

# THE DAWN IS AT HAND

Poems by Kath Walker

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## Foreword

I am well aware that the success of *We Are Going*, which went quickly into seven editions, was not due to any greatness in my simple verse, but to the fact that it was the work of an Aboriginal. It had therefore what I believe the French call a *succès de curiosité*. Another factor was the rather sudden and heartening new awareness among whites about that time of the plight of the Aborigines, and the growing demand that something be done about it, which I am proud to think I helped to stimulate.

The chief criticism seemed to be that some of the poems were somewhat angry and bitter; as though even atrocities were never to be mentioned by nice people.

*But hush, you mustn't say so,  
Bad taste or something.*

And of course there was the malicious whisper of 'Communist' (quite untrue) which now in Australia, as in the land of Joe McCarthy is automatically the answer to every vigorous protest against social injustice.

My good friend and best critic James Devaney who taught me much, suggested to me that 'propaganda-like stuff' which might be all right for my campaigning addresses on behalf of Aboriginal Advancement is not necessarily good in poetry. So in the present book the only poem of the kind (I think) is the ballad 'Daisy Bindi', which is factual, not something made up by me. Neither are the old tribal tales here my own invention, but were heard from the old people when I was a child.

Kath Walker

For Patricia, Denis, and Vivian,  
whose patience, tolerance and  
sacrifice, enabled me to write  
these poems.

## Assimilation—No!

Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river  
And where is your wine? There is only the river.  
Must the genius of an old race die  
That the race might live?  
We who would be one with you, one people,  
We must surrender now much that we love,  
The old freedoms for new musts,  
Your world for ours,  
But a core is left that we must keep always.  
Change and compel, slash us into shape,  
But not our roots deep in the soil of old.  
We are different hearts and minds  
In a different body. Do not ask of us  
To be deserters, to disown our mother,  
To change the unchangeable.  
The gum cannot be trained into an oak.  
Something is gone, something surrendered, still  
We will go forward and learn.  
Not swamped and lost, watered away, but keeping  
Our own identity, our pride of race.  
Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river  
And where is your wine? There is only the river.

## Integration—Yes!

Gratefully we learn from you,  
The advanced race,  
You with long centuries of lore behind you.  
We who were Australians long before  
You who came yesterday,  
Eagerly we must learn to change,  
Learn new needs we never wanted,  
New compulsions never needed,  
The price of survival.  
Much that we loved is gone and had to go,  
But not the deep indigenous things.  
The past is still so much a part of us,  
Still about us, still within us.  
We are happiest  
Among our own people. We would like to see  
Our own customs kept, our old  
Dances and songs, crafts and corroborees.  
Why change our sacred myths for your sacred myths?  
No, not assimilation but integration,  
Not submergence but our uplifting,  
So black and white may go forward together  
In harmony and brotherhood. •

## The Dawn is at Hand

Dark brothers, first Australian race,  
Soon you will take your rightful place  
In the brotherhood long waited for,  
Fringe-dwellers no more.

Sore, sore the tears you shed  
When hope seemed folly and justice dead.  
Was the long night weary? Look up, dark band,  
The dawn is at hand.

Go forward proudly and unafraid  
To your birthright all too long delayed,  
For soon now the shame of the past  
Will be over at last.

You will be welcomed mateship-wise  
In industry and in enterprise;  
No profession will bar the door,  
Fringe-dwellers no more.

Dark and white upon common ground  
In club and office and social round,  
Yours the feel of a friendly land,  
The grip of the hand.

Sharing the same equality  
In college and university,  
All ambitions of hand or brain  
Yours to attain.

For ban and bias will soon be gone,  
The future beckons you bravely on  
To art and letters and nation lore,  
Fringe-dwellers no more.