

## **Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain**

**‘Me Yes I Am He the Villain’:**

**Reflections of a Bloke From Outside**

**MUDROOROO**

To begin with my identity, if I must use the term, this rests on my Buddhism. My religion does not believe in a fixed permanent self, but in a self that must be predicated with non-self and this is absolutely necessary to understand if we are to achieve any degree of self awareness. Existence is not singular (individual) and independent. Any identity we have is made up of our intricate relationships with our families (society), nature and the whole universe. As an *identity* I engage in a plurality of realities and the transitory nature of things in a constant flux of cause and effect. Everything is interdependent causally evolving and dynamic. Indeed, each of us as *being* is forever in the process of becoming. We are not fixed static entities inhabiting a fixed static world or universe, but dynamic beings evolving along with as part of the universal flux. My identity is not real but imaginary assembled by the mind. Now what exactly do I create as my supposed personal ‘identity’? First of all, my religion is very dear to me and without it I am not me. Secondly there is my work (praxis). I am a writer and I cannot be understood without this being taken into account. Thirdly, there was or is my Aboriginality which to a great extent shaped my existential being in Australia, though the dilemma has faded away in the long period of exile. Ten years is too long a time away from home for it to remain home; but still my identity is composed of all three. It is impossible to understand me without taking into account this triad. People may assert that I am not Aborigine but this very assertion is based on my being Aboriginal. Understand! To bring up a thing or non-thing is also to bring up the opposite. How could I even think to say that I am not Aboriginal, when this instantly brings up the claim that I am Aboriginal especially when so much of my Australian life has been lived as an Aboriginal and also much of my writing is about Aborigines. Still, it has never been the most important part of me and this must be taken into account even more than any supposed genealogy. My Aboriginality is

not based on a government definition; but on a life lived. I am an existentialist not a government definition.

I have been described as one of the most enigmatic literary figures of Australia perhaps because I live in an exploded village in Nepal and have been to a great extent forgotten in Australia except as a trickster, a liar and a thief of identity. I am a writer of many books, articles and poems. I am an author, a poet and an essayist. Before I was discarded I was considered an Aboriginal writer who set the key to what might be considered an Australian Aboriginal text; an 'authentic', decolonized black text which I now consider an impossible writing not to be found in this globalised era where there are no more 'authentic' texts, only pastiches named from subject matter rather than form. Content determines form and this must be my next to final word on the authenticity of any text or even identity seen as text.

My writings have been translated into quite a few languages, Italian, French, German, Russian, Hindi and Chinese as well as Polish. My poetry continues to be anthologized in Australia and my first novel *Wild Cat Falling* came out in a French edition in 2010. This I welcomed as I consider that the French novelists took the novel as far as it could go so far indeed that in the works of Robbe Grillet the text collapsed into itself and what we were left with was an anti-novel interesting but tedious. Of course before this James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake* had with great Irish wit demolished what I might call the square narrative. My own novels are said to be self-conscious, postmodern forms of political protest/cultural revival literature; but I prefer to see these as playing around with storytelling, a sort of rapping bouncing off words to wrench forth a meaning. Dig it!

My novel days are over now, but I—well, I really dug the neo-realist French writers—sought to develop a multidimensional and nonlinear narrative style, a pastiche that might expose some of the contradictions inherent in Australian culture and life as seen from the other side. Owing to my love of Aboriginal culture and storytelling and also because in my early work I felt that I lacked the ability to write dialogue as can be read in *Wild Cat Falling*, I developed a sort of brief spurt of action or reaction spoken out in a story stemming from what I had heard. One of these "Me" (?) was staged in Perth at the Subiaco Play House. This oral story telling continued with the arrival of a son who demanded that I tell him stories and not read

from books. Also as I am engaged in writing my autobiography, three volumes down and three more to end this lengthy project, I seek the strength of the spoken rather than the written word. As there are critical problems with what I have termed the life story, I use Henry Miller's idea of *fictional autobiography* believing that *my place* lies in the discourse and even outright lies may be part of that place which must be explored in close or counter reading methodology. Indeed what is hidden is to be discussed. For sure, man, for sure!

I'm an oldie, born over seventy years ago on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1938 and given the name Colin Thomas Johnson. Colin referred to the name of a play mate of my brother, Frank; Thomas my father's name and Johnson of course his surname. For a long time I thought that I had been born in the town of Narrogin, but later I learnt that I was born on a farm in the district of Cuballing to which mum and dad had come from outside. When I sought to trace my family roots things began to get muddy and still remain murky. I was one of eight children (a single brother Francis and sisters, Betty, Patricia, Joan, Shirley, Margaret and a little brother dying as a baby) and my dad Thomas Patrick Johnson seems to have been the son of an African-American from the state of North Carolina. When I first heard this I was overjoyed in that I might be related to the famous blues singer Robert Johnson. I even rushed off to North Carolina to check out what family I might find to dig up and write about. Alas, no Johnson family existed in the official records. It was then that I remembered that all that my mother had told me was that my father had come from the state of Victoria. My mother's name was Elizabeth Barron and the Barron family originally came from County Clare, Ireland.

My elder sister, God bless her, Betty exclaimed that our Mum was a direct descendant of one of the first British families to arrive on the shores of Western Australia in 1829 and have a baby there. I knew a bit more about the Barron family than she did. Edmund Barron arrived as a colour sergeant in the army and his wife ran the first tavern in the new Swan River settlement of Perth. At that time many people made money, but not Edmund and his wife, I suggest that they drank the proceeds. He left the army and received a land grant from the government, but doesn't seem to have made much of a go at it as he became a police constable. The Barrons have been described to me as a well-off pastoral family, but this is open to doubt, as they never seemed to achieve a respectable position in the colony.

Edmund's grant came about because the British government took over the land and doled it out without a thought for the original owners that continued to occupy it. Indeed they had nowhere else to go. They shared the land with the white families and provided labor which was short in the colony. Women too were in short supply and liaisons began and continued between white men and black women so that many of the first settler families fathered a counter black one. Even the Western Australian hero, John Forrest, whose statue can be seen in Perth fathered children from Aboriginal women. I knew Vic Forrest, one of his Aboriginal descendents. There is also the fact that Aboriginal families gained surnames from living on the same land as white families. Indeed there was or is a tribe called Durack from the Durack family and also with a touch of the Durack family in them. The local Noongar families and the first settler families are in positions of reciprocal relations, mother, father and offspring. It is easy to see that from such events and births I accepted that our Black Barron family was Aboriginal. Indeed, my mother never claimed that she belonged to the white Barron family at all. It may have been a matter of pride to Betty but not to mum. Also during her life she had nothing to do with what was supposed to be her family. I find this pretty weird. In my research into early Western Australian history I investigated the Barron family, but as I had no reason or time then to follow them down to the present I left it there unfortunately. Now I dig the story and might write it if I had the time as well as the life span. As for my paternal grandfather being from North Carolina, there are no birth records. He may have hidden his tracks well and as he couldn't write replied when asked where he was born, 'North Carolina,' and they wrote it down in Sydney when he married there. In the only two written records there is no name of a town or county. If there had been it would have been easier for me to check him out as in North Carolina births were recorded at county level. I would have liked to find out more about him, but Betty was only interested in making the connection not with bringing into memory this bloke that seemed to have led an interesting life and must have descendents in Sydney.

My mother died in Fremantle hospital on 15 September 1989 at the age of ninety-one when I was far from Perth and before that my father Thomas died in Narrogin on 7 June 1938, six weeks before my birth. Many years later I went to Narrogin cemetery to try and locate his grave. I learnt from the burial record book that even in death Aborigines were segregated from whites. I searched through the records which went back behind 1938 but there was no

record of a Thomas Johnson. It was as if he had never existed and I might have shared the same fate except I have escaped the “Aboriginal” dilemma by becoming a writer and a Buddhist as well as splitting away from Australia. It is my religion and work that give me a sense of worth, not any racial bias in the flesh or caricature. Indeed, I didn’t get much coming from mum and dad to fasten onto except the colour of my skin. For the first nine years of my life we lived in the small town of Beverley where no one would talk to us, because we were poor and black. I don’t know why mum ended up there camping in a broken store almost opposite the town native reserve. When my father died, my brother and three sisters were taken away and put into institutions as they were too much for my mother to handle. I never got to know them and only met them a few times. Mum was left with a daughter, Shirley and baby—me—in that dark dilapidated house. The first years of my life were spent with Shirley and we became the terrors of the town. Our escapades ended with both of us being taken from our mother and placed in orphanages in Perth. I was going on nine when I was taken away. Mum wasn’t left alone because in 1940 she had had another child, Margaret who remained close to her all through her life. Her other children had long deserted her and I was roaming the world. Margaret confided in me when I met her later in life that she had considered her mother of Aboriginal descent.

I was placed in Clontarf Boys’ Town an orphanage run by the Christian Brothers just outside of Perth and on the Swan River. It was a beautiful place; but with them blokes life was hard and tough, but they did give me an education up to the Junior Certificate as well as a thirst for religion. I think they would find it strange indeed that one of their boys has become a Buddhist and now says his prayers regularly to Lord Buddha just as when he was with them he had to say his prayers to Jesus. In *Wild Cat Falling*, my first novel, I wrote a bit about how we boys coped with Boys’ Town life. Hard indeed were the blows, but hard indeed were our souls—*perhaps?*

In those days poor troublesome bush kids with a bit of the tar brush like us were made wards of the state until their eighteenth birthday. In my case until August 1956, but two years before the Catholic Welfare had gotten me a clerical job which I loathed and abandoned for a life on the streets. I became what was termed a Bodgie, a *zoot* suiter with a taste for juke boxes and rock’n’roll which hadn’t been heard in the days of old. Life would have been, as it

was for many young coloured blokes then and now, a roller coaster ride to the bottom of the social pile, had I not met Dame Mary Durack, a rich Western Australian writer who decided on the strength of some stories and a bit of checking around that I was gifted enough to be helped. I got on well with her, dug her daughters but was too shy to make a move and let her and her welfare group send me off to Melbourne. In Perth in those days going *east* was our dream and so here I was doing it without much effort on my part. Dig that for good karma. At Spencer Street Railway Station I was met by Pastor Doug Nicolls, a little bopper if there ever was one, and taken to Stan Davies at the Aboriginal Advancement League. With my Junior Certificate I could get a job as a clerk in the Victorian Public Service at the Motor Registration Branch. There was a Buddhist Society in Melbourne which I attended and things turned brighter when I met the Bohemian poet, Adrian Rawlins who introduced me to the writings of the Beat Generation as well as the artists and writers of Melbourne. I was inspired by the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and even more by the spontaneous prose of the novelist Jack Kerouac to sit down and write my first novel *Wild Cat Falling*, published in 1965. This novel was well received by critics and has been in print to this day. In most of my writing I use my experiences of life and so what was *Wild Cat Falling* about but a young Aboriginal man facing the racist world of Western Australia and failing to cope with it. It was to have been a large sprawling narrative filled with madness, sadness and incarceration, but when I sent it to Mary Durack she edited it down into what it is today. Of course, I'm not one to leave a book unfinished and years later I returned to add two further parts, *Wildcat Screaming* and *Doin Wildcat*. These were published as separate novels but really the Wildcat books belong together and should be read as a consistent whole. It shows what it was like to be Aboriginal in Western Australia through the changes occurring in the main character over the years. *Wild Cat Falling* includes a foreword by Mary Durack (which has since become an afterword) that I treasure as it is the only piece of writing by someone who knew me as I then was so many years ago. I dig that kid who didn't smoke or drink and wrote a prose derived from Ancient Greece. Many people have put down this piece as being racist, but then Western Australia was racist and I was glad to escape that awful scene for many years. I thank Mary Durack for this because I was pretty naïve and couldn't have done it on my own.

Melbourne was so good for me that when I came to write the second volume of my autobiography, or confessions (still unpublished) I called it *The Sweet Life*. There I met writers and poets such as Leo Cash and Deidre Olsen (Crienna Rohan) and artists like Machem Skipper and even the Boyds. I got married after *Wild Cat Falling* was published in 1965. I loved Jennie Katinas, a refugee from Lithuania who really introduced me to European women with their style and fashion. In return I introduced her to the Beatnik life of on the road or if you will the life of a nomad or pilgrim. With the advance royalties in my pocket and after reading *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac I took off for foreign parts.

A cheap passage on an Italian ship got us to Singapore and from there we made our way north through Malaysia to Thailand and Laos and then west to Bangladesh and finally Nepal where marihuana was legal. From Nepal to India and then to the swinging London scene where I was shipwrecked on such things as twilight and got up when it was night so that we often missed the day but then night time was the time for living and so it wasn't all that bad. Indeed it was a great place then, but Jennie decided to go home and I followed her going through Calcutta (Kolkatha) and Bangkok before returning to Melbourne where the hip life of the Sixties was raging and rock'n'roll was king. I dug the scene but yearned for India. It had become my spiritual home and I needed to live there and get to know her.

*Wild Cat Falling* gave me enough money when Penguin Books bought the paperback rights to hit the road again and return with my wife, Jennie to India in 1967. Jennie only spent a year with me in Calcutta then Darjeeling where I met my guru Lama Kalu Rinpoche and studied with him as well as receiving initiations. I had met a beautiful holy man at last and he became my teacher forever and ever. We went right across India to Dalhousie where we took more initiations, but again Jennie decided that she missed her family and returned to Australia. I stayed on to become a Buddhist Monk, a real Dharma Bum. I spent the next six years in India wandering as a *Bhikshu* across the land and meditating with a most interesting meditation teacher, one with a beautiful chanting voice, a business man from a business family, the enlightened Vipassana meditation teacher, S.N. Goenka who travelled about India like a Buddha giving meditation camps wherever he was invited. Although a powerful teacher, he had remained a layman and I began thinking about whether it was better to return to lay life with my robe about my heart instead of my body. I returned to Melbourne in

August 1974 just before my 36<sup>th</sup> birthday to find that the hippie days were over. After so long in India I found myself in a strange rich world, but under the Whitlam government money was somewhat easy to come by.

Al Katinas, my brother in law, then a film maker suggested that I apply for a grant to write a cinematic treatment of *Wild Cat Falling*. I decided that I needed to write it in Perth and the film board selected the documentary film maker, Guy Baskin to help me. In Perth digging life in the North Bridge area, I began to write a novel *Long Live Sandawara*. It was then that I met the Spanish American girl, Elena Castaneda and fell in love. She left for America and unable to live without her I followed her to California and San Francisco where I did a pilgrimage to North Beach and the City Lights Bookshop where I met the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He had first published Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, *Howl*. I went to the sad Haight Ashbury where nothing remained of the hippies at all. California at the time was the home of counter therapies and I followed Elena into doing primal therapy. Strapped for cash most of the time I lived on the streets and eventually ended up in the Salvation Army workshop which cared for such homeless ones in exchange for their work. After six or so months in California which felt like six years as life was so hectic, I finished off my novel, *Long Live Sandawara*, before returning to Melbourne where I met the Aboriginal activist, Harry Penrith (later Burnam Burnam) and through him entered Aboriginal Affairs. He took me to Monash University where I got work at the Aboriginal Research Centre then headed by Colin Bourke. With him I did a short introduction into Aboriginal Life called *Before the Invasion*. Under his direction I also began writing *Dr. Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* and went to Tasmania to research the book. A Tasmanian Aboriginal, a Mansell elder, took me over the island telling me stories about an old bloke called King Billy and also introduced me to mutton birding. Back in Melbourne Colin Bourke suggested that I do a university course. I accepted his advice and began a B.A. (Hons.) course at Melbourne University. I met Bruce McGuinness, then head of the Victoria Aboriginal Health Service. He had set up Koorie College to teach a health course for Aboriginal students based on the bare foot doctors' approach to medicine as then practiced in China. He wanted me to teach an Aboriginal course on culture and I accepted.



The novel I had finished in California, *Long Live Sandawara* lay about until by chance I met Anne Godden of Hyland House who accepted it for publication. In those days I didn't worry overmuch about what happened to my writings. Most of those written in India had been lost. There was a detective novel, *St Francis and the Detective* and another *The Valley of the Blessed Virgins*, a long novel set in India with a large cast of characters. Only a few articles in the *Maha Bodhi Journal* of the Maha Bodhi Society survive.

In *Long Live Sandawara* I had attempted to bring together past events and characters to fertilise the present. I choose an Aboriginal epic hero, Pigeon from the Western Australia of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I talked the idea over with Mary Durack who had written an article about him. She gave me *Outlaws of the Leopolds* (1952), by Ion L. Idriess. He had written a quasi historical account of the armed resistance of Pigeon against the British taking over the land, the Kimberley region of Western Australia. I took the book to California with me and used it as my main source. Much later, after I travelled through the Kimberley and learnt about the massacres of the Aboriginal people there, I decided that Pigeon's resistance had been used as an excuse to thin out the Aboriginal population by outright slaughter. Indeed Pigeon's Bunaba people had been so decimated that there were only a few survivors left. This gave me a new awareness of how resistance and armed struggle might be used legitimately to completely pacify a people. To advocate armed resistance is too often to issue an invitation for massacre.

Four years later my Tasmanian historical novel, *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) was published. I wasn't all that happy about it as I felt that it was a bit square and decided that I'd do it over when I had the time. It had been fully researched. I had walked over Tasmania with the Mansell elder and seen the sites that I discussed, described and set the action in. It was in Tasmania that I discovered the do-gooder and doer for self, George Augustus Robinson who pushed himself forward as the savior of the Tasmanian Aborigines. He certainly wasn't, even though he received the official post of Conciliator and Protector of Aborigines and set up an isolated settlement on Flinder's island in the windy Bass Strait where most of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people he put there perished. My main character was the custodian of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, Dr. Wooreddy, he of the many names and attempts at surviving who ended his life on a ship off

the northern coast of Tasmania. He was taken ashore and buried on a lonely island and thus ended my book.

In 1980 I married Julie Whiting, a university librarian. She proved a better enemy than a lover though we had a son, Kalu born in 1985 and a daughter, Malika Clare born in 1988. 1988 was a special time for me a time of Aboriginal uprising in Australia during which I hit the road to visit different Aboriginal settlements to find out how the people lived. It was from my contacts that I coined the term, *Aboriginality*. It was in 1988 that I legally changed my name to Mudrooroo (adding Nyoongah later when I returned to my South Eastern Australian land and needed a second name to change my name legally by deed poll) after talking it over with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the first Aboriginal poet. The name *Mudrooroo* meant “paperbark” (an Australian tree) in the Noongar language of south-western Australia, of which I knew quite a few words, though it was by then a dead language and Nyoongah simply meant *person*. A *Djamadji* friend, Allan Morryawalla Barker suggested it. Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal was a great influence on my work adding to my cultural awareness as she took me over her land Stradbroke Island passing over to me the Aboriginality of the land just as in Tasmania the Mansell elder had done. It was through her that I began taking poetry seriously again and she helped me to put my *Song Circle of Jacky* (published in 1986) together. It was late in 1988 that I decided to go bush and live on the land in Bungawalbyn, the Aboriginal writer Ruby Ginibi’s country in Northern New South Wales. In my plans there was no room for Julie and our marriage ended that year. Indeed our separation had been long coming and I had taken her back to Queensland so that she could be closer to her parents and have their support when the break came.

My collection of poetry *Dalwarra: the Black Bittern* was published in 1989 by the University of Western Australia which had money remaining over from the *Celebration of a Nation* and backdated it a year. I had been against any Aboriginal participation in the so-called Bi-Centenary and this ignoring of my political position upset me so much that I dashed off a piece of spontaneous verse and prose, ‘Sunlight Spreadeagles Perth in Blackness’, which has never been published though it is my ‘Howl’. Again I introduced an old Aboriginal elder based on one I knew in Perth and how he saw things in a surrealistic way. I have good stories from him. By 1988 I had helped to organize two Aboriginal Literature

conferences and knew what I was writing about. Then when I attended the First Aboriginal Theatre conference held in Canberra which was more like a celebration than a square old conference I returned to my first novel to write the third part. *Doin Wildcat: A Novel Koori Script as Constructed by Mudrooroo* which appeared some twenty-three years after *Wild Cat Falling*. Maybe a long time, but I had always known that the original *Wild Cat Falling* had to be resurrected, though it had changed its direction into a reflection on that early piece of writing. Wildcat (now the name of my character) goes over that past time and queries parts of the narrative. It is his book after all. Anne Godden of Hyland House told me that it was the best thing I had written and it surely is with a swinging prose you can read aloud or think aloud. It was an Aboriginal book because it came directly from the structure of that theatre conference where there were lots and lots of jokes and a constant refrain “why don’t you fellows write like this”—and I did. *Doin Wildcat* seeks to describe or bring out the feeling and “soul” of the Aboriginal conference which included the white director and his camera crew and how they weren’t getting on all that well together. It is filled with Black fella humour. Of course it is more than that in that it invokes incarceration as a memory and how prison was part of the life of too many Aborigines. Indeed the year it was published a Royal Commission was formed to investigate the causes behind the continuing high number of deaths among Aboriginal people held in custody in the gaols of Australia. The Commission even discussed that the hopelessness and patheticness of too many Aboriginal young people often resulted in a deep depression in which it was better to die than to suffer on. I could understand that.

I had switched from the University of Melbourne to Murdoch University in Perth to finish my B.A. (Hons) which involved writing a thesis. From this I and Hyland House carved *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature in Australia* (1990), a work of critical analysis that was criticised for being too harsh and dictatorial; but what I said was open for discussion because whatever place lies in my discourse needs to be explored through a deep reading, over and over again. A little later, with Uncle Jack Davis, poet and playwright from W.A., Stephen Muecke, academic, Adam Shoemaker, friend and academic, and I novelist, poet and critic put together *Paperbark*, a motley collection of Aboriginal writings to which I added my novella, *Struggling*, that I had perversely based on a Bengali novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay; but then I loved the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore to such a

degree that my *Stradbroke Island Dreaming* poems reflected some of his love for the land and nature; but Pratiwandandi was about the city youth of Calcutta and how their distress and anger would lead to the Naxalite Revolution of the late Sixties and early Seventies. Yes, the suffering of youth can lead to revolt and rebellion. In 1991 the volume of poetry, *The Garden of Gethsemane*, was published. The poetry had been written on Stradbroke Island and even in some of the parks and supermarkets of Brisbane. By then I had come across the poems of the Murri poet, Lionel Fogarty and was impressed by them so much that I attempted to follow his style using words I found in the world around me. Most of the verse didn't work and I flung them away, but a few I liked I left in. One was *Happy Birthday Australia*. In 1992 this volume won two Western Australian Premier's book awards. Then in 1992, I sought to put the finishing touch to my Wildcat novel by writing a second part, *Wildcat Screaming*. Now I had accomplished what I had set out to do with my first novel and which had been edited out and into *Wild Cat Falling*. I wanted Wildcat published as a nicely sized novel, but no publisher came forward to do it and HarperCollins continued to publish the truncated text which had been set as a school book. It was about this time that I learnt about Einstein's United Field theory and became so taken by it that I thought of pushing all my novels into such a field through my characters especially Dr. Watson Holmes Jackamara who had been featured in *Wild Cat Screaming*. I later used him in *The Kwinkin*, (1993) a novel set in Fiji which I wrote after meeting the Samoan writer, Albert Wendt who enlightened me about these so-called South Sea Island paradises. Dr. Holmes Watson Jackamara was becoming my favourite creation with the ability through his acute mind to examine and see into the wiles of Australia. His last appearance is in my unpublished novel, *The Survivalist*.

Published in 1991 *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* was dreamt from the old *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* which I sought to transform from a square historical narrative into a *Maban* (Shaman) story of magic realism. It became my favourite book and had been written in Bungawalbyn away from civilization on a hundred acres of solitude with a few cows and magic mushrooms and plenty of emptiness to fill with my dreams. This had started out as a screen play but then became a novel which would later develop into a series and then be abandoned when publishers abandoned me and I gave up writing for a long while. There I also put together the poems in the collection *Pacific Highway Boo Bloos* about Northern New South Wales which I found a fabulous place in

which people actually could hear the spirits of Aborigines singing and dancing as well as see the giant prawn. On those magic acres I went back as far as I could into the Aboriginal past roaming about freely without clothing. It was really strange but even on public beaches and picnic grounds no one complained or even pointed me out. It was as if I too was a spirit. Indeed in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* I sought to enter the spirit world. Perhaps I wanted to live there forever, but the piece of land which I was renting came up to be sold in 1991. It was then that I came to Sydney for a meeting of the Aboriginal Arts Committee of which I was a member until I was chucked off for not toeing the lines of government control and met Gerhard Fischer, a German Professor with an idea dating from the bi-centennial, linking together the French Revolution with the invasion of Australia in 1788. He wanted an Aboriginal text to interpenetrate or something like that with a play by Heiner Muller, *Der Auftrag*, which I didn't dig at first as it was not written from experience, except for one haunting section which reminded me of an old Leftist German song I had once heard with the lines: "And just because he's human he doesn't want a pistol to his head." Yes, I could understand and decided to do it to see if it could be done in an Aboriginal way. The result wasn't what I wanted as Gerhard was the dramaturge and wanted to keep everything of Muller whereas I wanted to start from nothing and use the bits and pieces which fitted into my vision. I wanted to start from scratch, Muller after all had created the idea of the 'unfinished play'; but to Gerhard every word was sacred. Anyway this might explain the unwieldiness of the script, but not the subsequent production which I wanted to be loud and noisy as an Aboriginal demonstration. This was to be similar to the German play Gerhard took me to see. *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (German: *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marats dargestellt durch die Schauspielgruppe des Hospizes zu Charenton unter Anleitung des Herrn de Sade*), almost invariably shortened to *Marat/Sade*, a 1963 play by Peter Weiss made a greater impression on me than did *The Mission* by Muller though I dug the title. As my ideas developed I decided that the actors should wear masks so that they needn't even be Aboriginal. Indeed I thought at the time that white actors playing Aborigines under black masks would add to the drama. It would have been hipper, but it was not to be just like the Republic of Australia was not to be.

I was put up in a house of the University of Sydney to do the play and given access to the library with the result I did a lot of reading on Victorian sexuality and discovered the broken-backed woman. Strange sexuality was a strong part of *Der Auftrag* and it was a type of Victorian sexuality that I had to read about. Even better, in the library I discovered a whole collection of Gothic novels which I found to have been written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century around the time Australia was invaded and settled. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a *Gothic* monster which could not be ignored for long and it wasn't. If monsters didn't make it into the play they entered with a rush in the last three books of the *Ghost Dreaming* series set during the so-called spread of settlement along the southern coast of Australia, a Gothic series of events indeed. These three volumes are known as my Vampire books.

Professor Gerhard Fischer gave me the opportunity to roam in my mind and after six weeks or so I finished a script called *The Aboriginal Protestors Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of The Commission by Heiner Müller* usually abbreviated to *The Aboriginal Protestors*. When it was finished a reading directed by the Koori director, Brian Syron was arranged at the Belvoir Theatre. I didn't dig it at all and sat down and rewrote the whole play as I imagined it should be with a large cast of dancers and actors and noise, noise, noise, argumentation and conflict. Gerhard published this version, but it was never to be put on with the excuse (from the next director) that it couldn't be. Eventually it was edited down and put on in Sydney. I was kept away from this production but when it was taken to Germany I was allowed to go. The director Ian Turvey told me that he loved American musicals and found experimental theatre self indulgent. I found his production okay as it was and felt lucky to be at the European festival in Weimar where there was a house in which Nietzsche had lived. It had been turned into a museum which featured a large photograph of Nietzsche's sister meeting Adolf Hitler. I found this such a compelling juxtapositioning that I can never think of Nietzsche without Hitler and I still wonder how and why Europeans glorify a philosopher who invented much that was in line with Nazi thinking including the Overman. Added to Nietzsche and Hitler were the nearby remains of the concentration camp of Buchenwald where the Romany people were imprisoned and murdered. In that hell hole I knew what would have been my fate to have been living in this centre of European civilization and culture during the time of the Nazis. The idea of the centre of European and German culture was a supreme irony here in that the

Nazis had built their death camp around the tree where the great writer Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749–1832) had entertained his lady lover, Charlotte von Stein in a chaste manner. To add to my interest I was given a copy of Goethe's play, *Iphigenia in Taurus* which sparked my imagination and I began the first draft in Weimar of a drama in verse, *Iphigenia in Buchenwald* which has never been produced and is lying among my papers either in the libraries of Perth or Canberra. I showed it to Gerhard, but he made little comment except that it was difficult to get a play perhaps unsympathetic to the Jews put on in Germany. I shrugged and after revising my script a number of times left it while I thought over the Gothic times of the 18th century; though what could be more Gothic than the sufferings of Buchenwald as told through the story of a Gypsy Jewish whore?

After finishing my *commission* early in 1992 and being at a loose end after the stint working on the play, I accepted the position on contract for five years as the Coordinator of the Aboriginal Studies program at Murdoch University which given the end result perhaps wasn't the best move on my part. Indeed my second divorced wife was living in Perth and immediately took me to court to get child maintenance even though she had a well paying job. I paid and felt pride that I was supporting my two kids. A main reason for taking the job was not to create a career in academia, but to write a book on Aboriginal life and culture. Shamelessly I plundered the resources of the University to research and write what became *Us Mob - History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia*. It deserved to win the Ruth Adeney Koori Award for Aboriginal writing as it became a best seller though this was never acknowledged. Indeed HarperCollins sought to kill the book when they without consulting me decided that I wasn't a "real" Aborigine and thus not worth publishing as a writer, though they were forced by the flow of orders to allow *Us Mob* to be at least reproduced on photocopiers. It's not a bad book, but it could have been better if the editor hadn't cut out what he didn't understand thus mutilating the strength of the argument which stemmed from a feminist text by Trinh Minh Ha. (*Woman, Native, Other. Writing postcoloniality and feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1989). He hadn't even heard of her; but I had met her and dug her wry sense of humour.

I worked hard in Perth and it was then that my eldest sister, Betty contacted me to arrange a meeting at the old St. Joseph's Girls' Orphanage which was turning into a museum or

something strange and not a fit place to meet a member of my long lost family. Worse was to come as the first thing she said to me was: 'Why do you want to be an Aborigine, they are dirty.' I actually started and stared at this old brown woman who could have been any Noongar woman I might see on the street. There was also an Irish woman there, who had done our genealogy somewhat carelessly. She declared that I should be happy that I came from a well-off pastoral family. She didn't know that I had already researched out this supposedly well-off pastoral family and they were nothing of the sort. The only thing they had to say about dad was that he was *Afro-American*. Next and sadly, I met my brother Frank whom I remembered meeting in Clontarf. I had treasured this meeting and now he denied that it had ever taken place. He also looked like a Noongar. I didn't know what to make of these two and even felt insulted and hurt by both of them. They didn't even invite me to meet them later and in more genial surroundings so that we might discuss our family. They surely knew more about dad, but they weren't interested in yarning about him. Perhaps they didn't trust this stranger, Mudrooroo. On my part, I stared at these two and wondered where the *Afro-American* was. I had mixed with African-Americans and all of them had had nappy hair. None of my family did and this made me doubt their story about not being Noongars. Betty indeed reminded me of those dark women who spent hours scrubbing their faces in order to rub off the black as has been told in Aboriginal stories. In Western Australia to be an Aborigine is the worst thing you can be and even my eldest son, Kalu, has told me that they hate Aborigines there. From my own experience many do but then we don't have to worry about that anymore as we are now descended from *Afro-Americans*, aren't we?

I now can write about how I felt about this meeting with sister Betty and the problems she had with her identity because she has passed on and thus beyond any controversy. After all it was up to her if she wished to be free of as much colour as she could scrub off. In the last volume of my autobiography, *Aboriginal Affairs* if I still have the life left to write it I will to go into the whole episode the so-called *outing* of Mudrooroo. Some academics have had the audacity to write papers condemning me for hiding the fact that I had a 'white' mother. According to Betty I did, but I still hesitate to accept this as I see her in Beverley sitting on the steps of the kitchen door and her face is brown. Well, white or brown she was the only mother I had and I loved her dearly. As for dear Dad, I don't know, I never knew him and



could find no trace of any Johnson family in North Carolina, not South Carolina as some people have written. If I had I would have dug them the most and surely there would have been a book about my discovery. I would love to be descended from African-Americans, yes, but I hesitate to walk the walk because I find this difficult to accept. I need *nappy* hair, sir, yes just that one original feature and I will instantly say 'Right on, bro.'

At the time, I felt that the whole *Afro-American* thing was a farce and thrust it away as I was really busy between 1992 and 1996 writing and doing my academic work. Working at Koori College had given me good experience at lecturing and I found that lecturing was a delight when the balls clicked and rolled hitting every point you wanted to make and then sliding in at the end, a perfect score. At other times I stumbled and swore so that a student wrote to the Dean protesting at my language and attitude. I had used the word 'fuck' in a tutorial, but then I was talking about the Western Australian police.

Towards the end of my contract I was feeling that the vibes were turning bad and indeed they were. I was told by an Aboriginal friend how faxes had been sent around Australia declaring that I was not an Aborigine. 'They must really hate me,' I replied with a smile. I felt that I had nothing to lose as to what people wanted to think about me. University contracts were automatically renewed after being advertised of course and I thought that someone was after the job I didn't want. Few knew that I had had it with the academy and Western Australia and would be leaving the state and going to Queensland which I dug for its politics, difference and individuality. Indeed I had married the Queensland woman, Janine Little in January 1996 and had even bought a cheap house on Macleay Island where I would live at peace with the world, I romanticised, as a beach comber, but I don't know what Jeanine thought of this quasi-country move. I dug the island and had some good times there with the Oldies. I was learning from them what it was like to be old, not something to dig, I'm afraid.

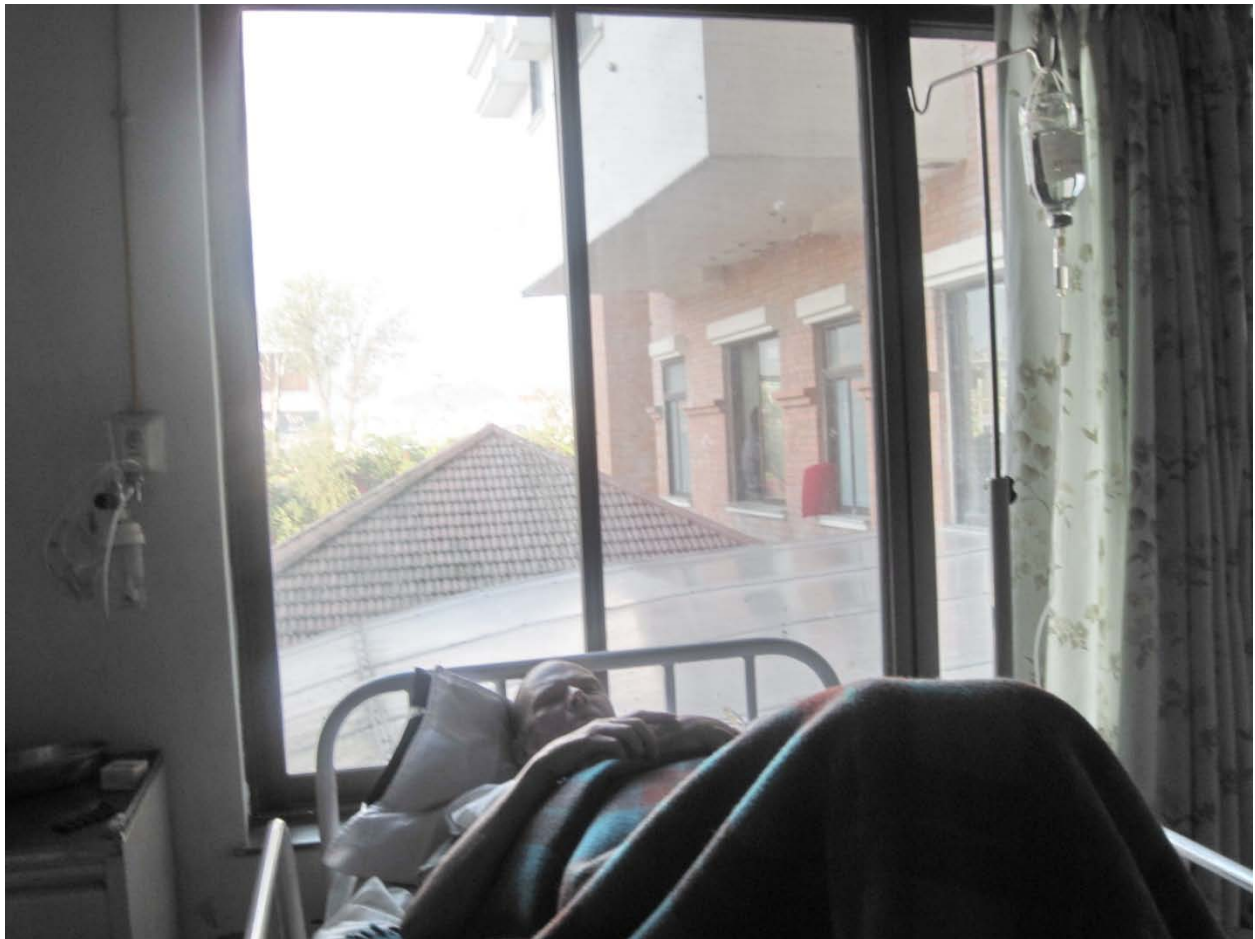
I was ready to leave Perth when as they say, the shit hit the fan and sprayed all over me. I had heard that someone was researching my past, but thought nothing of it. I had nothing to hide; but then I had enemies and it appeared that they had taken up Betty and the Irish woman's research to use against me. Of course as we were obviously coloured she had to trace our family back to some sort of black fellow and so my father, Thomas Patrick Johnson

with some evidence to go on was declared *Afro-American*. The Western Australian journalist Vicki Laurie wrote and had published a polemic which in effect gave me an *Identity Crisis*, the title of the article which focused on me, though I would have been pretty stupid in declaring a false Aboriginality and then becoming an Aboriginal ideologue instead of walking softly softly and making all that I could from the lie. Thus, I laughed the article off saying that there was no such thing as bad news, but there was. An academic woman at Murdoch actually came crying to me declaring that she had known all along that *Wild Cat Falling* could never have been written by an Aborigine. I asked her *why* and all she did was to show me the article in *The Australian Magazine* which was distributed nationally. 'Why, no pictures,' I joked, but she merely wiped her eyes and went off leaving me flabbergasted. She was seeing me as a liar and a cheat; but I shrugged and didn't worry over much as I was quitting Perth as my contract was all but up. Indeed my replacement had been found and was putting his things into my old office. I was proud that I had 100 percent Aboriginalised my section.

I really had antagonized some Noongars (and others including academics) who were out to crucify me even though I surely had done more for Aborigine people that they had, for example I had been on the founding committee of the cultural unit that had gone on to become *Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation*. We had even organized a Perth Aboriginal carnival that ran for a few years, but the current head, Robert Eggington came out against me. He even demanded that my work be removed 'from all Australian bookshelves and pulped.' 'Crazy, man, crazy,' I might say but Eggington (who had been raised white) made a move which might have been laughable, except it was taken at face value by too many. I might have been born in Cuballing, but our family was not local and indeed the Barrons came from Williams, which was the other side of York. Eggington got together some oldies from Narrogin and perhaps Beverley who declared that I was not related to the Kickett family. If he had telephoned me I could have told him that. The Kicketts were originally from around Beverley up to Narrogin, away from York while we were between York and Perth. If they needed to check me out they might have called the Aboriginal genealogist, Betty Colbung, but no they were more interested in attacking me. I was too busy packing for such nonsense anyway.

I had always been interested in what is called 'Shamanism' and my Nepali wife's father is a natural shaman that is he didn't learn but had been taken by the spirits to do their work. Speaking to Aborigines from the desert with their culture to a certain extent intact, I discovered that their minds were different. I termed this difference *maban reality*. I theorized about this in a revised edition of *Writing from the Fringe*, titled *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* which Anne Godden had urged me to finish so that it was a bit uneven. It seemed that I was always in a rush to finish something in those days. In my journal I had mapped out an ambitious list of plots that I could use, for example, in the detective books of Holmes Watson Jackamara; but before then I turned to continue the adventures of the Master of the Ghost Dreaming and his band of men and women, the very last of the Tasmanians seeking their spiritual home in a demon dominated world in which a female vampire grows in strength. I wrote about the very beginning and imaginary past of British imperialists who took over the whole of Australia with an Act of parliament. No other nation had even gained so much for so little. This was the theme of *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999), and *The Promised Land* (2000), the only volumes written of my Master of the Ghost Dreaming series which would have taken my adventurers onto the Titanic and thence to Canada where they would meet a strange messiah that lived in Vancouver. I had many books of that kind in me, except I became a *persona non grata*, I was sent as the British say to Coventry. No one acknowledged my existence let alone would publish me. I found that writing was indeed a political act when *The Survivalist, a Watson Holmes Jackamara Adventure*, was completely ignored. It was then that I began thinking that the only reason why my books had been published was that I had been an Aboriginal and not a good writer. Indeed without the race I hadn't any value as a writer. I found this disgusting and racist and said so in an article, *Tell Them You're An Indian*, published in a volume, *Race Matters*, by one of those that believed in me to the extent that she had asked me to apply for the post of Anthropologist at Sydney University either as a reality or a form of protest against the imperialist discipline itself. I wasn't interested. Now the absurdity of what I was or wasn't, maybe, yes, I was a nasty rocker-a-roller that had never reformed from his delinquent days. Now I began to understand the 18<sup>th</sup> century French writer Jacques Rousseau and the persecution he had gone through. Indeed I had reverted back to my early life in Beverley when we were ignored. Things hadn't changed much after all. I went to a literary conference in Toowoomba Queensland where the so-called writers would have nothing to do with me.

One of them indeed commented *ad hoc*, how I had the nerve to show my face? It was then I realized the depth of the antagonism and hostility there was against me. This affected me. I stopped writing. It was then that His Holiness the Dalai Lama appeared to me in a dream, laughed and told me to come to India. I woke up and old as I was took to the road again. Away from Australia life turned sweet as the 21st century dawned. I ended up in Nepal under the smile of a Buddhist Monastery housing the relics of the famous Lama Zopa who had spread Buddhism in the West. I married Sangya Magar, an Indigenous Nepali on 22 May 2002 and we have a son, Sam, a *hip* 8 year old digging things in outer space and thinking Super Man is the greatest hero up there with Avalokiteswara Buddha. He wants to be an engineer and terraform Mars if it proves uninhabited.



I have written this testament to set the record straight as I feel that it should be done now that my sister Betty is gone and I have just had an operation to remove a carcinoma. I have

cancer of the prostate gland or had if the operation has been a success. I revised this last testament when I recovered from the cutting and slashing. The first version I wrote when I felt that I was under a sentence of death; the second when I have grown stronger and back into life. The first was to have been my deathbed confession and now it is an explanation of my survival as a black man in Western Australia. If you don't love me at least try to understand me! *Om mani padme hum.*



**AFTER THE CURE.**

Mudrooroo Nyoongah,  
Copyright 2010.

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