

# The Canberra Times

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## Slave's daughter spins a spell of hope and justice;

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IN APRIL 1999, author Marilyn Lake stood in the centre of the tiny northern NSW town of Tumbulgum and fell under the spell of the elderly daughter of a 'slave'.

There in the purview of Mount Warning and not far from the cane fields that are synonymous with the Tweed Valley, Lake watched 200 people gather to pay tribute at the opening of a memorial to a woman known as a lifelong fighter for social justice. The woman is Faith Bandler.

In her book *Faith*, Lake wrote she was struck by how many people were drawn to Bandler's presence, 'wanting to touch her, give her a hug or a kiss, wanting to lay a claim to her'.

Later that day, Lake and Bandler drove to see a memorial to the hundreds of original South Sea Islanders who cleared land, cut timber and worked the NSW cane fields from 1867 to 1914. They were the more than 62,000 men and women who were kidnapped, or 'blackbirded', and brought to Australia to slave away in work considered unsuitable for white people. Among them was Bandler's father Peter Musing.

Musing was one of the hundreds of South Sea Islanders who escaped expulsion under the Immigration Restriction Act, a piece of legislation the sole aim of which was to secure a white Australia.

This daughter of a sugar slave would grow into a woman who argued for the common humanity of black and white. Lake said the fire of this remarkable sense of justice was sparked in the family home in Tumbulgum. When Bandler returned to that small town in 1999, the home was gone but those vital stories and memories that had formed the infrastructure of her soul remained important.

In the lean-to kitchen of a cedar and slab house the Musing children four boys and four girls would sit on banana cases and listen to their father's stories. Stories of being kidnapped, taken into the boat by slavers from the island of Ambrym in the New Hebrides, and held in the hull until they arrived in Australia. They heard how some people grew sick, died en route and were thrown overboard, and how strange everything seemed.

In 1924, when Faith Musing was five years old her father's stories of his enslavement and subsequent fight for freedom and the drawings he would make in the fireplace ash ended suddenly. Influenza had killed him.

Lake wrote, 'From her father, Faith learnt about the slavery of his people and she learnt who she was.' She learnt about the assault on her father's identity as people from many islands were collectively called by the Polynesian word for man, *kanakas*, an insult that ignored important cultural differences and stole their identity.

Faith Musing's childhood was set in an environment that yearned for a white Australia and considered segregated schools and hospitals acceptable. In just one example, she remembered trying to stop school-yard bullies taunting a Jewish boy with 'You killed Christ', only to be taunted with 'You killed Captain Cook'.

The outbreak of World War II saw Faith enter the Australian Land Army, move to Sydney and develop her love for music, a love that on one occasion had her at the Kapooka Army Camp singing for the troops. Her soprano voice induced the soldiers to sing, to call for more and to cry with joy. One night while she sang in the officers' mess someone said, 'Look outside', and when they walked on to the veranda there were hundreds of people standing below calling for her to sing their favourite songs as they threw flowers on to the veranda.

Apart from the opportunity to make enduring friendships, Land Army experiences also reminded her of the social dichotomy she lived in.

She remembers picking cherries in Young and noticing that Aboriginal people were employed in another orchard, separated by a fence and, 'as she also learnt by pay rates'. The Aboriginal women were paid much less. It was an episode that made her think about Aborigines.

After the war, Land Army women were forced to hand over their jobs and return to less rewarding lives. Faith maintained her adventurous life by embracing the Bohemian rhythm of Kings Cross. In the 1940s, Faith's cohorts included left-wing activists, Communist Party members, musicians and writers such as Dame Mary Gilmore.

Kings Cross gave her the environment in which to nurture her political education. She became involved with political organisations such as the Australian Peace Council and the Australian Russian Society and started campaigning for the banning of weapons of mass destruction.

In 1950 she campaigned for Aboriginal rights and rallied against the prevailing Cold War attitudes. It was a campaign that took her around the world from Rome to Naples, Bombay, Berlin and Paris. Two years later she married engineer Hans Bandler.

Then Prime Minister Robert Menzies had immersed Australia in a virulent Cold War mentality and Bandler lost her job and passport, and was under ASIO surveillance.

In the 1960s, Bandler campaigned for full citizenship rights for Aborigines an argument that would be won by 1967.

Ironically, the argument saw her clash with other campaigners for Aboriginal rights such as Charles Perkins, who resented a non-indigenous black woman representing Aborigines. The experience made her consider her own identity as an islander.

Lake wrote that a swag of significant awards recognised Bandler's dedication to 'fighting and writing for other people's well-being'. These included a Meritorious Award in honour and gratitude for a life of courageous advocacy for justice for indigenous people, for love and reconciliation, given to Bandler when she was 82. She had helped force Australians to 'come to terms with the shameful aspects of their history' and forced black and white to search for reconciliation. She had helped shape our national identity.

Bandler's story serves to remind us of traditions of acceptance, inclusion and justice.