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Reviews

Lady of the Lake

Iris Lovett-Gardiner

Koorie Heritage Trust Inc., Melbourne, 1997,
ISBN 0 646 31269 3

Reviewed by Jillian Marsh

Research Assistant, Aboriginal Research Institute,
Faculty of Aboriginal and Islander Studies,
University of South Australia

With the use of photographic material and the bringing together of memories and historical events, this book portrays a clear message to the public of a strong-willed and worldly person. Her experiences, although familiar to many indigenous people with regards to the way that Aboriginal people were able to survive, both physically and mentally, would shock and shame many non-indigenous counterparts for the past atrocities and injustices dealt out in the name of 'settlement' and 'civilisation'.

In this book, Iris, like so many people of her generation, shares a familiar story of childhood memories filled by both happiness and hardship, at a time when the two World Wars and Depression years took their toll across the country. However, as an indigenous author, Iris remembers not only the pain of losing loved ones during wartime and the limited stocks of food, services and other commodities but also the denigration and rejection experienced by the first inhabitants of Australia – the indigenous peoples.

For indigenous people, the sense of hardship was magnified because of the negative status afforded to indigenous peoples at the time. Despite this extra burden, Iris recalls happy and loving experiences surrounded by family and friends as well as the good times that feature in the upbringing of children at Lake Condah during the mission era. She then goes on to describe how her level of awareness as an adult shattered much of these earlier recollections. Once realising the extent to which missionaries and the

government systematically reduced Aboriginal people to dependent and fearful non-citizens in their own homelands, Iris sensed a duty within herself to tell her story, and that of others at Lake Condah. She recollects the manner in which food rations were used as a control mechanism. She remembers the non-acknowledgment of Aboriginal people's participation in the war as well as how they were refused 'land plots' afforded to other returned soldiers. The long-term consequences of children being removed from their families, other issues that still remain unresolved such as land rights and recognition of prior ownership, are some of the injustices that continues to this day. For Iris (and most other indigenous people) such injustices and discrimination cannot be forgotten and must never be discounted in the light of today's society of troubled race relations. Iris's first hand experiences verify the dramatic impact upon Aboriginal culture which, as she says, was quite purposely 'crushed' by foreign institutions that had no understanding and no consideration of indigenous peoples.

Despite such sadness in this book, the reader is privy to a carefree childhood many would relate to – both black and white. It is this familiarity which not only serves as a means within which the reader can identify with Iris in her happiness but also serves to involve the reader in considering many of the arguments used to decimate Aboriginal culture. To a large extent it is the historical aspect which remains largely unknown or denied by many people in Australia because it is either too painful to come to terms with or because it simply did not feature directly in people's lives.

Iris's story bonds the past to the present, and provides yet another chapter towards re-writing histories of this country which, although brutal, must be allowed to take their proper place in the educational institutions, and particularly in the learning and teaching processes of today. Iris's contribution not only works towards fulfilling her sense of duty to tell, but she also opens up a narrative for others – who have had similar experiences – to follow. This book offers a very heartening appeal to other indigenous people (particularly of Iris' generation) and will no doubt actively engage a broader audience.