Most Australians seem unaware of the extent and quality of Aboriginal literature. My survey focuses on creative writing in English as this has been an important expression of the political aspirations of the Aboriginal people, as well as a significant component of modern Aboriginal history. Aboriginal poets, playwrights, novelists and short story writers have been among the most articulate and influential of spokesmen in recent years; as Bernard Smith has observed, 'a few black writers . . . are playing a leading part in developing a new awareness of nationhood among their own people'.

Naturally much of what these authors write does not come under the rubric of creative writing. Aboriginal contributions in autobiography, biography, legendary tales and political discourse are by no means negligible. Indeed, the importance of these contributions deserves separate consideration. The tone of much Aboriginal creative writing is strongly political and increasingly it is standing on its own merits as talented work. This article provides a brief overview of the past twenty years, attempts to analyse the past and present writing situation, and offers some tentative predictions for the future.

Poetry

It is commonly believed that Kath Walker was the first Aboriginal author to be published. In fact, David Unaipon's brief *Native legends* — a fascinating synthesis of Aboriginal and Christian mythology — appeared in Adelaide over fifty years ago. Walker was the first Aboriginal to have creative writing published in Australia: her collection of poetry entitled *We are going* was first released in 1964. Despite a generally adverse critical reception ('Bad verse . . . jingle, clichés, laborious rhymes all piled up . . . This has nothing to do with poetry') *We are going* went through seven editions extremely rapidly.

A second volume of verse, *The dawn is at hand*, appeared in 1966. Four years later Walker published a major book of poetry, *My people - A Kath Walker collection* which reprinted her poems, added ten more and several brief essays plus one short story. After three reprints a new version of *My people* was released in 1981. The only substantive change was the replacement of the earlier essays with excerpts from a 1979 speech entitled 'Black Australia in the seventies'. Since 1970 new individual poems have appeared in various journals, magazines and books compiled by others, and Walker has increasingly chosen to channel her poetic energies towards children.

Walker's poetry has been maligned for its lack of sophistication and its qualities of 'sing-song' verse, but such a dismissal is far too harsh. Not only was the intention of the author to achieve an impact — which she surely has — but some of her blank verse in particular has special and intrinsic merit. Such poems as 'Stone age' and 'We are going' in the first book and 'Nona' and 'The past' in her second collection are impressive examples of this:

- A thousand 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.

1 Smith 1981:35.
2 Unaipon [1929].
3 Anon. 1964:145.

Photos courtesy of Jack Davis
ABORIGINAL CREATIVE WRITING

In 1970 a West Australian of the Bibbulmun tribe, Jack Davis, had his collection The first-born and other poems published by Angus and Robertson. Davis has had poetry in print regularly over the past ten years, most frequently in the magazine Identity (which he edited for six years). In 1978, he released his second compilation of verse, Jagardoo: poems from Aboriginal Australia. Davis has been described as ‘the gentlest and most contained’ of the major Aboriginal poets yet his verse can be most impassioned:

Oh, this earth! This sun! This sky I see
Is part of my heart, my heritage!
Oh God, I cry. Cry God for me,
For a place in a land of plenty.6

This expression of sorrow is not typical. Davis, especially in his second volume, devotes much attention to a poetic examination of natural phenomena — birds, animals, land-forms — and does so with sensitivity. While all Walker’s poems in We are going concern what can be termed ‘Aboriginal themes' (dispossession, tribal mythology, the schism between the races), just one-third of the poems in Jagardoo can be so classified. Davis considers a range of subject matter which exceeds that of almost every other Aboriginal poet. Even a child’s balloon can elicit his tender amusement:

This was not a minute thing,
But huge dimensional.
All her emotions were there:
Astonishment,
Anger, fear, joy,
All blending into hurt.
Better that you learn now, small one,
That balloons
At some time or other
Always
Burst.7

Probably the most controversial Aboriginal poet today is Kevin Gilbert. In recent years Australians have become familiar with his name: indeed, the September, 1980 issue of the Bulletin was advertised on the basis that one of his poems was to be included! Gilbert wrote a great deal during his fourteen-year imprisonment. A typescript copy of over fifty ‘Poems written while in prison' is held by the Mitchell Library, Sydney. Many of these were chosen for Gilbert’s collection, End of dreamtime, published in 1971. A large number of these had been altered from the original version by some unnamed editor, evidently without Gilbert’s permission.8

Gilbert published individual poems in subsequent years but it was not until 1978 that his second anthology, People are legends, appeared. Quite a number of poems published in 1971 re-appear with the same title in 1978 but their content has been revised: according to Gilbert, the ‘original versions came out’ in this second collection9 (although the poems are not necessarily identical to the typescript version). In End of dreamtime several poems were concerned with such themes as love and solitude; significantly, every poem in the 1978 volume focuses upon Aboriginal themes (ranging from drunkenness and ‘better blacks' to land rights and the figurative emasculation of Aboriginal men). Gilbert is a decidedly indignant poet. In People are legends the tone is almost unremittingly serious and critical both of Australian society and of certain Aboriginal people. The style of the 1978 book displays more poetic experimentation — more use of varying line lengths and rhythms,
more sarcastic use of dialect, more internal rhyme — than his first, and is frequently very powerful:

'white lady' white metho despair
I too am part of the price, brother
the price that has battered me here.
Give it and spare me the pain brother
Of repugnance in your burning eyes
I'm not drunk by choice, I'm a black Brother
Escaping the hate I despise.10

Walker, Davis and Gilbert are without doubt the three major figures of Aboriginal poetry at the present time, yet many others have published single poems or collections.

One of the most intriguing and innovative 'Black Australian' poets is Bobbi Sykes, widely known as a political activist. Over the past decade Sykes has written numerous poems for Aboriginal newspapers and periodicals such as *Aim, Identity, Koori-Bina,* and *Scopp*11. By 1975 her work had appeared in anthologies such as *Australian voices*, edited by Rosemary Dobson. In 1979 twenty-seven examples, entitled *Love poems and other revolutionary actions*, were published by the Saturday Centre of Cammeray, N.S.W. The tripartite collection includes nine poems for 'the revolution', ten 'for love', and eight 'of people'.

Sykes's poetry is unconventional and fascinating, especially in its line positioning and in its liberal use of the 'slash' line of punctuation, which operates with varying degrees of success. Her work is firmly committed to Aboriginal rights but it displays a more positive approach to the Aboriginal theme than does much of Kevin Gilbert's work. For example:

Let them know that this/
Was no country of beaten losers/
But proud warriors/
Whose time has almost come.12

Sykes's poetry also addresses themes relevant far beyond Aboriginal / Australian society, as in 'On visiting prisoners':

Mr. Warden-In-Charge/
Why do you lock me
Into a room . . . .
I won't run away . . .
I live on the outside,
And that's a prison/too/
Regulated by twelve million citizens/
Who play warden to each other/
And twelve million clocks
That measure out our 'time'.13

Unlike most poets writing for 'public' consumption, Sykes reveals the self-abasing wit which is so much a part of Aboriginal and Islander humour, as in the innovative poem entitled 'That man'. After levelling often amusing criticism at her 'man' throughout most of the poem, Sykes executes an abrupt and humorous about-face in its closing lines:

12 Sykes 1979:10.
13 Sykes 1979:17.
ABORIGINAL CREATIVE WRITING

Is that his foot-step/
  Coming down the path?
  So soon?
  So early?
Better dash/fix my face
  'n'
Rehearse what I'm
going to say/
  another day.14

Another Aboriginal poet whose collected work has recently been published is twenty-three-year-old Lionel George Fogarty of Queensland. His 1980 book, Kargun (obtainable only from specialized outlets) was published by Cheryl Buchanan, 'black activist' author of We have bugger all! The Kulaluk story.15 Fogarty sees the struggle of the Australian Aboriginal as part of a global battle against European oppression, as some of his titles clearly indicate: 'Death to Rhodesia-Zimbabwe Awakes' and 'To the P.L.O. Brothers and Sisters'. Fogarty's verse is bitter and reveals more passion and anger than traditional poetic skill:

They butchered our people.
They are still butchering.
They say and show they'll never stop cutting as long as we're here.
They want to get rid of us.
Well I say they are going to be surprised one day by people like you and me
For we will gain what's ours.16

Fogarty is harsh in his condemnations — he is anti-academic, anti-church and anti-'white' and his work offers incessant exhortations to Aboriginal people and threats to Europeans:

Red power show me you’re not lost
Black power row me to meeting you
Yellow power sing me a wing, tall in flight
Brown power make me sounds, aloud
White power, don't take me
Aboriginal power give me power
Now, I'll go — take.17

Not all of the author's poetry is as vitriolic but it is all as starkly-drawn. In fact the most impressive aspect of this book (in terms of skill) is the talented graphic illustrations by Aboriginal artist Johnny Cummins of Cairns.18

The most recent anthology of Aboriginal poetry is Gerald Bostock's collection, Black man coming. It was published in 1980 but was not widely circulated until 1981. Bostock's involvement since 1970 in Aboriginal political campaigns is reflected in half of his twenty-one poems. The longest and most fervent of these, 'Black children', was written (he notes) immediately after the forced removal of the Aboriginal tent 'Embassy' from the Parliament House lawns in 1971.19 It is an impassioned and very rhythmic exhortation:

14 Sykes 1979:22
16 Fogarty 1980:15.
17 Fogarty 1980:95.
18 Fogarty's second volume of verse, Yoogum Yoogum, was released in September, 1982. It displays a maturing, colloquial poetic skill.
19 Interview with Gerald Bostock 22 July 1980.
Come on, Black Children,
Rise on your feet!
Get out of the gutter
And onto the street;
United together,
Hand in hand,
Heads raised high we stand
Then, march as one,
Surging forward and onward,
For justice,
For freedom
And for our land.20

Bostock is clearly a believer in the development of the power of pan-Aboriginalism in Australia. He feels his verse has a role to play towards that end:

So Murrawina.
Black woman;
I will do as you request:
Unite your sons and daughters
And in your eyes be blessed.21

A powerful sense of rhythm and commitment is perhaps the most impressive aspect of Bostock's poetry; often rhyme augments the strong cadences of his verse, but occasionally word choice — and metre — become noticeably forced:

We speak our mother's lingo
And hunt with our brother, the dingo
We have our lore and tribal rites
And we dance corroboree at sacred sites.22

A growing number of Aboriginal people have published one or several poems in various magazines and newspapers. One of the most promising is Aileen Corpus, who contributed two poems to Identity and five to Meanjin. Her poetry is frequently urban in focus, quite colloquial, and often captures sounds in an onomatopoetic fashion:

bright red spurted out
in warm tiny drops
to my heart-beats,
pht.ph.t.ph.23

Corpus also displays a talent for effective usage of consonants and phonetic sounds, as in 'blkfern-jungal':

wlk'n down regent street i see
blks hoo display blknez
(i min they sens of blknez)
n they say t'rne ... 
	'time gonna lif yoo outta
yor blk hole n shoo yoo
how t'wlk n dress n tlk24

20 Bostock 1980:18
23 Corpus 1977:473.
24 Corpus 1977:470.
Finally, Corpus, when using rhyme, does so with impact:

Then darkness
Hurled a legacy as he recoiled
Leaving me ashamed
I'd become cheap game, soiled,
Another gin for another jockey
Who kept a score
No doubt to him a bore.
A gin, another token
Another one is done
Another black is broken
In more ways than one.\footnote{Corpus 1976b:23.}

Her 'blkfern-jungal' exemplifies a singular approach to poetry which emphasizes the sounds of words perhaps even more than their meanings. It is possible that this trend will be carried further to incorporate the lyrical sounds and cadences of Aboriginal languages, which would represent a further unique contribution to Australian poetry. This process may have already begun, for in the July 1980 issue of Overland is a poem written by Tutama Tjapangati of Papunya, Northern Territory:

Ohhh,
  too much/
  little bitta cheeky bug/
  kapi purlka/ walpa purlka / ohhh! ebbrywhere!
  jitapayin WHOOF! gone. Finished!
  / kapi kapi kapi / cough'a cough'a cough'a
  ohhh, too much


In addition to this emerging 'phonetic current' of poetry, a growing number of Aboriginal authors are publishing more conventional verse. Among the writers are Maureen Watson\footnote{Watson 1977:545-547.}, Lola Cameron-Bonney\footnote{Cameron-Bonney 1978:28.}, Banjo Worrumarra\footnote{Worrumarra 1979:185.}, Mary Duroux\footnote{Duroux 1975:26; 1978:25.}, Vicki Davey\footnote{Davey 1978:20, 24, 26, 30; 1981:2.}, Lorraine Mafi-Williams\footnote{Mafi-Williams 1978:3.}, Hyllus Maris\footnote{Maris 1978:27, 29.}, Ngitji Ngitji [Mona Tur]\footnote{Ngiti Ngitji [Mona Tur] 1976:25; 1978a:23; 1978b:23.}, Daisy Utemorrah\footnote{Utemorrah 1975:27.}, Robbie Walker\footnote{Walker 1981.}, and John Judabah\footnote{Judabah 1981:3.}. It seems that poetry is the most popular medium of creative expression in English. Any Aboriginal newspaper or magazine will almost certainly include poems. Naturally not all of this can be considered skilful poetry but an increasing amount deserves this appellation.

The novel

One of the most popular modes of creative expression in the western world today is the novel, yet few Aboriginal people have published works of this genre. To date, only Colin Johnson, Monica Clare, Faith Bandler and Archie Weller have written what can be considered novels. Nevertheless, these four have made a distinct and significant contribution to Aboriginal creative writing in English.
Johnson was the first Aboriginal to publish in this form. His *Wild cat falling* (really a novella) was first released in 1965, re-issued in paperback later that year, and reprinted in 1979. *Wild cat falling* is a lucid and impressive study of a young outcast — a 'part-Aboriginal' who feels alienated from all around him and is searching for some sort of identity that will provide him with inner peace. As the author says, 'The character I portray is not against the world — he thinks the world is against him'.38 The protagonist has served a term in prison (a place he detests but, paradoxically, where he first feels that he really belongs). The novel details his turmoil as he tries to find a place for himself and unsuccessfully endeavours to break away from the world of crime.

Johnson displays an assured and consistent talent in this novel. His imagery is apt and succinct:

A ticket was put into my hand when I was born, but if it gave a destination, well, time had smudged the ink and so far no collector had come to clear the matter up.39 His sardonic humour is most effective: 'Maybe she thinks if she keeps it up long enough I will leap out and do a corroboree in the middle of the floor'.40 And, with reference to white sunbathers: 'Funny how they oil themselves over and bake to achieve the despised colour I was born with'.41

*Wild cat falling* is not a flawless novel but it does make one regret Johnson's fourteen-year absence from Australian book publishing while he travelled the world and became deeply involved in Buddhism.

Johnson's second novel, *Long live Sandawara*, is quite different in scope and intention. There are certain thematic parallels with the earlier book (the evils of liquor, robbery, the spectre of jail, a Beatnik idiom, and the presence of a venerable Aboriginal mentor) but this 1979 novel attempts and achieves far more. It is in a sense two novels wedded into one. The first describes a happy-go-lucky commune of urban Aboriginal teenagers whose leader, Alan, prompts them to undertake a suicidal bank robbery. The second details in epic style the historical independence struggle in the Kimberleys of the Aboriginal 'freedom fighter' Sandawara. These two halves are skilfully woven together by the author and each derives added impact from the parallel structure, as was Johnson's intention. However, the style in which these two segments are written is disparate: in the urban section 'the two teeny-boppers sit on the mattress, very, very, bored'42 whereas in the Sandawara episodes the old man Noorak is finally ready to commence his 'last journey back to the strong places of my ancestors and to the land which Sandawara called his own'.43 It is a testament to Johnson's talent that his often mundane urban characters can be viewed as a profitable counterpoint to the heroism of Sandawara.

*Long live Sandawara* is more complex than *Wild cat falling*, in its more comprehensive characterization, more frequent creation of drama, and wider-ranging satirical focus. The second novel also differs from the first in that the 1965 work was intended far more for the European reader. As the author commented, 'the second book is consciously directed towards Aboriginales more than the first, even in terms of style, which is an non-intellectual as possible. I didn't want words getting in the way of the action and the argumentation'.44 Finally, instead of the uncertain self-awareness which the protagonist experiences at the end of *Wild cat falling*, one is left in the 1979 novel with the optimistic vision of Alan as a confirmed and surviving Aboriginal patriot who is returning to tribal land with the old man Noorak.

Johnson was until 1981 the only male Aboriginal novelist. 'Perhaps the first novel by an Australian Aboriginal woman' (according to its own Foreword) is Monica Clare's *Karobran*,

38 Johnson 1965:xiv.
40 Johnson 1965:75.
42 Johnson 1979:41.
44 Interview with Colin Johnson 27 August 1980.
published posthumously in 1978. *Karobran* presents an unusual and difficult case: as the author died 'before the manuscript could be revised and rewritten by herself' the book was edited by Jack Horner with the help of Mona Brand.\(^4_5\) *Karobran* amounts to a very autobiographical novel and readers are left unsure of the extent of Monica Clare's fictionalizing.

The book concerns the experiences of a part Aboriginal girl, Isabelle, raised with her brother Morris by her bullock-driving father. It details in fairly unemotional fashion the forced removal of the children from their father by the 'Child Welfare Board' and their vicissitudes in various institutions and private homes. One of the most potent aspects of the novel is Isabelle's apprehension of racial prejudice amongst children: 'When she went to collect her suitcase, she found that it had been put apart from the others — and written on the side of it, in white chalk, was “Your Black”'\(^4_6\). The novel is reasonably successful in its description of Isabelle's trials as a young working woman in the city and seems to be introducing the important theme of trade unionism as it progresses. Unfortunately, the narrative line peters out towards the end of the book, in which Isabelle travels from reserve to reserve speaking with her people. The novel closes rather abruptly without resolving a number of issues and has the air of an unfinished work.

Faith Bandler's first novel, *Wacvie*, was published in 1977. It is a semi-fictionalized historical account of the abduction of Pacific Islanders to work as slave labour in the sugar-cane fields of Queensland. The novel centres upon the experiences of the eponymous character — Bandler's father — who acts as a leader of his transported people in their battle for rights and justice from their employers. In addition Bandler offers a believable view of the lifestyle of the Queensland plantation owners and their wives, down to the last touch of rouge on the women's cheeks:

> She sat her huge body on the small exquisite chair, covering it all except the delicate back-rest, her stays holding in the layers of fat that would otherwise have smothered the beautifully grained wood.\(^4_7\)

However, the novel also suffers from a number of weaknesses. For example, as reviewers such as Mercer have noted, the author devotes a disproportionate emphasis to the sufferings that many Kanaka labourers experienced, without paying enough attention to the positive adaptation of these people to Australia.\(^4_8\) Secondly, it is ironic that, due to the author's genial, affectionate and reserved writing style, those sufferings that were experienced are somehow robbed of their full impact. Finally, *Wacvie* rushes to a rather sudden close, again a function of Bandler's explicit concern to detail the hardships of the Islanders as slave labourers.

Bandler's writing style is well-suited to books for children. Her 1980 book, *Marani in Australia* (co-authored by Len Fox) uses this to advantage in describing the same general area of Australian history. In this sense *Marani* is closely related to *Wacvie*. Bandler calls it 'more or less a sequel to the first book. There is a lot of me in it'.\(^4_9\)

As a result of the complexities surrounding the editing of *Karobran* and because Faith Bandler is of Ambrymese (New Hebridean) extraction it can be argued that until 1981 Colin Johnson was the only published Aboriginal novelist. *The day of the dog*, an important first novel by twenty-four-year-old Archie Weller of East Perth, appeared in that year. Weller's

\(^{45}\) Clare 1978:vii. Jack Horner (interview 17 November 1982) declares that 'I may have shortened sentences, tidied grammar and transposed some phrases but I left her expression and wordage alone. She had an idea that a small child would have a sentimental expression in speech, and that I cut out'. He reports that Monica Clare had always wanted to write the novel; she took a Wollongong Workers' Educational Association course in creative writing then 'rewrote till she was satisfied. So it was her creative effort, whatever cultural invasion may have come from W.E.A.'

\(^{46}\) Clare 1978:47.

\(^{47}\) Bandler 1977:55.

\(^{48}\) Mercer 1978:181-182.

\(^{49}\) Interview with Faith Bandler 23 July 1980.
writing skill first became evident in 1977 when, under the pseudonym of Raymond Chee, he won a short story contest sponsored by the magazine *Identity*.50

Weller's *The day of the dog* describes the frequent desperation and violence of Australian urban life for both Aboriginal people and poor Europeans. Like *Wild cat falling*, the novel details the misadventures of a young Aboriginal ex-convict and the irresistible web of crime which entraps him upon his release from prison; as in *Long live Sandawara* the themes of police brutality, carefree sexual gratification, and of drinking and the Bush as refuges or escapes are underlined. But despite thematic similarities *The day of the dog* is an original work with a tremendously immediate and strikingly dramatic atmosphere. Weller's slightly unorthodox use of the first-person present tense is readable and successful and his powers of description are finely-honed and evocative. He describes the protagonist Doug Dooligan and his mates most graphically:

No-one owns them. They are their own bosses. They have cobwebs in their hair and minds and, spiderlike, they dream up new dastardly deeds for their initiation. They paint on lies and blood from fights, to make themselves look elegant with patterns from their new Dreaming. They dance to their gods of flashing lights and hopes.51

Weller's use of metaphor is impressive:

Doug stays where he is for a long time. Once, he hears a motorbike zoom down the lane with radioed messages bombarding the air. He can smell the bitter scent of the dying tomato bushes amongst which he lies. Their season is almost over, but his is just beginning. The police will pick him from the bush and let him stew in prison.52

Both Johnson and Weller have further manuscripts in preparation and, if the talent exemplified in their work encourages publishers' interest, the number of Aboriginal novels should continue to grow steadily in the coming years.

*Drama*

The dramatic tradition of the Aboriginal people — exemplified in religious rites and camp 'corroborees' — extends back thousands of years. Aboriginal choirs and concert troupes have given successful public performances in southeastern Australia since the 1880s. Mime and impromptu sketches have long been a popular form of entertainment within many Aboriginal communities but it is only in the last decade that Aboriginal dramatists have produced written scripts for public performances by Aboriginal actors.

In his introduction to the 1965 edition of *Wild cat falling* Colin Johnson mentions that he had ‘written a play called *The delinks*’53 but I can find no evidence that it was ever performed publicly in Australia. All of the dramatic productions by Aboriginal playwrights discussed below were either performed or published in this country.

The first such play was Kevin Gilbert's *The cherry pickers*, which was staged at the Mews Theatre in Sydney in August 1971 'and was highly commended in the Captain Cook Bicentenary Competition'54. The play revolves around a group of seasonal workers — Aboriginal cherry pickers — who are preparing to begin work at the orchard. They are awaiting the arrival of 'Johnollo', a hero for the children and an inspiration in more ways than one for the women: 'that Johnollo! 'leven babies he made las' season an' only one miss!'55 They are also delayed because the cherry trees (especially 'King Eagle', the largest of them) are apparently sick. Gilbert presents his audience with a wide range of emotions in the play — elation, disgust, amusement and sorrow — and does so utilizing a very appropriate Aboriginal idiom. It is a decidedly vibrant play which profits from music and a solid amount of humorous dialogue. It also appears to present a more optimistic attitude than does much of the author's poetry:

51 Weller 1981:44.
53 Johnson 1965:xii.
54 'The cherry pickers' 1971:9.
55 Gilbert 1971a:12.
Phonso- 'I — I don't think I'll ever find a — a live Rosella. Only dead 'uns and dead feathers! Those white boys shoot all the live Rosellas with their pea-rifles jus for fun an' there is no Rosellas left for us blackfellahs to love - only dead 'uns.'

Mrs. Gegg- 'One day the blackfellahs will find a beautiful live Rosella for their very own and it will be a black whitefellahs' and a white blackfellahs Rosella, and no one will ever, not ever, try to shoot it down, Phonso!'

Phonso- 'What sort o' Rosella could that be Mrs. Gegg?'

Mrs. Gegg- 'A very big, very strong and very beautiful one, Phonso — a sort of Rosella and a — type of beautiful, grown-up love-bird I think.'

A number of themes run through The cherry pickers: the affinity between Aboriginal people and nature; the spoliation of nature by European society; the inability of Aboriginal people to return to the past despite the retention of tradition and superstition; the definition and value of culture; and the inability of even 'good whites' to fully comprehend and appreciate the Aboriginal ethos. One of the highlights of the play is its interlude of pure fun and mocking, termed 'geenjing time', in which both Europeans and Aboriginal people who behave in a pretentious fashion are lampooned. Despite the pathos of the ending, when it is revealed that Johnollo has perished in an automobile accident and that 'King Eagle' is dying, the play illustrates Aboriginal resilience and humour.

Gilbert has also written a number of sketches for the stage (some of them rather bizarre) which were performed in tandem with The cherry pickers. What is salient about these sketches (titles include The gods look down, Evening of fear, Eternally Eve, Everyman should care and The blush of birds) is that unlike the rest of Gilbert's writing none is at all concerned with Aboriginal themes. It is regrettable that The cherry pickers and the sketches can only be read in typescript form in the Fryer Library collection. The play in particular merits publication.

The second venue for an Aboriginal dramatic production was the Nindethana Theatre of Melbourne where, in 1972, the revue Jack Charles is up and fighting was staged. The show, starring Aboriginal actors Jack Charles and Bob Maza, was a 'revue of short skits depicting, sometimes humorously, sometimes poignantly, the confrontation of black and white cultures, from the Aboriginal point of view. Maza left Nindethana in order to form the National Black Theatre in Redfern, Sydney, and his first production there — another series of sketches entitled Basically black — was largely derived from the material for Jack Charles. Nindethana's revue met with 'a fairly good reception from white audiences in Melbourne and Canberra'; Basically black was quite successful when it opened in Sydney later in 1972, but was not so fortunate when it was taken on tour through Queensland in 1973. Public criticism was frequently vitriolic, although 'black audiences responded enthusiastically.' Neither script has been published.

Two extremely brief Aboriginal plays that have been published but not performed are Kath Walker's Tail of platypus and Daisy Utemorrah's Mugugu. Both are directed towards children and employ the technique of personifying animal characters. They were printed in the magazine Identity in April 1974 and January 1975. The first describes the distress of a platypus who has lost his tail and ultimately discovers it being used as a diving board by a frog; the second involves two brothers who go fishing, catch a mugugu (toadfish), and then are persuaded by its entreaties to return it to the sea.

The year 1975 was significant for Aboriginal drama. The first full-length Aboriginal play in four years was staged in the recently-renovated National Black Theatre Art and Culture Centre in Redfern. Robert Merritt's The cake man, the most successful Aboriginal play in four years was staged in the recently-renovated National Black Theatre Art and Culture Centre in Redfern. Robert Merritt's The cake man, the most successful Aboriginal
dramatic production to date in terms of exposure across Australia and overseas\(^{61}\), opened at the Centre in January 1975. The popularity of Merritt's play was such that it was successfully revived in 1977 for a season at the Bondi Pavilion Theatre in Sydney. A condensed version was televised nationally by the A.B.C. later in the same year. In 1978 The Currency Press of Sydney released the play in print, making it the first published full-length work by an Aboriginal playwright.

*The cake man* is a very popular play among Aboriginal people because of its verisimilitude: it captures the lifestyle of Aboriginal reserves (popularly called 'missions') as it was for many during their childhood. Song-writer Candy Williams's sentiments are typical: 'It really freaked me out. The first production was really tops. It moved me no end, because on every mission there's a Cake Man story\(^{62}\). But it is not simply a matter of relating to the play from personal experience, for *The cake man* has been generally well-received by all audiences. To account for this one must credit not only the dramatist's subject matter, but also the skill with which he delineates the relationships between his characters. Merritt's sensitive and realistic treatment of dialogue is particularly noteworthy. The affectionate speech of Ruby for her son, Pumpkinhead, and the despondency revealed in the words of her husband, Sweet William ('I been stewin' all my life. Ain't made me no better, Rube') have the ring of truth. And, running through this is a singular sort of credible levity which remains undampened even in the face of misfortune. To cite one example, the above-quoted line of Sweet William's is followed by Ruby's 'You always tasted good to me'\(^{63}\), which brings a smile from her dejected spouse.

The major themes of the play are generally not optimistic: the emasculation of Aboriginal males via the loss of traditional authority; the deplorably insufficient conditions of many 'missions'; and the hopelessness of searching for prosperity in the city as an Aboriginal; though all of these are offset by the resilience and affection of the Aboriginal family. Whether or not *The cake man* is ultimately uplifting is a matter of some debate. The play closes with the innocent Sweet William's arrest outside a Sydney pub (solely because he is standing near a brawl when the police arrive) and this is followed by a musing Epilogue in which he addresses the audience in a monologue, pleading for the return of his separate 'reality'. Some have questioned the appropriateness of casting the non-Aboriginal Mr. Peterson as the 'Cake Man' who gives Pumpkinhead and his mother a box of food (and a cake), arguing that it replicates too closely the pattern of paternalistic donation.

*The cake man* is strongest in its portrayal of the Aboriginal 'mission' family; it is slightly out of its depth when it utilizes exaggerated caricatures of Priest, Soldier and Civilian at the outset of Act One. Though the points made may be true, their manner of expression does not do justice to the subtlety, skill and humour of the remainder of the play. Nevertheless, Merritt's script is a significant and successful piece and it is to be hoped that he will continue as a dramatist.

In 1975 two one-act plays by Jack Davis, *The biter bit* and *The dreamers*, were performed on a double bill at the Black Theatre. The latter had been presented on its own in 1973 in Bunbury, Western Australia. Although neither play has been published, the latter was rewritten and expanded into a full-length production by its author for its performance at the 1982 Festival of Perth.\(^{64}\) In fact, Davis is the most prolific Aboriginal playwright and his major full-length play, *Kullark*, was one of the highlights of the 1979 Sesquicentenary celebrations in Western Australia. Indeed, it 'was acclaimed by some critics as the finest thing to come out of the year's celebrations'.\(^{65}\)

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\(^{61}\) *The cake man* finished a successful season in Brisbane, following seasons in Melbourne, Sydney, and at The Festival of World Theatre, Denver, Colorado, U.S.A between July and September 1982.

\(^{62}\) Interview with Candy Williams 21 July 1980.

\(^{63}\) Merritt 1978:18.

\(^{64}\) Interview with Jack Davis 13 November 1981.

\(^{65}\) Watts 1980:58.
The play itself 'is a blend of traditional and modern Aboriginal culture'; 'some segments incorporate traditional song and dance, whereas others use country and western music'.

*Kullark* is a tripartite, largely historical play which skilfully depicts the racial attitudes and actions involved in the 'colonizing' of Perth and south-western Western Australia from the 1880s to the present day. Significantly, it is one of the first bilingual dramatic productions in Australia: the three European and three Aboriginal actors deliver most of their lines in English, but some parts are spoken in the author's language, Bibbulmun. The play revealed some facts deeply disturbing to Western Australians. In the author's words, 'We said in *Kullark*, that 13,000 Aboriginal people were wiped out in the short space of 71 years'. Some have challenged the veracity of Davis's play but he maintains that 'it is all fact, based on material in the Battye Library'.

Nevertheless the play is not sombre. Humour pervades the entire work and Davis's wit enables him to offer entertaining, covert didacticism which emphasizes the buoyancy and resilience of Aboriginal Australians. As he put it, 'Aborigines had learnt to keep themselves alive by laughing' and this approach to life is evident from the outset of the play: one of the major characters, Alec Yorlah, dismisses the local Priest as 'just a bookie's clerk' and continues 'and Him up there . . . 'e's sort of in charge of the T.A.B. in the sky'.

*Kullark* obtained a significant amount of exposure through its production by the National Theatre Company of Perth in 1979. The company toured various Western Australian country towns and had a successful season in the capital. *Kullark* is scheduled to be published by Currency Press in tandem with the revised version of *The dreamers* late in 1982. Publication and possible television and feature film productions should enable more Australians to become acquainted with these major contributions to Aboriginal drama.

Another Aboriginal play performed during the past decade is Gerald Bostock's *Here comes the nigger*, first presented at Redfern's Black Theatre in 1976. Bostock's play has not been published, but it may well be the first Aboriginal work transformed into a feature film. The author revised the playscript considerably and with actor Bryan Brown approached the Australian Film Commission. In March 1980 the Creative Development Branch of the Commission awarded Bostock $2,000 to develop his script.

The revisions the author has effected since his play was staged are quite considerable, but the theme of the work and its characterization have remained relatively unchanged. *Here comes the nigger* is the most powerful and the most visibly violent of all the Aboriginal plays written to date. Unlike all others it mounts to an intense climax at the very end and provides no dénouement. The two major characters are a blind Aboriginal poet named Sam Matthews and the woman, Odette O'Brien, who is tutoring him for his H.S.C. examinations. They gradually develop an affectionate relationship and (though the playwright is careful never to portray a sexual dimension) those round the pair are convinced that each is sexually taking advantage of the other. Bostock is perhaps strongest in his lucid illustration of racist stereotypes employed on both sides of the colour line. Says Billy, Sam's brother: 'You know what these gubbah [European] women are like. They can screw you right up'. And Neil, Odette's brother, says: 'You know what they say about white women who muck around with black men. They say they've got a sweet tooth; that they're partial to the taste of licorice sticks'. These racist misconceptions can be very destructive, Bostock suggests. The tragic ending of the play is a direct result of their operation.

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70 Davis c.1979:5.
Although the specific context the dramatist presents is Australian, the theme is universal and Bostock argues that his play 'can be adapted to any urban area where there is a majority and a minority'. In addition, Bostock highlights another theme which many overlook — the position of the handicapped in our society. As he puts it, 'Family groups get over-protective of any family member who is handicapped, and try to take them over. Sam and Odette are involved in a paternalistic relationship also, but they try to overcome their in-bred patterns and become individuals'.

Bostock's production is also unique in focussing wholly on urban Aboriginal people. The setting is the city, the police are ubiquitous, the idiom is urban and the pace is swift. The play suffers to a degree from an excessive number of sub-plots which divert attention from the main relationship and, given the liberal views of the author concerning oppressed minorities, it is curiously illiberal toward homosexuals.

*Here comes the nigger* occupies a singular position in the field of Aboriginal drama and may soon spread its powerful message much further. Dramatists have made a most important contribution to Aboriginal creative writing in English; in Jack Davis's words, 'I think we'll find people are going to ask for more of this type of theatre'.

**The short story**

In the 'Aboriginal Issue' of *Meanjin* (Number 4 of 1977) John Beston said of the short story: 'No Aboriginal has done extensive work in that form. Colin Johnson and Kath Walker, however, have both published several'. Beston was inaccurate. By 1977, Walker had published five stories and Johnson two in various books and journals, while Jack Davis had published nine original short stories (under this name or his tribal name 'Jagardoo') in the magazine *Identity*. In addition to being one of the most respected poets and playwrights, Davis deserves to be recognized as the most prolific Aboriginal short story writer to date. Moreover, as longtime editor of *Identity* he encouraged younger authors so that this magazine became the main showcase for short stories by Aboriginal people.

Davis displays a range of approaches in his stories, but all are unified by Aboriginal themes. Some stories are Aboriginal only in the sense that they are autobiographical, such as 'My brother Harold' and 'The contest'. In such stories Davis's tone is most amusing: 'Then came Dad's voice, "What the dickens is going on in there?" My Dad never read Dickens, but this was a favourite expression of his'. The author usually selects a contemporary incident in order to provide some revelation concerning human nature. The story 'White fantasy — black fact' is a case in point, for it details the rescue of an Aboriginal girl suffering from snakebite by a gang of 'bikies'. These supposedly tough customers are the only ones willing to stop by the roadside and offer help while average citizens continue to speed down the highway.

Yet another approach Davis employs is to describe an Aboriginal 'fringe-dwelling' situation (as in 'Heat') in which nothing substantive actually occurs. The characters nevertheless manage to laugh in spite of their destitution and discomfort. Not all of Davis's stories have uplifting endings: 'A day' describes an uncared-for Aboriginal child who collapses in school due to malnutrition, fatigue, and blood poisoning.

A number of stories represent dramatizations of historical incidents. In 'Deaf mute mother' Davis describes the pitiful plight of a deaf mute, Iltja, who dies after her baby has been forcibly removed by the authorities for adoption. In 'Pay back', cruel white explorers are doomed by the treachery of one of their fellows (who has previously poisoned a soak to exterminate Aboriginal people) when they force a native to lead them to the nearest water hole. Whereas this story relies heavily upon irony for its success, 'The stone' uses the supernatural to enhance its impact. A young tribal girl is lured by a dazzling opal to follow its flight when thrown into a pool: 'Then as the water engulfed her, the light became a crown in

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74 Interview with Gerald Bostock 22 July 1980.
75 'Kullark' "A play" 1978:7.
77 Davis 1974b:29.
the spot where she had slipped into the pool's embrace. Then the curlew's sobbing cry cut through the midnight air. Even when he uses lyrical and mystical language, Davis's stories are carefully controlled and exhibit the same reserve and sensitivity as his poetry.

As Beston noted, Kath Walker and Colin Johnson have also made several contributions to the genre. Walker's entire Stradbroke dreamtime can be considered, in one sense, a collection of short stories. Several of these have been excerpted for publication in various magazines. She has, however, also penned stories of animal fantasy purely for children. 'Koo-Poo' is a simple didactic tale about an errant baby kangaroo, which instructs all offspring not to disobey their mothers' orders to stay by their sides. Walker has also contributed to Australian anthologies such as The cool man and other contemporary stories which appeared in 1978. In 1981 she entered the field of juvenile book publishing with her story Father sky and mother earth, which she described as 'purely environmental propaganda directed towards children'.

Although most Aboriginal short stories have appeared in Identity, Colin Johnson's two stories, 'A missionary I would have been' and 'Safe delivery', reached a wider audience in his home state by publication in Westerly. Neither story has anything to do with Aborigines or, indeed, with Australia. In the former the protagonist undergoes a 'dark night of the soul' experience in Nepal. The story is replete with conflict, particularly internal conflict — between lust and self-control, Buddhism and Christianity — and the tortured atmosphere is lucidly conveyed: 'I was lost! Hideous scene — beautiful scene of my damnation. No — of my purging! Arak, more Arak, what matter — desire?'. The environment of the story is cloying and overwhelmingly tactile and sensuous: 'The rain began to fall — like a white mist of sperm. The clouds bulged heavy with dripping lust,' and 'tunnel of alley, oozing slime; falling steps slippery with my desire — worn with my countless thoughts.' In striking contrast is Johnson's 'Safe delivery', which uses irony to throw into relief the space traveller's psychological trauma born of fear, solitude, and helplessness. It also analyzes the cold, ironic comfort provided by technological language. As it turns out, the traveller is doomed and the detached, clinical diction only serves to accentuate the perception of horror. It also serves to illustrate Johnson's wide-ranging stylistic talent.

Probably the most promising new writer introduced in Identity was 'Raymond Chee', alias Archie Weller. When a short story contest for Australian authors was inaugurated by the magazine at the end of 1976 forty-five entries were received from all over the country. Winner of the Adult Section was nineteen-year-old Weller. One is immediately struck by the similarities between the beginning of Chee's story 'Dead dingo' [Thus: ('The gates . . .] close behind him and he's free. Free? Ha, that's a laugh'] and the opening lines of Johnson's Wild cat falling: 'Today the gates will swing to eject me, alone and so-called free'. In fact Weller emulates Johnson in numerous ways in this story describing the plight of a thin, solitary 'part-Aboriginal' ex-convict who rejoins his friends as a hero because of his crime. The man goes to a party, drinks, smokes dope and chats up an unknown girl; he feels forced to break the law again because he cannot make money in a legitimate fashion. Despite the abundant similarities, Chee's is an original work: his style has nothing of Johnson's Beatnik idiom about it and significantly more action is compressed into a short space.

This indebtedness is less apparent in his longer 1977 story 'Stolen car'. Chee details the fall from innocence of a country Aboriginal who journeys to the city and becomes totally corrupted and desensitized by urban life. There is no sense of free will in this story; from the moment Johnny Moydan accepts a lift into town with Benny Wallah (in a stolen car) his
fate is sealed. The author offers a bitter and detailed description of police brutality which harmonizes well with his intense, staccato style of writing:

Then the sergeant gets in
Middle-aged and thin. Greyish hair, a little curly. A hard lean, bony, face.
A slit for a mouth, and cruel, dark eyes boring into the youth, alight with a madness that frightens and paralyses him. . . .
Jerk his brain up and down.
Johnny's brain snaps. He becomes a loose, ragged, spineless wreck.83

The protagonist fights the system but after being branded and being treated as a criminal for such a long time he finally breaks down and acts the role:

Something deep down in Johnny's tortured heart breaks. . . The car is a smooth blue sports type. A prostitute, flaunting her body sensually. Teasing and tempting him. He desires her. Be as good as the boy who owns her.86

In yielding to the temptation Johnny internalizes all the forces of destruction surrounding him and causes his own self-destruction in a high-speed chase.

Chee moves totally away from the 'urban youth and crime' model in his 1979 story 'The storm'. Although in some senses this story is less complete than 'Stolen car', the style is more mature and less frenetic. Chee's imagery is precise: 'Cars roaring past on the highway, half a mile away, left the memory of their drone hanging, with clothes on the line, still and expectant'. His images can also be savage:

He was out of the car and in his storm.
Suddenly, it wasn't his storm anymore, but an animal born from the heaving gross belly of the clouds, threatening to destroy his little daughter with its bloody teeth.87

There is no overt Aboriginal theme in 'The storm'. The reserve inhabitant is buffeted by the wind and rain just as much as the most obnoxious European in the district. But the story does clearly underline the potency of nature — a fact that Aboriginal people have been particularly aware of for thousands of years — while it exemplifies Chee's maturing talent as a writer.

No anthologies composed exclusively of Aboriginal short stories have yet appeared, although the collection Aboriginal voices edited by Howard Kelly, John McArthur and Barbara Putt does include several stories by Michael Parsons and Hyllus Maris. Certainly the talents of Jack Davis and Chee/Weller illustrate the potential for such an exclusive collection. Other writers such as Reg Saunders88, Lola Cameron-Bonney89, Bob Randall90, and Louise West91 (so far published only in Identity) can only be named here, but their work suggests that the short story genre may continue to be an important mode of Aboriginal literary expression.

83 Chee 1977b:30.
86 Chee 1977b:33.
89 Cameron-Bonney 1972:37.
This paper has surveyed expressions of Aboriginal creativity in written English. One point which should be emphasized is that Aboriginal writers feel that they are singularly qualified to explain a unique racial experience to other Australians. The effective birth of Aboriginal creative writing in English occurred in the 1960s; the 1970s have seen the rapid maturation of that literature. The primacy of poetry as the most popular medium of Aboriginal written expression is likely to persist. Jack Davis, for example, has had two further volumes of verse accepted for publication.92 Exciting and innovative developments in the area of phonetic and dialect poetry may well be in the offing with the talents of those such as Bobbi Sykes, Aileen Corpus, and Tutama Tjapangati providing the impetus.

The obvious talents of Colin Johnson and Archie Weller give hope of further significant novels. It is next to impossible to predict the development of the short story genre, but if writers such as Weller pursue their craft some noteworthy achievements could be forthcoming. Certainly in this regard it is imperative that national magazines such as Identity, which maintain editorial policies conducive to the development of new Aboriginal writing talent, continue to exist.

The most auspicious area for further creative writing in English may be the theatre. Drama provides a total visual impact which cannot be achieved through the medium of print. Plays may be profitably and successfully transformed into film and video scripts. The talent that Gilbert, Merritt, Bostock, and Davis have displayed suggests that further powerful, skilful and effective drama is a real likelihood. If Bostock's attempt to film Here comes the nigger succeeds it could well act as a catalyst for increased Aboriginal involvement in both cinema and television script production.

Gifted and motivated Aboriginal authors of all ages responded in the 1960s and 1970s to editorial encouragement and new opportunities to make known their perceptions of life. Their numbers will surely increase as young people take advantage of higher education and growing public sensitivity to the richness and variety of Aboriginal culture. A significant proportion of the Aboriginal people have been urban residents since the second World War. The fact of urbanization and the factors of change and continuity in Aboriginal culture have not yet been adequately understood by other Australians, who tend to perceive the Aboriginal people as 'tribal'. The granting bodies which support Aboriginal endeavours — in literature and in other fields — must become more responsive to Aboriginal definitions of their own culture and society. Urban as well as non-urban authors deserve recognition and funding for their efforts to make the Aboriginal experience enrich the lives of all Australians.

In his Boyer Lectures, broadcast nationally, Bernard Smith noted that the Aboriginal community is now the most 'important and vocal national minority' in Australia.93 Many Aboriginal voices are now communicating fluently in indigenous languages and in their own forms of English. The sympathy of editors and funding bodies is necessary to ensure publication of their words so that what Aboriginal people say, and the way they say it, can be appreciated by other Australians and by audiences round the world.

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92 Interview with Jack Davis 13 November 1981.
93 Smith 1981:56.
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