REFLECTIONS ON GROWING UP AS AN ABORIGINE IN ADELAIDE

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KOONIBBA

Both my parents had full-blood Aboriginal mothers and white fathers. My father belonged to the Wirangu tribe and my mother to the Kokata tribe. My mother was in her teens when she was taken away from her tribal situation - I don't know how old my father was. Both my parents were taken to the Koonibba Lutheran Mission. Koonibba was begun by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1898 and taken over by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1964. The mission came into contact mainly with the Wirangu (a coastal tribe now almost extinct), the Kokata and, to some extent, also the Mimming and Eucla tribes. Our present day Aborigines are mainly descendants of the Kokata tribe.

In 1913 Koonibba had opened a children's dormitory with 31 inmates and soon the numbers increased considerably. The use of such dormitories was normally a principal means of destroying Aboriginal culture. Aborigines were treated as minors and submitted to autocratic rule. Through this you can see their moral instability was due largely to the collapse of ancient codes and the difficulty they had in replacing these with Christian ethics.

Both my parents were living out there at the time Koonibba was established and they were taken in so they could be civilized and Christianised. They were brought up in an era of government policies which included protection, segregation and assimilation - so they could be later absorbed into the white European society. My father and
mother met each other on the mission. In this period the mission not only took in half-caste children but full-blood children as well. My mother and father's half-brothers and sisters were also brought up on the mission and educated at the Mission school.

While my parents were still living on the Mission they married and had two children; later they lived in Ceduna for awhile. Although my mother spoke very little about their early days on the Mission she did tell us stories about how they did everything by the bell: they would get up by the bell, wash, dress and eat by the bell, go to school by the bell and pray by the bell. After leaving the Mission my father did various jobs around the Kyancutta, Woolimb and Minnipa areas, such as clearing bush for the farmers and working on the railways. They returned to the Mission quite often to visit their relatives. I remember when I was a child she used to take us back there. We were told how we should behave and only to speak when spoken to in case we offended the older people. We were taught that we must show respect to the older people.

After my parents married and left the Mission they didn't tell us too much about their early lives at that time. They didn't even teach us their language. Although both my father and mother could speak several dialects, they only spoke English to us. I only realised this much later. They always told us that we must behave ourselves when we went out in public places, when we went to school, and to Church. We were gathered together and told, "Now, you must behave yourselves because people are going to look at you. People are going to wonder about you and how you behave and how you have been brought up". We were always given this little advice before we went out. I never used to understand why they used to do this but I suppose it was their way of helping us to be accepted into the white community in which we lived. They wanted us to conform to the white man's way of living. So in our home we only spoke English. The only time they spoke in their own language was to each other, or to visitors and relatives who were from their own tribe.

ADELAIDE

While we were living at Minnipa - when I was about seven years old - my parents decided to move to Adelaide. We stayed with a few friends at Mile End and then Goodwood until my mother and father bought a house near West Terrace. I went to the Sturt Street Primary School. There were a lot of Aboriginal families living in Adelaide at that time and we all used to congregate together and meet at each other's homes. Our homes were like open houses to all our friends and relatives. You must remember we were still living under the Act and unless you had an exemption card, to prove that you could live like a white person, there were restrictions on where you could go and what you could do.

My mother didn't get exempted until 1962. I don't know why she did this so late in her life - maybe she saw it as an advantage. I know that both she and my father were very glad to be able to vote because if you weren't exempted you had no voting rights. In fact, you were not a citizen of this country; you were a ward of the State, so you were under the Protection Act. There were conditions under which you received the exemption card. There were unconditional exemption cards, as well as other cards that were temporary or contained certain conditions. If you could prove that you could behave yourself in a proper manner, to be accepted in the white community, it allowed you access to various places you couldn't go to before, like hotels and restaurants. While both my mother and father got exempted this didn't apply to the children. Once you grew up and came of age you had to, if you thought it necessary, apply for it. Speaking for myself, I never got exempted. My sister did. She had a lot of problems because she was going out with her boyfriend at the time who happened to be a white man. You weren't allowed to go out with white men because it was called 'consorting'. Each time they walked down the street he would get arrested and probably spend a few hours in gaol. Every time this happened she thought, "Well, I may as well get exempted". This gave her the right to go out with him.

As we were growing up in the city we were forever told how we should behave and how we should conduct ourselves. My parents were very
strict and we weren't allowed to drink, we weren't allowed to smoke
and we weren't even allowed to swear - which was probably because
of their upbringing on the Mission. They were even told not to teach
us their language because this would be very harmful to us, so I think
they always had our welfare in mind and how best we could cope with
living in white society. They rarely ever explained to us why we should
do this or why we should do that. I grew up with my brothers and
sisters and the other children believing that it was because we lived in
the city that we had to do these things. We didn't understand
government policies; we didn't realise the pressures that our parents
were under. A lot of parents, for example, were afraid that if they did
anything wrong their children would be taken away from them. We
didn't know any of these things that went on. They never told us about
how all these things would affect our lives. We just grew up, gradually
coming to the realisation ourselves, without having it fully explained.
I'd always wondered about a lot of these things right up until I got
married, it was very confusing. I used to think my parents were
hypocrites; they'd tell us one thing, while they'd be living another way
of life.

As I said, our home was an open house; friends and relatives would
come in from the missions or from the country areas and they would
stay with us. It was overcrowded but I thought it was fun - people
everywhere. My parents were very kind and generous to all these
people but it seemed as if we never received any consideration
ourselves. I never felt as if they loved us; it was like they didn't trust
us and we had to behave ourselves all the time and not get too
involved in what was going on around us. Another thing I thought was
very hypocritical was that we always went to Church and social
evenings, learnt our catechism lessons and got confirmed, yet there
was always this drinking and gambling going on.

In nearly every home in Adelaide there was gambling. The blankets
would be put on the tables early in the morning and all the people
would come and play cards. It wasn't until I grew up that I realised that
this was a way for them to supplement their earnings. A lot of the men
at this time were unemployed or, because they were not very well
educated, they only had odd jobs here and there. This was one way
for families in Adelaide to make some extra money, to them it was a
kind of business - although I'm sure there were a lot of people who

 gambled for the fun of it and wasted their money. Most of the women I
knew - of the many families who lived in Adelaide - were able to get
extra food, clothing, pay the rent and even send their children to high
school, which mother and father did with each of us, and there were
ten of us in the family. Everyone who did work in our family gave their
money to Mum. We all helped one another. When they were gambling
and they had no money, they'd play using tea or sugar, clothes, or
ration coupons. This was during the war years. They took it in turns
- one week it would be at one home, another week it would be at
another home. There were rules that the owner would set; for
instance, no drinking, no fighting and no borrowing money. You were
given a free game if you went broke, but if you lost that game you
were out. Through all this our lives went on. We went to school, to
work, we did all the other things in our lives and, as I said, on Sunday
we went to Church. My mother played the organ in Church and we
had outings but, as soon as we came back, out would come the
blanket and the cards and there would be people everywhere. My
mother saved her money - she was a very frugal woman. She was
able to buy the house that we were living in. As it was during the war
years, and no one could go out and stay in a hotel or whatever
because of the Act, we'd have all these soldiers coming in and staying
with us on leave and there was money galore. The children had all
these chocolates and things which they couldn't buy in the shop
because they were rationed. We thought it was fun and a carefree
time. We were given money and went to the pictures, down town and
to the River Torrens but had to be home at a certain time.

At times like this the question of how to behave in public arose again.
For example, my parents would say, "When you go out with a white
person, only speak when you're spoken to." We were told not to offer
our opinion on anything if people didn't want to talk to us. Usually
when people spoke to you they weren't looking at you but above you.
You weren't there. It's like you didn't exist or weren't recognised as
another human being. But if we did anything that pleased them it
made them very happy. We used to play on this - you got to know
what they expected from you. It was like proving that we were
becoming like them. This affects a lot of people in very many ways.
You sort of lose your identity as a person, so all the time you have to
prove that you are something you are not. You're not being yourself,
there's no spontaneity about yourself and how you interact with other
people. Your always on guard, keeping in mind that you must be doing the right thing. You don't take the first step; you always hold back because you look at these people and think, "Oh, are they going to smile at me, are they going to talk to me?" They make the first step, so you're holding back. It's not a normal situation. You'd rather be with your own people where you feel more relaxed and more free to be yourself. As I grew up I realized something was being taken away from me - my own identity as a person; not just as an Aboriginal person but as a human being. I know I became a very cynical and very bitter person. I know other people who were affected in the same way too. It wasn't until I started realizing these things and saw what was happening to me and those around me that I thought to myself, "I'm not going to let these people or these situations dictate to me how I should feel or think. I'm going to be myself." I realized you had to meet people halfway, that you can't always be judging them by thinking they are putting you in a lump and saying you are all alike. I mean, it's vice versa too, white people can put us all in a lump and say "You're all the same." That applies to Aboriginal people as well. When they look at you because they're white, they're "intelligent" and "Who are you? - you're black, you have no intelligence at all" - maybe. That's the feeling you get, so you don't open your mouth. I grew up in that sort of atmosphere and it does have an affect on your personality and how one reacts to other people. This is the kind of environment in which I was brought up and in which we lived.

**WAR YEARS**

It was in the war years that I started becoming aware of what was going on around me and asking questions. I used to ask a lot of questions, things about my mother and father and how they used to live and other things, like "Why does this apply to me and not white children?" My parents never gave us any explanations, they used to say, "That's for you to know so you just go on, you're on your own. You're out there and you're on your own and no one's telling you why all this is happening to you. You have to find out for yourself."

My brother wanted to join the Air Force and he passed the examination, but I was told they didn't accept him. I don't know why but they weren't taking Aboriginals into the Air Force. He asked my mother's permission to join the Army, but she said, "No". He was away for two weeks and when he did he was in uniform. My mother was very upset because she didn't want him to join the Army. I don't think any of these men actually went out of Australia. They were stationed in the Northern Territory. Few of them could read and write but manpower was needed; the situation was very serious at the time, with the possibility of the Japanese invading Darwin. Those men from the West Coast stayed at my parents' home when they were on leave. The men that came from Point Pearce, Point MacLeay or elsewhere, would go to the homes of people in Adelaide who came from their tribe or their territory. When I look back now our home was a very small place but we'd have people sleeping in the passage and in the backyard.

I remember the time when the war ended and they all came there before going home. There were about fifteen to twenty taxis outside, waiting to take them to Port Adelaide where they caught the boat, The Minnilpa, to take them back to the West Coast. A few went by a bus service, called the Elders, travelling through to Port Lincoln. When we went to see them off at Port Adelaide it was so gay and festive. To me, those years were very fun times. I suppose it was always fun because there were so many people around.

But things change. Like our family and friends in the rest of the State, we were continually subject to poverty, high unemployment and the suppression of our culture. We were expected to conform. Those Aboriginal people living in Housing Trust homes could no longer take relatives in because of over-crowding - they were told it was unhygienic. You couldn't give them this feeling of sharing what you had with them. A lot of people couldn't afford their own homes and had to live in the Housing Trust homes. I remember that time as one when everyone shared everything that they had - food, clothes, money and so forth, and helped one another. Things began to change in Adelaide too. South Australia was growing because at that time New Australians, as we called them, began coming here. At this time we moved to Largs North and I met my husband. I remember he was picked up by the police for going out with me. I couldn't be bothered going and getting exempted because I couldn't see what difference it would make as to how you were treated.
After making friends with a lot of these New Australians, some of whom were Polish and other nationalities, I discovered that they were very shocked at what was happening to us. They made remarks like, "Oh, it's like living in Europe under Hitler" - with all those restrictions placed on you because of the Act. For example, when we were teenagers we were stopped by the police and told, "You have to be home by nine o'clock." My brother later went to the Korean War. When he came home my parents were invited on the stand at the City Town Hall to welcome all the soldiers as they paraded by before the Lord Mayor. Yet, that night, when we had a big party to welcome them, there were - and I'm not exaggerating - ten police cars out the front of our house. They wanted to arrest us all because we had white people in our home, and new Australians too, celebrating my brother's homecoming. Everyone went out and they said, "Okay, you arrest us. We'll go to the media, like the News or the Truth, and tell them, here's a man who went and fought for our country, we're welcoming him home, we're having a party for him and here you are going to arrest him." My brother wasn't exempted - he wasn't a citizen, as you say, of Australia. With these sorts of things happening to you, it builds up something inside - like a bitterness. A lot of people have this bitterness; they walk around with a chip on their shoulder and it does affect you. I felt very sad for my brother that night. I was eighteen at that time and had just met the man who was to become my husband. My relationship with my future husband and his friends, and most of the New Australians I met, was something I had never experienced before with white Australian people. These New Australians made me feel like another human being - a person. It doesn't matter what colour you were, you could sit and talk with them. Yet if you went into a white Australian's home there was always a barrier there. You had to know your place, to know what was expected of you and how you should behave. I think a lot of them did it unconsciously, they weren't aware of the way it was coming across to us. Perhaps we are very sensitive people, I don't know, but it was always there, morning, noon, and night, twenty-four hours a day, that feeling inside of you that you have to know your place and where you exist in the scheme of things - knowing your place when you're with white people. I do believe a lot of this attitude rubbed off even on the New Australians. They saw how Aboriginal people were treated and, of course, they wanted to be accepted too so they had to conform to the white Australians' way of thinking. People who were once friendly towards us, and accepted us as we were, later shied away as they became embarrassed - they failed to recognise us or acknowledge us in the street or wherever we may have gone. Of course, you wondered, "What did I do?" It was like that. You didn't have to do anything, it was just because of who you were.

Eventually I had children of my own. It wasn't until they started going to High School, that they began asking questions. By that time my husband had died and I was left with seven children. It was at this time that I got involved in Aboriginal organisations on a voluntary basis and working part time at such places as the Housing Trust. I was on various committees such as the Community Centre, Wakefield Street Centre, and other committees dealing with alcohol problems. I worked for four years with the Alcoholic Programme. It was around this time that I learned more about government policies, the different things that were available to Aboriginal people and so forth. This knowledge helped me put my children through High School. I wouldn't have been able to manage otherwise.

My children began asking me many questions when the children at school found out that they were Aboriginal and that they were getting a grant. Even though they knew their own aunts and uncles they had never before questioned the fact that they had Aboriginal blood in them. I got them together and explained to them the reasons why people's attitudes towards them would change once they realised that they had an Aboriginal mother - that they had Aboriginal blood in them. Such silly questions were asked of them. They'd come home and tell me, for instance; that they had been asked, "What do you eat?" and "How do you sleep?" - and there we were living in the middle of Adelaide. These children were asking my children because they didn't know, and they didn't know because they hadn't been taught these things at school.

As I became more aware of this problem of ignorance I became more involved in the Aboriginal community and all the different organisations that were set up at that time to help Aboriginal people. Whatever organisation you got involved in a white fieldworker or director was there showing you how to manage, administer and control your own affairs. I learnt so much. It made me respect and love my parents all the more and I only wish they were alive so that I could tell them so
and talk to them. I could now understand the pressures they had to go through. I could now understand the compromises and changes they had to make in their lives. What they did for us, for my brothers and sisters, and the reasons why. Even though it took many years to realise it, they were not hypocrites and they did love us - even if they didn't show that love by touching us or putting their arms around us.

Maybe this was because of their upbringing in a Mission home - I don't know. I made it my business that I would touch my children and I'd put my arms around them and I would show my love for them. I think the most important expression of love is to touch each other and to show that you love one another. I know that my children love me and they have this respect for me and they've shown it by supporting me in the things that I do.

Group of Aboriginal soldiers in the C.M.F. on leave at Koonibba Mission, 1940s.

My mother Nora Wilson's exemption document
Front row: Nora Wilson, Ruby Cox (Wane), Mrs. Wiebusch, Liza Grey, Molly Bilton.

Men in the CMF (1939-1945) at Springfield Training Camp. (see names next page)
Back row (left to right): Ken Swan, Herbert Miller, Gordon Miller, Stanley Miller, Godwin Wilson, Leslie Mundy, Walter Richard, Clem Miller, Raymond Coleman, Johnny Shingara, Effie Tripp, Regnald Dunnet, Sark Webster, Gilbert Kile, 2 men unnamed, Edward Benboit

Second row (left to right): Frank Carbine, Larry Willaroo, Cyril Argent, 2 men unnamed, Lawrence Moore, 1 man unnamed, Sydney Miller, Herbert Saunders, George Lindsay, 2 men unnamed, Ernie Rigney, Darby Mannix

Third row (left to right): Gilbert Abdullah, Raymond Boyland, S.O.L. Lampard, Howard Buckskin, Leslie Moore, Corporal Boyland, Nobby Kepnyneryr, 1 man unnamed, Edmund Ware, 1 man unnamed, George Gurkin, 1 man unnamed, Bill Karpary, Gordon Abbott

Fourth Row (left to right): Arnold Gray, Albert Lawrie, George Harris, Herbert Mundy, Kevin Saunders, Lionel Campbell, Auevle Gray, Rufus Cyril Rigney, Billy Angie, Len Gallan, 1 man unnamed, Harry Scotti, 1 unnamed man, Wilfred Miller, 1 man unnamed, John Rankin, Ross Davis, Victor Rigney, 1 man unnamed.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q You said you were made to feel ashamed of your own ways, well, I can understand that, is that a feeling still abroad amongst the present generation to the same extent, do you think?
A Yes...it all depends. There are a lot of Aboriginal people who don't even want to be recognised as Aboriginal people. Some of them, because they have been brought up by white people - and they are as black...they are blacker than I am - still they don't acknowledge themselves as Aboriginal people. The white person is going to put them all together and say, "You're lazy, you're good-for-nothing, your dirty and your unintelligent" - and that's what they're afraid of. So they become afraid to associate with their own people. You don't let it worry you too much. You say, "They've got a problem, they've got some searching to do otherwise they can be unhappy people."

I was working with the alcoholic program...I was at Norwood. People would come in with an alcoholic problem and I soon found out... they were Aboriginal people. They were white and they married white men or vice versa and they tried to hide their Aboriginality...it sort of ate away at them and they'd turn to drink. They were afraid that if they had children the children would turn out black, because they didn't know. They thought, "Oh, they're going to find out", and they're forever hiding it, in someway or another. There are people now - they think they're 'just it', all dressed up, they've got good jobs and are earning a lot of money, you see them walking down the street and they'll cross the road. They don't want the other people - white people - around them to associate with them being Aboriginal and, yes, their very colour gives them away... So there are Aboriginal people out there how are ashamed to admit they have got Aboriginal blood in them.

Q I was interested... you were taking about the Europeans coming to Australia and being far more accepting of your parents' condition... actually being shocked at the way your parents were being treated. Did that apply to a lot of them... the people who lived under repressive sorts of governments overseas?
A Yes, I think it was because they did live under repressive governments overseas that they could see what was happening to the Aboriginal people here too, and they were very shocked that it should exist here. A lot of Aboriginal women married New Australians at the time. I heard the statement made that you don't marry your own people because if you married a white person it would put you up in status. Well, I wasn't aware of this statement at the time. I married my husband because I was in love with him.

Q In terms of getting the vote... do you think Aboriginal people, [in regard to] exemption cards, couldn't be bothered anyway because of the fact that they knew the government were making a racist policy - a white Australia policy, anyway?

A Yes, there were quite a lot that I knew of who couldn't be bothered. They said, "What's the point?" I don't think there was anyone... keeping an eye on them to see what they did. A lot of people had to report in - you were sort of on parole - you had to report in to the Protector at the time in North Adelaide, Kinkore Avenue, where they had an office. And they'd ask you questions, 'Did you do this, did you do that?' There were rules you had to comply with. You see, if you were on a temporary exemption, you were sort of working towards an unconditional one.

Q [The tape is unclear at this point but the questions appear to have concerned education]

A Oh yes it did, very much. They became more aware that if you wanted to survive, it was another form of surviving too. You had to be educated and a lot of people were thinking of their children. I mean, it was always drummed into us that we had to do well in school... You know, your parents aren't going to be around forever and they wanted to have this feeling that you could survive out there and the best way was for people to be educated.

Q Growing up a kid in Adelaide as you did - or as a young person in Adelaide, - what sort of differences and problems do you think the young Aboriginal kids have now growing up in Adelaide? What are the things that are different from your early days compared to now?

A Well I think there's less unity within the family. There's not the solidarity there, too, amongst Aboriginal people that there was when I was young. I mean, everybody sort of came together - even during the war years - to support one another. It was not unusual for people to give money away to other families and give them food and clothes. I don't see that sort of thing now and I don't see that sort of unity in the family. Whether that early Christian upbringing on the missions made a lot of difference... You know, they lived sort of two lives; that Christian upbringing with those Christian values, kept the family together... I do think that that had a lot to do with it. But now I don't see that there, there are a lot of families out there that just don't know how to look after their kids, don't know how to be parents - but we've got all these young people wandering the streets and that.

Q Could I ask you if your search for your identity - self-identity - with that Christian upbringing, did that create any conflicts...?

A I didn't have any understanding of traditional Aboriginal spirituality. I didn't know anything about Aboriginal culture. I had to go out and learn that from the white people. I was taught that... I could only reflect back on some of the things my parents told me and relate to it in that way, but as far as spirituality, you would say it would be a Christian spirituality. But I found a lot of fault with that too as I got older. ... the different religions, different doctrines taught in different denominations - you ask yourself questions about that too. But basically I would accept those teachings. That helped me a lot. I found a lot of hypocrisy among Lutheran ministers - I don't know if there are any Lutherans here - especially the way they preached to Aboriginal people. It was always hell and damnation and fire... all fire and damnation. But when you'd go along to the white meetings - they'd always have separate meetings - then when you'd go along to where the white Lutherans were having their services, it was all love and kindness. There were two different gods. There was love, you know, repentance and forgiveness but, in the other one, you had to behave yourself and you had to stop this drinking and gambling otherwise you'd go
to hell. It was the way they came across. Not only that, but when you'd go to the religious study groups you'd sit there like a dummy and they'd tell you everything, what was what, what was expected of you. There was no interaction, you couldn't express your own opinions, feelings. Yet you'd go along to the white one, you know, everyone's there bringing out their own thoughts, their own feelings. It's not only that... it's a welfare system as well. So whether they stayed Lutherans because of the Christian beliefs or whether they stay Lutherans because of their welfare handouts, you know, it's not for me to say or even to judge but you do notice these things.

A NOTE ON THE "ABORIGINES ACT"

Robert Foster

An important theme in Neva's talk is the influence of the Aborigines Act 1934-39 on the lives of Aboriginal people of South Australia. Given its importance we thought it would be instructive to spell out some of the provisions in the Act to which Neva refers in her talk.

For much of the 19th century there was very little legislation specifically directed at the Aboriginal population of the state. As Faye Gale (1972:59) put it, "the official policy at the time of colonisation was, in the main, one of benevolent laissez faire toward Aborigines."

By the turn of the century however, the perceived failure of this attitude culminated in the passing of the Aborigines Act of 1911, "the effect of which was to set Aborigines apart as a separate group in the community and, in contrast to the earlier attitudes of laissez faire, to legislate for them in a rigid and paternalistic way" (Gale 1972:61).

Heading the newly created Aboriginals Department was a Chief Protector who had wide ranging powers. He was the "legal guardian of every aboriginal and half-caste child, not withstanding that any such child has a parent or other relative living, until such child attains the age of twenty-one years" (sec. 10:1). He had the power to move any Aboriginal person onto a reserve or 'Aboriginal institution'. Furthermore:

Any aboriginal or half-caste who refuses to be so removed, or resists such removal, or who refuses to remain within or attempts to depart from any reserve or institution to which he has been so removed, or within which he is being kept as aforesaid, shall be guilty of an offence under the Act. (sec.17:3)