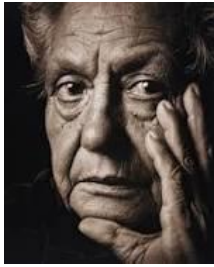


Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet
president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk

January 2016

A Displaced Person In Your Own Country: Oodgeroo Noonucall (1920 - 1993)



When Ann and I were in Australia last January, we took the ferry to North Stradbroke Island which lies off the coast of Queensland. This island was the birthplace of Australia's best-known Aboriginal poet, Oodgeroo Noonucall and it was to this island that she later returned.

She was actually born Kath Walker but came to feel that this name had been imposed upon her just as her island had been given a false name: it was originally called Minjerribah. As with any true poet, names were extremely important to her as they were to her ancestors. Names confer a mystical power on the world and names are intimately bound up with a person's sense of identity. The Noonucall people were the original inhabitants of this island and by changing her name, she was striving to regain part of the identity which she felt had been stolen from her. Unlike so many people in the Western world, she does not subscribe to the crude fiction that the past and present are divided into neat categories but that they flow seamlessly into each other. The past is very much alive and *is all around us*.

The Past

*Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past..*

*Tonight here in suburbia as I sit
In an easy chair before electric heater,
Warmed by the red glow, I fall into dream:
I am away
At the camp fire in the bush,
My own people, sitting on the ground,
No walls about me,
The stars over me,
The tall surrounding trees that stir in the wind
Making their own music,
Soft cries of the night coming to us, there
Where we are with all old Nature's lives
Known and unknown,
In scenes where we belong but have now forsaken.
Deep chair and electric radiator
Are but since yesterday,
But a thousand camp fires in the forest
Are in my blood.
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
Of all the race years that have moulded me.*

Oodgeroo left school aged 13 and like so many Aborigines, she was compelled to leave the island of her birth and go to work in the nearest city, Brisbane as an ill-used and badly paid domestic servant as this was one of the very few employment 'opportunities' open to Aboriginal females. As a means of escape, in 1941, she enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service. A year later she married an Aborigine who was from a

different tribe. In 1943, she was invalided out of the army due to a serious ear infection which left her with partial hearing loss for the rest of her life. She was able to train in secretarial skills at a college in Brisbane and found a job with a manufacturer. She and her husband joined the Communist party as that was the only political party in the country at that time which concerned itself with the rights of Aborigines.

Oodgeroo's marriage lasted less than five years and she was left to raise their son on her own. When he experienced difficulties at school, his mother was forced to return to domestic service. In the second household in which she worked, she was made pregnant by the son of her employer.

It wasn't until the 1950's that Noonucall became interested in writing poetry and in the last years of that decade, she joined the Realist Writing Group in Brisbane and some of her earliest poems appeared in that group's magazine. In the early 1960's, she sent a manuscript to a Brisbane publisher. She was fortunate that the eminent poet, Judith Wright who had a great interest in Aboriginal culture was the reader for this publisher and in 1964, Oodgeroo became

the first ever Australian Aboriginal to have a collection of poems published. This collection, entitled *We Are Going* with its simple, direct style sold over ten thousand copies in a short period of time. It seemed to appeal to many people who don't normally read poetry and who realized that an Aboriginal woman could have important truths to impart about the intimate relationship between humans and their natural environment. There was perhaps also a sense of guilt about how white Australians had treated the indigenous population. In a moving poem from a later collection, Oodgeroo writes about an old man made to feel an alien in his own land, a *displaced person in (his) own country*:

Oodgeroo became more and

more involved in the struggle to achieve political rights for her people, including the right to vote and to be granted Australian citizenship. After many years living in Brisbane, she made the decision in 1971 to return to the island of her birth which had inspired so many of her poems. On the island, she helped establish an Aboriginal cultural centre. Increasingly well-known internationally, she travelled widely, including trips to the USA and China.

Oodgeroo died at her home on Stradbroke island in 1993. As with the early inhabitants of St. Kilda in the Outer Hebrides, birds were believed to foretell a person's death. The curlew had long been believed to be a brother of the Aborigines and which came to warn of a coming death by crying near a camp three nights in succession.

Last Of His Tribe

*Change is the law. The new must oust the old.
I look at you and am back in the long ago,
Old pinnaroo lonely and lost here,
Last of your clan.
Left only with your memories, you sit
And think of the gay throng, the happy people,
The voices and the laughter
All gone, all gone,
And you remain alone.*

*I asked you and you let me hear
The soft vowelly tongue to be heard now
No more for ever. For me
You enact old scenes, old ways you have used
Boomerang and spear.
You singer of ancient tribal songs,
You leader once in the corroboree,
You twice in fierce tribal fights
Wild enemy blacks from over the river,
All gone, all gone. And I feel
The sudden sting of tears, Willie Mackenzie*

*In the Salvation Army Home,
Displaced person in your own country,
Lonely in teeming city crowds,
Last of your tribe.*

from *The Curlew Cried*

*Who is it that tonight must go:
The old blind one? The cripple
child?
Tomorrow all the camp will know.*

*The poor dead will be less afraid,
Their tribe brother will be with
them
When the dread journey must be
made.*

*'Have courage, death is not an
end',
He seems to say. 'Though you
must weep,
Death is kindly and your friend.'*

*Three nights the curlew cried.
Once more
He comes to take the timorous
dead -
To what grim change, to what
ghostly shore?*

