

Notes and Documents

Remembering an Australian legend: Nancy de Vries 1932–2006

On 11 March 1932, eight days before the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened, Nancy de Vries was born at Crown St Hospital. Her mother, Ruby Edwards, had come from far western New South Wales to have her baby and she and Nancy lived in a home for single mothers in Marrickville, where Nancy was baptised in the Church of England. But when Nancy was 13 months old, she was taken from Ruby and put into state care. Ruby was told that she could get Nancy back when she had a steady job. Nancy went to the first of many homes, a foster family where she was very happy. Many years later, this foster mother told her that Ruby had returned, with a job, but the Child Welfare Department had refused to allow her access to Nancy. It would be over 50 years before they saw each other again, and the beginning of Nancy's long and heart-rending search for her mother. Nancy stayed in her first foster home for five years, the longest period she would remain in one place until 1950 when, after her eighteenth birthday, she was no longer subject to the control of the Child Welfare Department.

In addition to eight different foster homes, Nancy spent significant parts of her childhood in different church and government institutions and, between each move, she was in the Bidura Children's Home in Glebe, known as 'the depot', which was a kind of revolving door for children who were wards of the state. After reporting to a foster mother that she had been raped at about nine years of age, the mother returned her the next day, on the grounds that she was 'uncontrollable'. It was a label that would stick to Nancy for many years to come, and which eventually saw her transferred to the infamous Parramatta Girls Home, which Nancy remembered as 'the finishing school because it finished us RIGHT off'. Her last institutional home was Callan Park psychiatric hospital. She faked a suicide attempt with four other girls from Parramatta Girls Home after discovering that the conditions were much better at Callan Park! And they were, but she couldn't then leave it. Nancy's 22 different moves also included Malgoa Mission in Penrith, Cootamundra Girls Home and Moonaculla Aboriginal Station. She was sent to 'punishment' for failing to conform to expectations of her white foster parents. In fact, it had been her second experience of sexual interference. But time spent at Moonaculla with other Aboriginal families provided Nancy with some of her most cherished childhood memories and renewed her hope of one day finding her own family.

As a young adult, Nancy decided that she would like to work as a nurse and was determined to break through the barriers of racial discrimination that limited the career

opportunities of Aboriginal women. The staff of Callan Park maintained the early labeling of Nancy as of low intelligence — despite their own reports to the contrary, and would not support her desire to train. She was only allowed a position as a ward maid. Despite this, she did obtain a position as an enrolled nurse working night shifts while raising her three young children Peter, David and Megan. In 1985, then 53 years of age, Nancy was eventually able to realise her childhood dream of becoming a registered nurse by enrolling at the University of Western Sydney. She and her dear friend Eunice became, in 1988, the first two Aboriginal graduates of the Diploma in Applied Science (Nursing) at Macarthur Institute (now University of Western Sydney). While she was at University, Nancy also completed a major in Aboriginal Studies, in which she was a straight High Distinction student: she had certainly put an end to the stigma of low intelligence. She was also a very powerful speaker and remained in touch with her own lecturers by becoming a highly valued guest lecturer herself. This was extended to many community and school events where almost everyone who heard her speak would be greatly moved. She could have an audience almost to the point of tears and then roaring with laughter a second later. There are students all over the world who will remember how this amazing woman touched their life and brought into it an empathy for others that will always remain with them.

It was while she was studying that she joined the Aboriginal organisation, Link-Up, to get help and support in the search for her mother and in the process of reunion. Nancy was 55 years old when she was finally reunited with her mother, but it was a more difficult encounter than she had dreamt of. Ruby, probably traumatised herself by her own experience in Sydney so many years before, had not told anyone about her first child and the knowledge came as a shock to the family. Some reached out to Nancy and some didn't. Ruby herself was ambivalent. She and Nancy spent a total of only ten hours together, over various visits, before Ruby passed away. In an exhibition on her life, held at the Liverpool Regional Museum in 2002, Nancy described her reaction to the brief time she was able to spend with Ruby: 'I beat the system. It may have been 10 hours in a lifetime but it was 10 hours they never wanted me to have with her.' After finding her mother, Nancy remained a staunch supporter of Link-Up until her death, spending many years on the executive and always reaching out to other Aboriginal people with similar histories. She will be remembered by the Link-Up family with the greatest affection, as someone who never failed to promote Link-Up values and beliefs and worked tirelessly to bring Aboriginal people back home again. It was the most important Aboriginal organisation to Nancy for its work in reuniting families. Her own leadership quality inspired self-belief in many vulnerable and apprehensive Link-Up members who will always remember 'Nance' as one of the organisation's most treasured members. As an elder within the Link-Up family her wisdom and courage was acknowledged and respected.

After graduating from the University of Western Sydney, Nancy got a job in the bush running the Aboriginal Medical Service at Brewarrina before returning to Sydney to work in drug and alcohol rehabilitation nursing at Wisteria House. Nancy was a humble person and it was only by accident that her fellow nurses discovered one day she was on the Nurses Registration Board, the first Aboriginal nurse to be appointed to it.

In 1997 Nancy was chosen to represent all those people in New South Wales who were part of Australia's history of the stolen generations, a history that had been told in

grim detail in the findings of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Report *Bringing them home* earlier that year.¹ Part of Premier Carr's historic apology said:

We are confronted with continuing, contemporary pain, grief and loss, as has been demonstrated in this House this morning. We cannot ignore the overwhelming evidence ... that for a century this Parliament supported laws, which inflicted, and continue to inflict, grief, suffering and humiliation — laws designed, in the words of the Link-Up statement 'to eliminate us as Aborigines' ... I reaffirm in this place, formally and solemnly as Premier on behalf of the Government and people of New South Wales, our apology to the Aboriginal people. I invite the House to join me in that apology.

Nancy always recalled this as the most important day of her whole life — for herself, her mother and all Aboriginal people who had been through the pain of removals. In 2001, she told friends:

They can't give me back my mother, my lost childhood, the feeling that I was loved. No amount of money could give me back that and I don't want it. But when Bob Carr gave his apology it was a removal of all my mother's guilt. The secret she bore alone. It was so important to me as her daughter that her hurt be removed. The apology set her free.

Nancy had been through immense personal pain, degradation and utter loneliness as a child and young woman. Yet she had shown enormous courage too, refusing the denial of who and what she was. Standing up for herself was interpreted as willful and undisciplined, but it got her through situations that would have broken the spirit of many. To those who sought to discredit the history of the stolen generations as just some 'politically correct myth' she could respond, with humour and with a sparkle in her eye that anyone who knew will recall, by proudly stating: 'I'm not a myth. I'm a bloody legend!!'

Shortly after her own speech in Parliament — Nancy de Vries and the Queen are the only two non-member women to have ever addressed the Parliament — Nancy suffered an aortic aneurysm that left her in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. In hospital, she said she had made a deal with 'the big fella upstairs' because she needed time to see her grandchildren grow up in a safe and loving home, and proud of their Aboriginal inheritance. She managed this through an amazing nine years of illness, with the indomitable spirit that had characterised her whole life. Her final years were spent raising her seven grandchildren in Liverpool, supported by her son Peter (who died suddenly in 2003) and her daughter Megan. She continued her guest speaking commitments at community functions, schools and universities and was officially recognised for her community leadership by the Liverpool City Council in its 2003 Australia Day celebrations, and in its 'Auntie Nance' exhibition in their Regional Museum curated by Fiona Nicholl. As a member of Liverpool Council's Aboriginal Consultative Committee Nancy was highly active in the life of the community and its schools. Nancy was often seen driving around Liverpool at all hours or taking herself into the city on her little red

1. National inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families 1997, *Bringing them home: report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney.

scooter, attending meetings and honouring her activist commitments. Bad weather was never an obstacle. Many friends in Liverpool remember Nancy bearing down on them in her buggy with her wicked laugh and grin, warning 'Get out of my way or I'll knock you over!'

Nancy particularly enjoyed travelling with her family from Liverpool to watch her beloved team, the Newtown Jets, play football on weekends. She was a well-known fan to the players. On top of the daily rounds of shopping, cooking and taking the kids to swimming lessons and netball, she made her history available for an exhibition and co-authored a book on her experiences titled *Ten hours in a lifetime*, a special edition of which was launched by Gough Whitlam in 2005. It will be published later this year by Aboriginal Studies Press. Her co-authors, Jane Mears, Gaynor Macdonald and Anna Nettheim had the privilege of spending many hours listening to Nancy telling her gripping and often harrowing story. The book is not only their tribute to a truly great person, it is also about their own journey of learning what it means, as non-Aboriginal people, to enter into the pain of another's life, one in which we are all implicated.

On 11 May 2006 the members of the New South Wales State Parliament stood in their places to honor Nancy's memory. Milton Orkopoulos, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, offered his 'profound sympathy to Mrs de Vries' family, friends and admirers around the State. Her great personal strength and kindness allowed her to overcome tremendous difficulty with dignity and humility. She was an inspiration to us all.'

The member for Wakefield, Brad Hazzard also offered his recollections of Nancy:

[C]oming into this Chamber in 1997 when we met in a bipartisan effort to send a message to Australia that this Parliament believes that reconciliation is the way forward, Nancy generously gave us her time, which was something she said had been taken from her in her youth.

Any of us who were in this Chamber on the day when Nancy spoke will remember the emotion with which she addressed the gathering, but, more important, the sentiment and emotion felt by all honourable members. This Parliament has proudly led the way on reconciliation by offering the first apology to the stolen generations. It is appropriate today that we reflect on Nancy de Vries, who was such a great ambassador for reconciliation and who wanted black and white Australia to find its way forward and grow through a profound understanding of the need for reconciliation. We thank Nancy and her family for what she contributed. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

Nancy de Vries is survived by her daughter Megan, her son David and her grandchildren Peter, Luke, Brian, Glen, Kelly, David, Albert, Mark, Gemma and Patricia.

Fiona Nicholl, Jane Mears,
Gaynor Macdonald and friends
of Nancy De Vries

The Sally White - Diane Barwick Award for 2006

The Sally White - Diane Barwick Award is presented annually by the Board of *Aboriginal History* to a female Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander tertiary student who is about to start or is already studying for an Honours or post-graduate degree. The Award can be used for any appropriate research-related purpose.

The 2006 White - Barwick Award was granted to Denise Smith-Ali. She is a Noon-gar woman from the south-west of Western Australian. She is currently studying at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, finishing her Advanced Diploma and a Bachelor of Arts degree. She previously completed a Diploma of Arts (Language and Linguistics) in May 2006, and has qualifications as a Language Other than English Teacher (LOTE) in 2003, through the Western Australian Education Department.

Denise writes:

I have a great interest in oral history, collecting, recording, and documenting language and dialects with remaining speakers in my country. I collect, record and document songs. I transcribe and translate the recordings, and construct word lists and work towards constructing a dictionary.

After I have completed my degree I hope to continue to develop my language knowledge. I want to develop skills working with Indigenous teachers, preparing resources for use in schools' language and cultural programs, and also develop skills for desktop publishing and web publishing of resources. The White-Barwick Award will give me some financial assistance towards this.

Future candidates for the Sally White - Diane Barwick Award are invited to apply in writing at any time, for selection in April of the following year.

Please apply to Aboriginal History Inc. PO Box 3827, Canberra ACT 2601.

Contact the Secretary, Robert Paton 0419 736459 for further details.

Erratum

'Indigenous organisations and mining in the Pilbara, Western Australia: lessons from a historical perspective' by Sarah Holcombe, *Aboriginal History* 2005, volume 29: 107-135

Aboriginal History sincerely apologises for a copy editing error that was introduced into page 122 of Sarah Holcombe's 2005 article. The sentence that reads 'The chairman is non-Indigenous' should read 'The Chief Executive Officer is non-Indigenous, while the Chairman is Indigenous.'

Sarah Holcombe has also sent the following letter to the Board of Aboriginal History Inc. regarding her paper and responses to it that she has received since its publication.

To the Editorial Board of Aboriginal History,

I would like to acknowledge that some members of the Gumala Aboriginal Corporation (GAC) Board do not agree with the conclusions reached in some areas of the paper 'Indigenous organisations and mining in the Pilbara, Western Australia: lessons from a historical perspective' published in *Aboriginal History* volume 29, 2005.

Such disagreement reflects the dynamic political context within which anthropologists operate, and within which this research was undertaken. Such disagreements also reflect the challenges of writing ethnographies that are not overly interpretative of their sources. There is clearly a methodological challenge involved when providing necessary background political context in giving representation of a diversity of views, including the voices of 'informants', without perceptions of privileging one viewpoint over another.

Sarah Holcombe
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy
Research,
Australian National University

15 December 2006

'The axe had never sounded': place, people and heritage of Recherche Bay, Tasmania

John Mulvaney

Forthcoming publication by Aboriginal History Inc. Monograph 14
with the ANU E-Press Canberra, May 2007

'This book meets well the triple promise of the title — the inter-connections of place, people and heritage. John Mulvaney brings to this work a deep knowledge of the history, ethnography and archaeology of Tasmania. He has also been directly involved with Tasmanian cultural heritage issues over many years.

The book is written in a clear, lively style, effectively presenting a comprehensive account of the area's history over the two hundred years since French naval expeditions first charted its coastlines. The important records the French officers and scientists left of encounters with Aboriginal groups are discussed in detail, set in the wider ethnographic context and compared with those of later expeditions.

The topical issues of understanding the importance of Recherche Bay as a cultural landscape and its protection and future management form a major component of the book. Readers will be challenged to consider the connections between people and place, and how these may constitute significant national heritage.'

Professor Isabel McBryde
Australian National University

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