A tribute to Isobel Mary White

This tribute to Sally White by Isabel McBryde was first published in the obituaries section of Aboriginal History, volume 21. As this present volume commemorates the life and work of Sally White, it is fitting to reprint Professor McBryde's tribute here.

***

Isobel White, or Sally, as we have all known her with such deep affection and respect, was for long a much valued member of the Aboriginal History editorial board. It was with deep sadness that we learnt of her death in August 1998.

Sally was a very special person within her family, 'an important person' to Charlotte, Nicholas and Jonathon and their families. The family was at the core of her life, throughout all its changes. Whether based in London, Texas, Missouri, Melbourne or Canberra, the love that sustained this core was unchanged.

Sally was important to all of us — in so many different ways. She had a remarkable breadth of understanding of, and sensitivity to, others, responding to our diverse lives and concerns. In these concerns she so often sustained us. Caring for people, she never drew back from that sustaining rôle, however demanding. Luise Hercus tells me that Sally once said to her: 'I feel like a wailing wall'. That can perhaps raise a flash of guilt. How often did we impose on the kindness so freely offered?

Sally was a remarkable person; it is appropriate to begin with her human qualities. We will all long remember her courage, her determination, above all her integrity and directness in relations with others. She cared intensely for people, concerned that justice and honesty should prevail in human dealings, both personal and collective. Social justice and equity were important principles that informed her decisions in relation to wider society and political action.

Born and brought up in England, Sally's youth was spent first in Harrow, then later in Birmingham when her father took up an appointment as headmaster there. Brilliant at mathematics, Sally went straight on from school to read Economics at Cambridge. This was in Milton Keynes' department. She completed the course in 1933, one of those women students accepted by the Cambridge academic establishment, though not to the extent of being actually awarded a degree. At the completion of her studies at Girton she was awarded a travelling scholarship for 1934–35 to undertake research in Canada on migrants and outworkers. At this time her concerns for society also prompted her to be politically active, both in England and in Canada. On her return from Canada she became an energetic member of the Fabian Society. Her professional work in these pre-war years was with both private firms and Government, as a factory inspector and personal assistant to senior management. In 1938 she married Michael White, brilliant young scientist. During the war both were engaged in government serv-
ice and spending much time in London experienced the years of intense bombing. At the end of the war she was also caring for two small sons.

After the war Michael moved to appointments in the United States, where the family spent in all ten years before he took up the Chair of Zoology in Melbourne. In Melbourne Sally met with grace the demands on her time and energies as a professorial wife, caring mother and grandmother. However, she also began a new career in Anthropology. It has brought her international renown. How did this transformation of Cambridge-trained economist, then wife and mother, to anthropologist occur?

While in Missouri and when the children had grown to school age, Sally took up academic study again. Building on her concerns with social questions and society, she chose anthropology. In Melbourne she maintained this interest, first through the museum and the Victorian Anthropological Society, then from 1964 as a member of the staff of the new Department of Anthropology at Monash University. Her students there remember her as a dedicated, inspiring teacher. Rigorous and incisive in her own work, she encouraged them to achieve the same standards. As adviser, supervisor and examiner she soon earned Australia-wide recognition.

For her own research she chose to consider the roles of women in Aboriginal society. This focused on desert groups, with major fieldwork in the late 1960s and 1970s often in collaboration with linguist Luise Hercus and musicologists Catherine Ellis and Helen Payne (see White 1970; Hercus and White 1973; White 1977; White 1979; White and Payne 1992).

She brought fresh insights to research from the breadth of her own intellectual background and personal experience, as well as an independent creative stance. Her work was innovative, exploring hitherto neglected areas that are now regarded as central to the discipline. It resulted in a number of important published articles, and the research papers on Central Desert women lodged with Monash University.

Fieldwork was a major part of her life in those two decades, often combined with Michael’s fieldwork on the Nullarbor and in Western Australia. At Yalata on the Nullarbor she worked over many years from 1969 with the women of that community, especially Alice Mangkatina (Alice Cox) and her family (see White 1985a). Of this she wrote:

What I looked forward to most as I approached Yalata on each of my visits was Alice’s beautiful welcoming smile (White et al. 1985, p. 214).

The women at Yalata shared their lives with her in ways very important to her, taking her on bush trips and introducing her to significant places such as Pidinga. They often called her kapali (grandmother).

This made her think of Daisy Bates (she says ‘uncomfortably’: Fighters and Singers, 1985a, p. 215). The comment brings to my mind her major work of the 1970s and 1980s, the editing of Daisy Bates’ Native Tribes of Western Australia. This book was the product of meticulous historical and anthropological research. It brought to scholarly readership Mrs Bates’ serious anthropological recording of the societies of Western Australia. It is a significant contribution to Australian anthropology, and to the history of anthropology in Australia. Its editing, and analysis of the complexities of Daisy Bates’ life and work with Aboriginal groups engaged all those intellectual qualities we associate with Sally’s research. It shows so clearly her incisive, yet objective, non-judgemental and sensitive command of analysis. It is a magnificent achievement. Appropriately it was launched in
December 1985 by her friend Ken Colbung, himself a Nyungar of southwestern Western Australia. He then chaired the Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, a body of which Sally was long an active member.

From the early 1980s Sally was an active member of the editorial board of *Aboriginal History*. She was review editor for many years, and co-editor with Judith Wilson and Isabel McBryde of the two special volumes honouring Diane Barwick (vols 11 and 12). Her wide intellectual interests, acumen and extensive international experience and contacts made her a magnificent editor and board member. We all benefitted from her wisdom and her counsel offered in friendship. Her special expertise in ethnohistory, melding history and anthropology, is shown in the beautiful paper ‘The birth and death of a ceremony’, published in *Aboriginal History* (White 1980).

Sally’s commitment to Aboriginal anthropology has continued in recent years. When direct research was no longer possible, she remained involved through the editorial board of *Aboriginal History*. She still examined theses, and was always there in an advisory role for friends and colleagues.

Her research and writing from the 1960s are major contributions to Aboriginal studies, both empirically and theoretically. We think of significant books such as:

- the Daisy Bates volume, *The native tribes of Western Australia* (White 1985b)
- *Fighters and Singers* edited with Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan
- the school text book *Before The Invasion*, co-authored with Colin Bourke and Colin Johnson;
- the volumes of *Aboriginal History* for which she was co-editor and review editor.

There are also important articles, such as that on dogs (their roles in hunting and social relation with Aboriginal people) at Yalata (White 1972) and chapters in books edited by others such as Fay Gale’s *Women in Aboriginal Society* (White 1970); R.M. Berndt’s *Aborigines and Change: Australia in the 70s* (White 1977); Caroline Larrington’s *Feminist Companion to Mythology* (with Helen Payne: White and Payne 1992); and Julie Marcus’ *First in their Field* (1993). There is also her major research report on desert women lodged with Monash University.

For Sally her intellectual interests were matters of exploration, of ever seeking new understanding. They were driven by that perception and wisdom she brought to all her living, and was so generous in sharing. We have so much to thank her for, and to celebrate in her memory.

To her family, especially Charlotte, Nicholas and Jonathan we extend our deepest sympathy in their personal loss.

May I end by adapting the wording Sally, Diane and Betty chose in their dedication of *Fighters and Singers*, to Shirley Andrew.

To Sally,

Who knows about scholarship and learning and cares about people.

Isabel McBryde
Note

This tribute builds upon the eulogy I was honoured to be invited to present at the funeral service in Canberra on 28th August 1998. A similar tribute, but focusing on Sally’s contribution to Australian anthropology, will be included in a forthcoming issue of Canberra Anthropology, with the agreement of both Dr Peter Read, chairman of the Aboriginal History editorial board, and Dr Patrick Guinness, editor of Canberra Anthropology.

Isabel McBryde is Professor Emerita of Archaeology at the Australian National University, where she is currently a Visiting Fellow in History of the School of Humanities. She is also a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

References


