounting pressure of being a very prominent and public Indigenous leader, the personal toll of finally talking about his own traumatic childhood and depression overwhelmed him. He took his own life on 1 May 1996.

The story of Rob Riley's life is inseparable from the racism that he and his family faced throughout their lives. This highlights one of Beresford's main points and that is the very clear damage that intergenerational disadvantage and trauma can have on communities and lives. This is exemplified in the life of Rob Riley, but what is remarkable with Riley's life is that he took the racism, abuse and disadvantage and instead of turning inwards used it to fuel his life-long fight for justice, understanding and Aboriginal identity and in the process became a great leader and advocate. To this end the life of Rob Riley offers a window into the history of Aboriginal Australia and the great issues of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Quentin Beresford has grounded the biography in extensive research with Rob Riley's family, friends and colleagues. This is more than just a book about Rob Riley; it is a book about Australia, about the trauma of intergenerational oppression and racist policies, but most importantly the courage and resolve of one person to not only improve the condition of Indigenous people in Australia but also make Australia a better place. John Howard famously opined that we should forget the past and get on with the present. Riley would have railed at the notion and with good reason. In 2007 we can look at the status and position of Indigenous people across Australia and still not help but be shocked. Health, education and life expectancy are all appallingly low. Riley's life and death raises vital questions about Australia's past and future. What it demonstrates most of all is that we

need to acknowledge our past and work together for our future. Well-researched and well-written, this book offers a very personal view into a great man's troubled life and simultaneously provides a window into the era and the Aboriginal rights movement.

