

ODGEROO

On 3 November 1920, Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born in her traditional country, Minjerriba, North Stradbroke Island, in Moreton Bay east of Brisbane. She was baptised Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska. Her parents Ted and Lucy Ruska remained on the island with their family of six children, and were not forced to move to a reserve.

Kath left school in 1933, at the height of the Depression. Her parents had hoped to provide her with the opportunity for further education like her older sister, Lucy, who trained as a nurse. However, scarcity of work during the Depression meant that there was not enough money, and Kath started her working career as a domestic servant working for a number of professional families in Brisbane.

At the outbreak of war, three of the Ruska family volunteered for war service in 1940. Kath's brothers, Eddie and Eric, joined the Army as were captured by the Japanese after the fall of Singapore in 1942. Both survived their years as prisoners in Changi, but Eddie lost one of his legs, a real tragedy for a promising young sportsman.

Kath's war service was spent as a member of the Australian Womens Army Service. She had been warned that she could suffer from racial discrimination in the Army, but found this was not the case, and made some firm friends during her time in the Army. Kath was trained as a telephonist and was promoted to corporal and given the responsibility of training some new recruits. North Stradbroke Island was strongly fortified during the war as part of the defences for Brisbane. Kath's parents did their bit for the war effort by throwing their home open to soldiers and construction workers.

Persistent middle ear infections ended Kath's war service and she was invalided out of the Army. In December 1942, she married Bruce Walker, whom she had known for some years. Bruce's traditional country was on the mainland, but he had relatives on North Stradbroke Island. Kath and Bruce made their home at 19 Myrtle Street Buranda. Bruce worked as a welder throughout the war at the Kangaroo Point shipyards where American designed Liberty ships were built. Their son, Denis, was born in December 1946.

Kath maintained her interest in sport and established an Aboriginal womens' cricko team named the All Blacks. The team soon began to play vigoro, a more popular sport. Bruce Walker was a talented bantam weight boxer. After retiring from his cherished sport, he found it hard to leave behind the mates he had made and traveled the Queensland coast to keep in contact with them.

After leaving the Army, Kath worked in the office of Nanco Bacon at Murarrie. The long hours were difficult to manage while taking care of her young son. Kath became house-keeper for Sir Raphael and Lady Cilento who took great interest in her welfare and her literary talent. Kath's second son, Vivian, was their grandchild.

During the 1950s, Kath became a member of the Communist Party, believing that this offered the best opportunity for advancing the interests of Aboriginal people. At that time, the Communist Party was the only Australian political party which did not have a 'white Australia' policy. She was always opposed to the policy of assimilation, but believed firmly in the cause of reconciliation between black and white Australia.

Kath's poetry received wide acclaim in the post war years. She was the first Aboriginal poet to publish a volume of verse. *We are going* appeared in 1964 and many more volumes followed. She had this to say about her work as an Aboriginal poet:

You could say a poet is born, but you're not born a poet. You have to work on it ... I felt poetry would be the breakthrough for the Aboriginal people because they were storytellers and song-makers, and I thought poetry would appeal to them

more than anything else. It was more of a book of their voices that I was trying to bring out, and I think I succeeded in doing this'.

We are going was released in the United States and Canada and, in 1966, *The Dawn is at Hand* won the Jessie Litchfield award. Later, Kath was awarded the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award and the Dame Mary Gilmore Medal. Her work attracted the admiration of Judith Wright. The Australian-born Master of the Queens Music, Malcolm Williamson, produced a choral symphony, *The Dawn is at Hand*, based on Kath Walker's own selection of her poetry.

Oodgeroo was also a talented artist. Throughout her years of living in Brisbane, she worked hard to achieve social justice for Aboriginal people and helped to bring about the 1967 referendum which at last accorded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people full citizenship. Her books *Integration and Queensland Society* (1968) and *My People* (1970) are her best known works on this subject. In 1970, Kath Walker was awarded the MBE for services to Aboriginal people.

In 1970, Kath returned to Minjerriba, and purchased the property, Moongalba. Over the next 23 years, some 30,000 people visited her there. Many were children of all cultural backgrounds whom she encouraged to her open air classroom to learn more about Aboriginal culture and society. Throughout the Moongalba years, Kath preferred to be known as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Custodian of Minjerriba. Oodgeroo means paper bark tree. Oodgeroo was a finalist in the 1981 Queenslander of the Year awards.

Her work for Aboriginal rights continued, and she became very frustrated at the slow progress which was made by governments in Australia, and returned her MBE in 1988, the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia. Oodgeroo was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Queensland University of Technology.

On 30 Sept 1993, the 'Minjerriba tribute' – a national celebration of Black Australian writers – was planned for Moongalba. Sadly, after a brief battle with cancer, Oodgeroo died on 16 September, only a fortnight before the event started. Her family decided that she would have wanted it to continue. In February 1994 a trust was established to carry on Oodgeroo's work, with the aim of achieving a just reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians¹.

¹ K Cochrane; K Walker *Our people*,