**Reflections on People and History**

**By Gary Foley**

Those who choose to spend their lives battling in the struggle for justice find that two things occur over time. The first is that they find that the road to justice is full of potholes of frustration and disillusioning setbacks. There are rare wins in minor skirmishes and frequent defeats on major issues of importance, and ultimate victory is always just over the horizon. Over the long term the frustration can bring deep disillusionment and many fall by the wayside or become victims of the substances they consume to ease the pain. But for those who survive in the long term and manage somehow to retain their humanity and their sense of humour it is often due to the second thing that occurs; the strong relationships that you develop with your fellow activists and dreamers.

It is on the historical record that I became politicised at the age of 17 when I two things happened to me almost simultaneously. The first was my now notorious bashing at the hands of corrupt and racist members of the NSW constabulary, and the second was one week later being given a copy of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* to read. Those two events set me on the path I have travelled ever since, and it has been a long hard road with no real sense of victory in sight. I started out a callow youth who slowly educated himself through participation in street demonstrations and involvement in a group in Redfern that was described by others as a Black Power cell. Over the next forty years I was at times a draughtsman, actor, publicity officer, teacher, bureaucrat (briefly), writer, website designer, computer programmer, radio star, screen writer, and now academic historian and university lecturer.

Through all those jobs and occasional distractions, I have always been ultimately working toward the same goals. That is to firstly be part of the long term push to achieve justice and equity for all Aboriginal peoples in Australia, and when that is achieved, to then begin the task of ‘civilizing’ the rest of Australia to create a more equitable and just society for all. Thus as a result, along the way you meet and develop close relationships with those who, like you, have the same level of commitment and involvement as yourself. In the long term you discover who the small band of reliable, consistent ‘true believers’ really are. It is not just a question of how committed they are, but also can be subject to a range of unpredictable factors such as health, poverty, family traumas and the oppressive brutality of the system. All of these factors create overwhelming pressure that might cause an otherwise strong and staunch brother or sister to drop out of the struggle.

Those of us of my generation who fought at the *Battle of the Aboriginal Embassy 1972* and who are still standing and still fighting today are but a pitiful few. We have lost virtually all of our comrades of old as we have watched the ravages of time and the enormity of the struggle take away their energy, health and lives. The majority of key *Embassy* activists of 1972 are today dead. Virtually all of them died in poverty, which is a sign of their dedication to the struggle and that they were not ultimately interested in personal wealth or aggrandisement, unlike many of the ‘leaders’ of today. But the worst part for an old warrior who has survived is to know that all those good brothers and sisters who are no longer with us died knowing that they had never seen the face of victory.

Six months before I was born the same fate befell one of the great NSW activists of the 1930s, Bill Ferguson, when he died a sad and disillusioned man. Every generation of committed, Aboriginal lifelong political activists since Pemulwuy has died knowing that their battle was in vain. No generation to this day has drunk the fruits of victory. And knowing all that, I expect to die knowing the same thing. But in my mind the saddest thing about all those staunch warriors who have gone before us is that most of them have been forgotten (or never known) by their own people.

The majority of the current generation of Aboriginal children leaving high school have never heard of people such as Fred Maynard, Bill Ferguson, Jack Patton, Marge Tucker, Pearl Gibbs, Fred Fogarty, Bill Onus, Ken Brindle, Bert Groves, Dooley Bin Bin, Gladys Elphick or the multitude of others who fought for the better lives that some Aboriginal people today enjoy. Even less have heard of the great unknown dead heroes of my generation, such as Bruce McGuinness, David Anderson, Albert Haydon, Billy Harrison, Black Allan Barker, Essie Coffee, Lin Onus, John Newfong, Billy Craigie, Isobel Coe, Bob Bellear, Ambrose Golden-Brown, Brian Syron, Bobby Mcleod, Don Brady, Rob Riley, Bob Maza, Justine Saunders and many more. These were inspirational people who were motivated by a strong belief that they could make a difference and change the world, which is what they helped to achieve. We changed the world and we changed Australian history at the 1972 *Battle of the Aboriginal Embassy*. The only problem was that duplicitous Australian politicians changed the world back.

It is the fact that so few people in Australia know the names of the Aboriginal heroes of my era that prompted me into writing this reflection. When one has known and worked beside so many committed and brilliant people who were selfless and courageous in their efforts, it is deeply distressing when they pass on and their work is soon forgotten and/or ignored. I suppose that is one of the reasons I decided late in life to become one of the things that I had previously despised, namely an academic historian. As insinuated, I had previously had a low opinion of Australian historians because I felt that they had in the past colluded in the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples stories from the pages of Australian history.

But when Australian historians somewhat belatedly decided to turn their gaze on the period of history and events that I had been part of, I was disconcerted at their superficial analysis and incorrect interpretations and assertions about that era. I had been part of events that historians were attempting to describe and analyse and I knew that their versions of events were not only often wrong, but in some cases were deliberately distortive. In the face of such provocation I therefore decided to become one of them in order to make an Aboriginal voice heard in their exclusive club.

Consequently, a lot of what I write in the way of history is an attempt to present an Aboriginal perspective of events in my lifetime and ensure that some of the untold stories inaccessible to mainstream historians are able to be heard. In this last gesture in life I may well be a voice in the wilderness, but that is why I don’t just write history; I also teach it at university.

In the past 15 years there have been literally thousands of students pass through my university classrooms, and I believe that if only 20% of those students do what I tell them to, which is to pass on to others what I have taught them, then there is a quiet revolution occurring undetected out there in Australian society. Like a bird-flu virus I am infecting the minds of young Australians with the truth about their own history, and this virus of truth is spreading. It won’t change Australia in my lifetime, but at least I can die knowing that I left something behind, even if it is a virus of truth slowly infecting the minds of Australia and causing them to reflect and think.

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