

WE ARE GOING

POEMS

BY

KATH WALKER

NADRASCA
BOOK EXCHANGE

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Foreword

As far as I know, this is the first book of poems to be published by an Australian aboriginal. Kath Walker is well known in Brisbane literary circles. She is Queensland State secretary of the Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement League, hon. secretary of the Queensland State Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Executive Member Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League, and also a member of the Union of Australian Women, of the Realist Writers' Group and other cultural bodies.

Kath Walker has written: 'I am of the Noonuccal tribe of Stradbroke Island, near Brisbane, my totem the carpet snake. I was born in 1920 and arrived about a week before expected, at the home of white friends where there was a wedding in progress; and the little black baby stole the show from the star performer, the bride. They named me Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska.'

She had primary education at Dunwich, on Stradbroke, and remembers with appreciation and gratitude her teacher, Mr. A. G. McPhail, 'a fair and just man who taught me the rudiments and took as much interest in the Aborigines as he did in the white children. At thirteen I began domestic work in Brisbane at 2/6 a week.'

When the second world war broke out she joined up and became a switchboard operator. She married during the war and has two children. 'At the age of 37 I went back to school under the repatriation scholarship scheme for service men and women, and took a stenographers' course.' But with her love of reading, alert inquiring mind and natural aptitude it may be said that she is largely self-educated, especially in literature.

Kath Walker is not a full-blood, but though fully integrated into the white community, accepting and accepted, she puts her own race first and is a dedicated worker for them. 'I am busy speaking from various platforms on behalf of my people.' Her themes, it will be seen, are all aboriginal themes. This gives the book a unity. Nevertheless she has no narrow racial outlook. She believes in the common brotherhood of man and dislikes the patrioteer nationalism that divides men.

*I'm international, never mind place;
I'm for humanity, all one race.*

Aborigines cannot forget the past, the mass murderers and the slave owners, the colossal crime of our early dealings with the blacks. These things are here touched upon but are not over-emphasized. Her main concern is the plight of the Aborigines today, especially in Queensland—public apathy, the colour bar that still exists, apartheid-minded Australians who are still with us and who should be slapped down and silenced. Whatever is done

for the aboriginal will have to be done without them and in spite of them, who contribute only what Kath Walker calls 'the stink of Little Rock'.

*The colour bar! It shows the meaner mind
Of moron kind.*

But her main message is of hope for the future. She is healthily realistic, not merely negative and nostalgic. 'Away with bitterness and the bitter past' is the burden of her song. 'Let us judge white people by the best of their race.' And the book appropriately ends with a Song of Hope.

*To our fathers' fathers
The pain, the sorrow;
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow.*

This work seems to have been written more for her 'native Old Australians' than for whites. Kath Walker is the poet of her people. Song makers there have always been among them, long before the colonization of this country. Now for the first time the aboriginal poet is articulate in English. And in my opinion this is a remarkable first book. About a third of it is in free verse, the rest rhymed with a good variety of metres well handled. Kath Walker is to be welcomed into our national literature, not as a curiosity, but as a poet in her own right.

James Devaney.

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Dedication

Dedicated with pride

To all members of the Federal Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Advancement, whose motto is:

'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights . . . and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'

(Article 1. Declaration of Human Rights)

Aboriginal Charter of Rights

We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism,
Black advance, not white ascendance:
Make us equals, not dependants.
We need help, not exploitation,
We want freedom, not frustration;
Not control, but self-reliance,
Independence, not compliance,
Not rebuff, but education,
Self-respect, not resignation.
Free us from a mean subjection,
From a bureaucrat Protection.
Let's forget the old-time slavers:
Give us fellowship, not favours;
Encouragement, not prohibitions,
Homes, not settlements and missions.
We need love, not overlordship,
Grip of hand, not whip-hand wardship;
Opportunity that places
White and black on equal basis.
You dishearten, not defend us,
Circumscribe, who should befriend us.
Give us welcome, not aversion,
Give us choice, not cold coercion,
Status, not discrimination,
Human rights, not segregation.
You the law, like Roman Pontius,
Make us proud, not colour-conscious;
Give the deal you still deny us,
Give goodwill, not bigot bias;
Give ambition, not prevention,
Confidence, not condescension;

Give incentive, not restriction,
Give us Christ, not crucifixion.
Though baptized and blessed and Bibled
We are still tabooed and libelled.
You devout Salvation-sellers,
Make us neighbours, not fringe-dwellers;
Make us mates, not poor relations,
Citizens, not serfs on stations.
Must we native Old Australians
In our own land rank as aliens?
Banish bans and conquer caste,
Then we'll win our own at last.

This poem was prepared and presented to the 5th Annual General Meeting
of the Federal Council Aboriginal Advancement, held at Adelaide, Easter 1962

We are Going

For Grannie Coolwell

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent,
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.
We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering
camp fires.
We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,
And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
We are nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered.
The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going.'