

# Word Art: a blog on reading poetry and fiction

Presented by Prof Stephen Torre BA (Hons) PhD *Qld*, Arts and Culture Consultant, Reef & Leaf Pty Ltd

E-mail: storre@ozemail.com.au Mob: 0408 770 166



**Oodgeroo Noonuccal** was an Aboriginal Australian political activist, artist and educator who campaigned for Aboriginal rights. Noonuccal was best known for her poetry and was the first Aboriginal Australian to publish a book of verse. Noonuccal was born Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska in 1920 on North Stradbroke Island. She attended Dunwich State School and then became a domestic servant. In 1943 she married childhood friend and Brisbane waterside worker Bruce Walker at the Methodist Church, West End, Brisbane. The couple had one son, but later separated. She worked for Drs Raphael Cilento and Lady Cilento and had a second son Vivian with the Cilentos' son Ralph junior. During the 1960s Kath Walker was a key figure in the campaign for the reform of the Australian constitution to allow Aboriginal people full citizenship. In 1972 she bought a property on North Stradbroke Island which she called Moongalba ("sitting-down place") and established the Noonuccal-Nughie Education and Cultural Centre. In 1987, she announced she would return her MBE in protest over the Australian Government's intention to celebrate the Australian Bicentenary which she described as "200 years of sheer unadulterated humiliation" of

Aboriginal people. She also announced she would change her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, with Oodgeroo meaning "paperbark tree" and Noonuccal being her people's name. She died from cancer on 16 September 1993 at the Repatriation General Hospital at Greenslopes, Brisbane aged 72 years and was buried at Moongalba on North Stradbroke Island.

Oodgeroo wrote many books, beginning with *We Are Going* (1964). This first book of poetry was extraordinarily successful and made her Australia's highest-selling poet alongside C. J. Dennis. The title poem is a poignant account of the dispossession felt by indigenous peoples as they witnessed the desecration of their traditional lands. Perhaps for the first time, it helped non-indigenous readers to understand the feelings of sorrow and cultural alienation experienced by indigenous people at that time, as well as the intrinsic importance of 'country' to indigenous identity.

## "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 the 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 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."

## Word Art: Oodgeroo Noonuccal

---

Oodgeroo wrote many poems which ‘gave voice’ to authentic indigenous experience, contesting the colonial and post-colonial historical suppression of Aboriginal culture in the language of the oppressors themselves, English—and, most powerfully, in English Poetry. In the poem “Gifts”, Oodgeroo presents a speaker who is trying to attract a woman by offering her increasingly extravagant inducements. He first offers the woman cosmetic adornments, “pendants” and “parrot feathers”, then promises to “put a child in your arms”. Next, he tells her he will achieve fame as a “headman” and “great rain-maker”, as well as a composer of songs about her. But the woman remains unimpressed, so he then offers impossible control of nature and the cosmos itself (“I will bring the stars of heaven to you”). In the punchline the woman dismisses all these grandiose claims, asking instead that he simply bring her food. The poem cleverly debunks many such ‘romantic’ poems in the English poetic tradition in which male lovers promise extravagant material gifts, fame, power, and all sorts of impossible inducements to women. In contrast to this, the women desire things more immediate, practical and sensual, like (in this case) food.

### “Gifts”

“I will bring you love,” said the young lover,  
“A glad light to dance in your dark eye.  
Pendants I will bring of the white bone,  
And gay parrot feathers to deck your hair.”

But she only shook her head.

“I will put a child in your arms,” he said,  
“Will be a great headman, great rain-maker.  
I will make remembered songs about you  
That all the tribes in all the wandering camps  
Will sing forever.”

But she was not impressed.

“I will bring you the still moonlight on the lagoon,  
And steal for you the singing of all the birds;  
I will bring down the stars of heaven to you,  
And put the bright rainbow into your hand.”

“No,” she said, “bring me tree-grubs.”

Oodgeroo’s later poetry expressed an optimism for the future of indigenous people in Australia. In “A Song of Hope” she said: “Look up, my people, / The dawn is breaking, / The world is waking / To a new bright day, / When none defame us, / Nor colour shame us, / Nor sneer dismay”. The poem ends as follows:

See plain the promise,  
Dark freedom-lover!  
Night’s nearly over,  
And though long the climb,  
New rights will greet us,  
New mateship meet us,  
And joy complete us  
In our new Dream Time.

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