



Australia's Fourth World Literature

Introduction

The author discusses in detail both the nature and the extent of Aboriginal writing in English from the 1920s until Australia's bicentennial year (1988). In the chapters that follow, a number of specific issues are addressed: the manner in which this literature represents the social world around it; the role which it plays in articulating the black past and contemporary Aboriginal identity; and the relationship between Aboriginal writing and other forms of Australian literature.

The author will demonstrate that Aboriginal authors have produced literary works which merit serious attention, analysis and public recognition. This involves describing and evaluating Black Australian literature within both literary and socio-political contexts.

Above all, the function of the Black Australian novel as a meaningful and often impassioned form of cultural communication is emphasised throughout.

Keywords

Aborigines, Black Australian writing, Fourth World, World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP)

Introduction

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As the 1980s progress, modern nation states are increasingly being forced to come to terms with their indigenous minorities. The Laplanders of Finland, the Indians of Peru, and the Inuit of Canada are no longer articulating their aims and grievances solely through appeals to their respective national governments. In a process hastened by the constant improvements in electronic and satellite communications, there is a trend towards indigenous collectivity on a global scale. A clear example of this was the creation in 1975 of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), officially sanctioned by the United Nations as a non-governmental organisation. At the inaugural meeting of the WCIP, George Manuel introduced the concept of The Fourth World, a phrase employed to describe indigenous minorities throughout the earth.

Australia is no exception to this trend. How the nation is perceived internationally depends, in part, on its own Fourth World: the Aboriginal people. In May 1981, Australia's situation was highlighted when it hosted in Canberra the Third General Assembly of the WCIP. It became evident that Australia was at least temporarily positioned at the intersection of what might be termed the First and the Fourth Worlds, especially when the Queen's representative, Governor-General Sir Zelman Cowan, delivered his welcoming address to – and was heckled by – the assembled indigenous delegates. Just a few months later in September 1981, Australia played host to another international gathering: the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Melbourne. During this conference it was possible to describe the country as being at the convergence of, perhaps, *three* different worlds. Aboriginal political spokespersons, denied official

access to the conference forum, endeavoured to make private contact with Third World Commonwealth government officials who, in turn, pressed their own cases in the presence of the established First World Commonwealth delegations.

A year later, during the Brisbane Commonwealth Games of 1982, Australian Aborigines made a strong impression upon representatives of the international media who were gathered to cover the sporting events. The rapidly quelled demonstrations of the Aborigines highlighted the plight of Australia's Fourth World most succinctly, and the foreign coverage of their protests illustrated the sympathetic international interest in Australian Aboriginal affairs.¹ Events of 1987, such as the furore over Michael Mansell's attendance at a conference in Libya and Black Australian protests in Portsmouth, UK (over the use of the Aboriginal flag on board the 'First Fleet' replica ships) again thrust Black Australian issues onto the world stage. Then, on 26 January 1988 television news crews from around the globe filmed and interviewed while thousands of Black Australians marched in the streets of Sydney to voice their opposition to the Bicentenary. In Hyde Park, over 15000 Aborigines and their supporters attended the largest protest rally since the days of the Vietnam moratoria. The positive and non-violent focus of the events not only impressed foreign correspondents but also served to unify Aboriginal groups from all parts of Australia.² It is therefore clear that within the network of international political opinion and influence, the Aboriginal people are at a crucial stage in their development. As Ribnga Kenneth Green wrote in 1979:

The concept of the Fourth World is still very much in its early formative stage. Australian Aborigines still have the important opportunity of determining the paradigm of such a movement. The weakness of a minority can be turned into its very source of strength.³

These factors, and the accelerating politicisation of many Black Australians over the past two decades, led Bernard Smith to comment in 1980 that:

During the past twenty years or so a spirit of nationalism which is uniting people of Aboriginal descent has arisen throughout the Commonwealth . . . Whether the Aboriginal people constitute today a nation within a nation is arguable; but there can be little doubt that it is now the most important and vocal national minority in the country, is growing in strength and confidence daily, and is developing widespread international connections.⁴

It has not simply been a matter of the rest of the world taking a greater interest in the lot of Black Australians; Aborigines have themselves been reaching out internationally, more so than ever before. For example, during the past ten years, Aboriginal delegations have visited the Peoples' Republic of China, the United States, Europe, Nigeria, Canada, and the United Nations. Not all of these overseas contacts have been primarily of a political nature for, over the same period of time, Aboriginal dancers (both tribal and modern) have attended cultural festivals in Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Tahiti, Nigeria and Canada.

The vibrancy of Aboriginal culture has elicited much overseas interest: to cite one example, a French Society for the Promotion of the Culture of Australian Aborigines has been in existence since 1980. The Western world of the performing arts is increasingly taking note of both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture: in 1978, New York drama scout, Elaine Gold, visited Australia with a view to securing scripts of plays written by Aborigines, for possible presentation at Joseph Papp's Shakespearean Summer Festival in Central Park, New York. Four years later, Robert Merritt's play *The Cake Man* was invited to the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado, where it was so enthusiastically received that its two week season was sold out in advance of the first performance. Two years later Jack Davis's *No Sugar* was Australia's representative at the same festival, held in conjunction with Expo 86 in Vancouver, Canada – and again won both popular and critical acclaim. In May 1987, Davis's play *The Dreamers* was revived for a four week season in Portsmouth, providing a most ironic counterpoint to the re-enactment of the launching of the First Fleet to Australia. Finally, at the 1988 Festival of Perth, the third stage of Davis's dramatic trilogy, *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*, had its world premiere prior to a national and international tour.

Had Elaine Gold come to Australia only ten years earlier her quest would have been fruitless, for it was not until 1971 that the first play written by an Aborigine was performed. By 1988, twelve plays and a number of revues written by Black Australians had been staged in various cities and many more were being workshopped. This is just one index of the growing confidence and fluency of Aborigines operating within the constraints of White Australian culture. Indeed, there appears to be some relationship between the fact that as Black Australians have made political and social advances over the past twenty-five years in Australia, they have embarked far more frequently upon projects of creative writing in English. This question

will be addressed more fully at a later stage; what is noteworthy here is that, in 1961, no Black Australian had published any works of creative writing for approximately thirty years. By 1988, in addition to the twelve plays already mentioned, eighteen collections of poetry (and many more individual poems) and seven novels – all written by Black Australians – had appeared. One Aboriginal author, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), claims to have outsold all other living Australian poets, and her works have been widely translated.⁵ One branch of the Australia Council, the Aboriginal Arts Board, is directly involved with the funding of Aboriginal literature, and welcomes manuscripts for possible publication. In Sydney an autonomous Aboriginal publishing house, Black Books, became a reality in 1986 with the release of its first publication. Then in early 1988 Magabala Books of Broome, Western Australia – another independent Black Australian publisher – launched its first major title, Glenyse Ward's autobiographical story, *Wandering Girl*. The vast majority of Australians are, however, unaware of these achievements and, more importantly, do not yet appreciate their significance.

I intend to discuss in detail both the nature and the extent of Aboriginal writing in English. It should be stated at the outset that, throughout this study the descriptive term 'Black Australian' has been deliberately used, in addition to 'Aboriginal', for it embraces the published work of other oppressed, dark-skinned minorities in Australia, such as the Torres Strait Islanders. In the following chapters, a number of specific issues will be addressed: the manner in which this new literature represents the social world around it; the role which it plays in articulating the black past and the contemporary Aboriginal identity; and the relationship between Aboriginal writing and other forms of Australian literature. I will demonstrate that Aboriginal authors have produced literary works which merit thorough analysis as well as public recognition. This will involve describing and evaluating Black Australian literature within both literary and socio-political contexts. Above all, the function of the Black Australian novel as a meaningful and often impassioned form of cultural communication will be emphasised throughout.

One of the most important dimensions of this cross-cultural communication is the fact that the present generation of Australians now have the opportunity to obtain a glimpse of Aborigines as they see themselves, rather than as they are seen by others. Ever since the first Dutch reports in the seventeenth century, Black Australians have been assessed in the writings of Europeans. They have been placed

under the figurative microscope of the visual and literary arts, initially for overseas and, later, for domestic consumption. However laudable the motives for this work might have been, it was inevitably affected by the preconceptions and limitations of the artists and authors involved – who were all culturally foreign to their subject matter. Some authors were curious, some were sympathetic, some were bigots, and some were genuinely concerned, but not one was an Aborigine.

Hence, when Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first collection of poetry appeared in print in 1964, a new phase of cultural communication began in Australia. Not only the content, but the very fact of Noonuccal's *We Are Going* was important as, effectively for the first time,⁶ one of those best qualified to do so was commenting creatively upon her own race, its aspirations and fears. But this was not all. Noonuccal's book ushered in an era of self-reflective literary examination by Black Australians; it also completely changed the specimen on the slide under the microscope. Aborigines had now begun to analyse, pass judgement upon, criticise, and occasionally praise White Australians.

At the same time that Noonuccal was preparing her first books of poetry, important socio-political changes were altering the status of Aboriginal Australians. Throughout the 1960s, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) gained importance as the most influential and nationally representative black pressure group. In 1961, Aborigines were finally granted the franchise throughout Australia and, in 1965, Charles Perkins and others organised the widely reported 'Freedom Rides' throughout country towns of New South Wales. In 1965, the federal Arbitration Commission ruled that Northern Territory Aborigines should receive equal wages in the pastoral industry, this parity to be achieved gradually over a three year period. Importantly, in 1966, the Gurindji people at Wave Hill station in the Northern Territory resorted to strike action, initially for improved wages, but ultimately for their tribal land. The following year the Commonwealth government held a national referendum in which an unprecedented majority of Australians (almost ninety per cent) voted in favour of transferring to the Commonwealth paramount legislative and jurisdictional power in the area of Aboriginal affairs. In 1968, FCAATSI accelerated and reinforced its campaign to achieve Aboriginal land rights.

As this brief catalogue of political and legislative measures indi-

cates, the decade beginning in 1960 was one of protest, publicity and, in some cases, significant change in the realm of Aboriginal affairs. This is not to say that the autonomy or the political influence of Black Australians increased evenly throughout the entire country. There were during the same decade clear examples of the continued powerlessness of Aborigines in the face of governmental and industrial economic aims. In 1965, the Commonwealth's grant to the Nabalco consortium of mining leases on Gove Peninsula in Arnhem Land, expressly against the wishes and desires of the Aboriginal people there, was an excellent case in point. So much, of course, depends upon perspective. While one commentator can wax enthusiastic over the unparalleled support for the referendum of 1967, another can throw quite a different light on the same event by noting that it took almost two hundred years for the British settlers of Australia to grant full citizenship rights to Aborigines and to recognise them officially for census purposes.

It is likely that the 1960s brought more important and lasting socio-political changes to the lives of Aborigines than any previous decade since the arrival of Europeans in Australia. One salient indication of the alteration in the Aboriginal socio-political situation was the increasing publication of Black Australian authors. Dramatic – and overdue – changes in the legislative status of Aborigines paralleled the experiments of Black Australian literature during those years. I contend that a fundamental relationship exists between the socio-political milieu and Aboriginal creative writing in English. It is a complex relationship. It is not one in which the literature demonstrably operates as a direct reaction to socio-political events (although this is occasionally the case); nor is it a relationship in which literature observably influences Aboriginal behaviour or political action. But in the case of Aboriginal creative writing, the literature and actual events are very proximate: novels are extremely naturalistic, the inspiration for plays comes largely from the personal experiences of the playwrights, characters are modelled to a great extent upon individuals the author has personally known, and socio-political issues are faced squarely. In short, black creative writing in Australia cannot be studied in isolation: it must be examined and evaluated in terms of the social environment which surrounds it and the historical events which precede it.

It is essential to note, however, that while the approach to the literature of black/white race relations to be taken here is explicitly historical, cultural, and sociological, it is not deterministic or Marxist.

Novels, poems and plays concerning Aboriginal/white relations in Australia are seen as aesthetically significant in terms of both their style and content. In a literature which frequently focuses upon violence and cultural clash, what is said is assuredly crucial, but how it is said also undoubtedly contributes to, or detracts from, the aesthetic impact of the work. This aesthetic criterion cannot be ignored in an examination of Black Australian literature. In fact, such an examination demonstrates that Aboriginal creative writing in English is a phenomenon worthy of serious critical, cultural, and academic consideration: that it is a rapidly developing literature in its own right.

Many White Australian authors have dealt with Aboriginal themes, with varying degrees of success. Certain of Australia's finest writers have derived the inspiration for some of their best work from an observation of Aboriginal situations. On the other hand, it is worth emphasising that talent is by no means an assurance of popularity in the marketplace and, for this reason, the works of several less artistically skilled European writers who have written 'best sellers' concerning Aboriginal/white race relations will also be examined. For the concerns of this study, popular literature is just as important, and deserves as much critical attention, as the literature of the educated elite. This is not so much a theoretical as a practical issue: if over 100000 Australians have read a book written by Douglas Lockwood, it would be both irresponsible and misleading not to discuss his work in relation to the literary perception of Australian Aborigines in White Australian writing. There is a further cogent reason for an examination of the more popular literature of Aboriginal/white race relations: the imagery which Ion L. Idriess employs in his novels may not be as striking and metaphysical as that of Patrick White, but it is, nevertheless, just as important in terms of the articulation of the author's themes and his racial attitudes. In short, I make no claims for the pre-eminence of certain types of literature, but I do assert that many varying types and standards of writing must be treated in a topic as socio-political as this one.

If one believes that the individual reader is affected by what she or he reads, considerations such as the volume of book sales and the choice of certain works of literature for educational syllabuses cannot be ignored. Some tentative propositions can be advanced: for example, as soon as a book is prescribed or recommended for study in schools (especially secondary schools) it gains a degree of legitimacy

that increases the longer it remains a set text; if public opposition to its inclusion is strong enough, it will soon be removed.

Similarly, if a book is poorly marketed and distributed by its publisher, then its impact upon the public will be limited, regardless of the talent of the author. Although an analysis of the book publishing industry in Australia is beyond the scope of this study, some reference to such factors as reprint publishing, the volume of sales, and the selection of literature for educational purposes will be made where relevant.

Such relevance can often be viewed in so far as it is part of the entire social milieu in which a work of literature is created. Again, this is not to say that the socio-political situation dictates the form of a literary work. It must be remembered, though, that in the case of Aboriginal literature in English and creative writing by White Australians on Aboriginal themes, literature is frequently so proximate to reality and to social events that these must be surveyed prior to a consideration of the works themselves, if they are to be fully understood and appreciated.

This study is concerned with cross-cultural communication. It begins by describing an historical period during which such communication was minimal. The onset of the Depression provided the impetus for social questioning, and many of the questions – asked by politicians, missionaries, pastoralists and authors – concerned the Aboriginal people. The same period also saw the publication of the work of David Unaipon, the first Black Australian author in English, whose writings are discussed in Chapter Two. It is therefore appropriate to begin the study of black/white literary and socio-political relations in 1929.

During the Depression, relatively few Europeans wrote about Aborigines. Those authors who did so passed comment, not only on Black Australians, but also, to differing degrees, on their own dominant white society. Through this they revealed – sometimes unwittingly – information about themselves. Two such writers were Katharine Susannah Prichard and Xavier Herbert. In the years of the Depression, they rescued the Aborigine from literary invisibility and boldly addressed the embarrassing issue of miscegenation. There is a strong social dimension to their novels, especially Herbert's *Capricornia*, which reflects the general unrest and questioning of those years.

In the 1930s, there were important alterations in the scientific, anthropological, and official views of Aboriginal people; these changes will be discussed in Chapter One. Yet not all authors of the 1930s and early 1940s adopted the sympathetic stance of Prichard and Herbert.

One who did not was Ion L. Idriess, whose first novel dealing in part with Aborigines, *Lasseter's Last Ride*, appeared in 1931. Another was Arthur Upfield, who wrote an entire series of popular but highly stereotyped books concerning the fictional Aboriginal detective Napoleon Bonaparte (or Boney, as Upfield called him). In the fifteen years following 1930, changes in the socio-political climate in Australia paralleled in an intriguing way changes in the literary perception of Aborigines by whites; changes which will also be discussed in the second chapter.

The end of World War II in 1945 marks a turning point in black/white relations in Australia. The returning servicemen had fought against tyranny, discrimination, and oppression in various theatres of war around the globe. The Aboriginal soldiers among them were often prepared to fight these same afflictions in the domestic arena upon their return. In addition, the Black Australians who saw action in World War II sometimes developed uniquely egalitarian relationships with their white fellow-soldiers in the heat of battle, so that both white and black attitudes underwent a radical – if usually temporary – change.⁷ Other blacks who had obtained employment in Australia due to the exigencies of wartime production had been absorbed into the trade union movement, a factor which was to become of considerable importance in the genesis of Aboriginal political protest, as the Pilbara strike of 1946 was to illustrate.

The fifteen years following 1945 also saw the emergence of a new generation of White Australian authors, one of whom was Judith Wright. *The Moving Image*, published in 1946, included a number of poems in which her understanding of Black Australians was both original and strikingly symbolic. Over the same period, various writers – almost exclusively novelists who had themselves lived and worked with Aboriginal people – released important works, among them Randolph Stow, Donald Stuart, and, the popular authors Bill Harvey and Douglas Lockwood. Towards the end of this period Patrick White wrote *Voss*, the first of his three novels which include Aboriginal characters, and a book which offers a singular, metaphysical insight into the culture of Aboriginal Australians. The third chapter of this study will highlight the most noteworthy socio-political events in the area of Aboriginal/white relations in Australia until 1961; the fourth will assess the black/white race relations literature of that same era, with regard to its creative merits and its social commentary and ideological content.

It is in the twenty-five years up to 1988 that the other side of black/white cultural communication in Australia finally found expression. As Aboriginal writers began to respond to the themes which they considered to be of importance, they presented a long delayed reply to the dominant White Australian culture. When they write, Black Australians are not solely responding to the surrounding white society. Although a treatment of the relations between blacks and whites is definitely an important element in their works, perhaps even more significant is the exploration of the nature of 'Aboriginality' itself: what it means to be black in Australia. Thus, there are two main tributaries which must be explored in an examination of Aboriginal literature in English. These two streams do flow together in places but they are distinct, if related, concerns. As J.J. Healy puts it, 'the volatile pictures that are now emerging in Aboriginal matters . . . give us, very starkly, Black on White; very poignantly and angrily, Black on Black'.⁸

The self-reflective examination of Aboriginality is a major, but not the only, theme in black creative writing in English. Following a socio-political survey of Aboriginal/white relations from the 1960s to the present, further chapters deal with some of these other related themes: views and varieties of history as expressed in Black Australian writing; sex and violence, as dealt with in the Black Australian novel; the emphasis upon political protest in Aboriginal poetry; and the fascinating position of Aboriginal drama as both critique and often humorous creative expression.

Naturally whites and blacks do not always choose to write about precisely the same topics, but there are cases in which a parallel approach is evident – for example, in two novels concerning the Aboriginal guerilla rebel, Sandamara – and, in such cases, the two approaches will be compared and contrasted at some length. Throughout, an historical and socio-cultural analysis prefaces the thematic and artistic treatment of the works. White Australian writing is discussed here only in so far as it illuminates aspects of Black Australian literature and historical activity. I have been intentionally selective in order to highlight the most distinctive aspects of Aboriginal writing. It is equally important to bear in mind that, while arbitrary dates have been selected to delimit, for example, the assimilation era, the situation was in reality far more fluid. In this study I have deliberately restricted both the White Australian authors and the genres discussed, as well as the boundaries of the periods selected for examination, in order to throw into relief Aboriginal

socio-political action and literary achievement.

It is essential to appreciate the social environment which surrounds black/white race relations literature in Australia and, in particular, that of the 1960s to the present. For example, one might suggest that the acceleration in the output of creative writing by Aboriginal Australians is a result of the creation of a Federal government funding agency for Aboriginal artists and writers in 1973 (the Aboriginal Arts Board), together with a general improvement in the receptivity of White Australians to the black viewpoint. While this may be partially true, it would be naive to claim that higher budgetary allocations to Aboriginal affairs and improvements in the autonomy of Black Australians completely explain an upsurge in Aboriginal creative writing. It must be remembered that the first collections of Aboriginal poetry appeared in print without any government subsidy and, even now, some of the most talented and influential black authors publish without the assistance of the Aboriginal Arts Board. Indeed, as will be noted in later chapters, there have been a number of occasions when official government actions which have been considered repressive by Aboriginal Australians have provided the impetus for the writing of poetry or drama. Clearly the matter is not simple, for both advances and regressions in black autonomy have produced literary responses.

However various and complex the circumstances of the time, the years since 1970 have witnessed the appearance of a great deal of Aboriginal creative writing in English. It is interesting to note, however, that there has not been a corresponding increase in the amount of creative writing by White Australians dealing with Aboriginal themes. In addition, while black authors favour the writing of poetry over any other literary genre, current White Australian poets – far greater in number – for the most part avoid writing poems about Aborigines. This represents a marked shift from the poetic preoccupations of, for example, the Jindyworobaks.

Why do Aborigines so frequently choose the medium of poetry? While it is impossible to offer a conclusive answer, some theories can be advanced. One factor is the poignancy and brevity of Black Australian verse: the medium provides an immediacy which allows the theme to shine through directly. Second, since much Aboriginal creative writing is published in limited editions on a shoestring budget, there is an inherent advantage in working in a genre which is more concise and

economical. In addition to these pragmatic considerations it is also arguable that, while the creation of poetry in written English requires many Aboriginal authors to bridge a cultural gap, since they are working in a format of foreign origin, that gap may not be as daunting in the case of poetry as it would be in the case of other literary modes. As anthropologists such as Elkin and Berndt have illustrated, traditional Aboriginal song cycles are venerable, complex, and extremely poetic. Rodney Hall's inclusion of the Wonguri-Mandijigai 'Moon-Bone Song', and other Aboriginal songs in translation, in the *Collins Book of Australian Poetry*⁹ recognises this fact.

Although Hall is the first white editor to include such songs in a major collection of Australian poetry, he is by no means the first to appreciate the intrinsic lyricism of many Aboriginal languages. As far back as the 1940s, such anthropologists as T.G.H. Strehlow were demonstrating this in published works such as *Aranda Traditions*, which first appeared in 1947.¹⁰ More recently, Carl von Brandenstein and A.P. Thomas's collection of *djabi* – initiation songs of Aboriginal men from the Pilbara region of Western Australia – brought these poetic elements to the fore. These *djabi* 'in their use of a few words to evoke a mood, have a kinship with Japanese *haiku*':¹¹

Drop, leaves, silvery stars!

Drop, leaves from the spearwood to the east of me!

Drop, leaves, wind-swayed, wind-ruffled.¹²

Given the impressiveness of this poetic tradition, it is not surprising that poetry is the single most popular medium of creative expression in written English for Aboriginal people. Moreover, Aboriginal authors today are fusing traditional languages with English in their poems to achieve a unique phonetic synthesis. More will be said of this innovation in Chapter Eight, but it is important to be aware of the historical dimension and traditional links of much Aboriginal literature in English, particularly Black Australian poetry and drama.

Although this primacy of poetry has not been challenged since 1970, Aboriginal authors have begun to work with other literary genres, drama being one of the most significant. Plays written by Aboriginal Australians have been performed from Sydney to Perth and overseas, have gone on state and national tours, have been published, have been presented at a number of drama festivals, and have been aired nationally on television. Theatre has the advantage over the printed

page of providing an immediate and total sensory impact. Given the socio-political preoccupations of Black Australian writers and their desire to achieve just such an impact, it is not surprising that they are writing for the stage. The potential transformation of plays into the media of video and film has not escaped Aboriginal dramatists, which further reinforces the attractiveness of the theatre. I will argue in a later chapter that Aboriginal drama is of both historical and contemporary significance, by examining the influence of traditional Black Australian oral literature upon modern Aboriginal plays.

The point is that, while I am not adopting a literary 'genre criticism' approach to race relations literature in Australia and am, rather, examining the subject thematically, the fundamental importance of the medium of communication cannot be ignored. Both white and black authors consciously choose to write in a particular mode or style for a wide variety of reasons, including the influence of mentors, education, economic aims, gender, subject matter, and personal disposition. They may also consciously choose to write for a particular or a general audience – in this case, primarily for an Aboriginal or white readership – or for both simultaneously. The genre and what may be termed the target of a work can be thought of as independent variables affecting both its financial success and its general impact. The task of isolating these variables from the works themselves is not only extremely difficult but extends beyond the ambit of this socio-cultural and literary study.

However, it is valuable to raise this issue because, when Aboriginal and White Australian authors do explicitly state why they choose a particular literary mode, and name the specific target of their writing, the matter becomes very pertinent. Such information is even more relevant when the themes of the literature involve cultural clash, as is the norm in the works discussed here. Since the texts themselves do not provide this information, my research has included as many personal interviews as possible with the authors being studied and, in these and other cases, relevant autobiographical and biographical material has been collected.

There is a further reason for this partly sociological perspective, which can be subsumed under the category of political activism. Over the past twenty-five years in Australia, the debate over Aboriginal rights (to land, to education, to citizenship, and to compensation) has received considerable publicity. Specific issues will be discussed at a later stage; what is presently important is that the group of black activists grew both in numbers and in audibility through the decades of

the 1960s, 1970s, and the 1980s, as did the politicisation of many other Aborigines. The activists made themselves heard through petitions, protests, demonstrations, interviews, and publicity campaigns and, importantly, many of them also began to write. Some produced purely political treatises, but a significant number of them wrote poems, plays, and even novels. Even those who did not demonstrate often wrote works sympathetic to the concerns of those who did.

Amongst today's White Australian community, those with official political power rarely produce creative writing on a political theme, especially one involving the Aboriginal people: the white public spokespersons are, by and large, not authors. However, amongst the Black Australian community, public spokespersons far more frequently are writers, or are influenced by them. What is important here is that Aboriginal authors are very frequently highly motivated in a political sense and are influential both among their own race and, to growing extent, among the larger Australian community. As Bernard Smith writes, 'A few black writers . . . are playing a leading part in developing a new awareness of nationhood among their own people'.¹³

A number of conclusions may be drawn from this. First, the role of these writers means that an analysis of Aboriginal creative writing in English has wider ramifications: one gains a clearer view of Aboriginal socio-political aspirations through interviews with the writers concerned and through reading their works. Second, Aboriginal creative writing illustrates the fact that artistic skill need not be a casualty of political commitment. Third, the contrasting perceptions of White Australian authors who write on similar themes are thrown into even clearer relief, as the majority are not as strongly politically motivated as their black counterparts. Thus, while this study deals with the literature of Australian black/white race relations over the past sixty years and the socio-political milieu in which it emerged, my major concern is the creative writing of the last twenty-five years up to 1988.

As noted at the beginning of this introduction, there are strong indications of a global trend towards a collectivity of indigenous peoples which is theoretically, and, in an increasing fashion, politically expressed. It is probable that a necessary precondition for the full participation of the Australian Aboriginal people in this Fourth World movement will be a unified black collectivity within Australia itself. Although Smith considers it 'arguable' at the moment whether or not 'the Aboriginal people constitute today a nation within a nation',¹⁴ it

does seem both logical and likely that – at least in symbolic terms – this is precisely the direction in which they are presently headed. During his 1986 tour of Australia, the Pope underlined the distinctive resilience and solidarity of Black Australia:

You have kept your sense of brotherhood. If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn.

The time for this rebirth is now!¹⁵

Since it can be argued that the nature of the pontiff's statement was both political and spiritual, the implications of his words for Aboriginal unity are certainly significant. And, as the events of 1988 have already demonstrated, Black Australians have now drawn closer together on a national scale than ever before.

Contemporary Black Australian creative writers have already played a major role in articulating this sense of unity and defining the Aboriginal identity. As the third decade of such writing continues, one can expect to find them growing in numbers, confidence and skill, and increasingly expressing and moulding the Aboriginal nationalism of which Smith speaks. More and more, Australia's Fourth World will define itself and demand both artistic and political recognition through its creative literature.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Spencer Reiss and Carl Robinson, 'Aborigines vs. Queensland', *Newsweek* 11 October, 1982, p. 13.
- 2 See, for example, Tony Hewett and David Monaghan, 'Blacks Boo Royal Pair on Barge', the *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 January, 1988, p. 2, and Anne Jamieson, 'The Push for an Aboriginal Parliament', the *Weekend Australian*, 6-7 February, 1988, p. 24.
- 3 Ribnga Kenneth Green, 'Aborigines and International Politics', in Berndt and Berndt, eds, *Aborigines of the West*, (Perth, 1979), p. 392.
- 4 Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, (Sydney, 1980), p. 36.
- 5 Jim Davidson, 'Interview: Kath Walker', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1977, p. 430.
- 6 Although, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, David Unaipon was the first published Aboriginal author, his works were never widely distributed.
- 7 For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Robert Hall's unpublished M.A. (Qual.) thesis, 'The Army and the Aborigines, World War II', (Canberra, 1979).
- 8 J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, (St. Lucia, 1978), p. 3.
- 9 Rodney Hall, ed., *The Collins Book of Australian Poetry*, (Sydney, 1981), pp. 13-19.
- 10 For further examples of traditional Aboriginal poetry, see Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia*, (Sydney, 1971); Ronald M. Berndt's *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, (Melbourne, 1976), and *Three Faces of Love*, (Melbourne, 1976); and Tamsin Donaldson's article, 'Translating Oral Literature: Aboriginal Song Texts', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 3, 1979, part 1, pp. 62-83.
- 11 C.G. von Brandenstein and A.P. Thomas, *Tarum Aboriginal Song Poetry From the Pilbara*, (Adelaide, 1974), Inside Front Cover.
- 12 *ibid.* p. 38.
- 13 Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, p. 35.
- 14 Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, p. 36.
- 15 'The address given by his Holiness Pope John Paul II at the meeting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Alice Springs on 20 November 1986', (Canberra, 1986), p. 4.