

The Canberra Times

A ride that began to close Australia's black-white divide

Robert Messenger.
Canberra Times
7 September 2002

Ann Curthoys's new book on the 1965 Freedom Ride is a timely reminder of what we were like at our worst, and how close we still are to the abyss, says Robert Messenger.

THE KIDS in the bus were in high spirits. It was a scorching February day in 1965 and they'd just been for a swim. They were singing the Christmas hit Stompin' at Maroubra and one little girl at the back of the bus, whose voice rose above all the rest, sounded just like Little Patti.

Stomp, stomp, stompin' at Maroubra

Everybody's doin' the Maroubra stomp

She had all the words. She had the motions, too. Her name was Zona Craigie and she lived at Moree. Many of her friends with her in the bus had never seen a beach, let alone been to the Bronte Surf Club, where the real Little Patti sang. But they giggled and they moved on to the Beatles.

Ticket to Ride and Daytripper would have been appropriate, but they were ahead of the time.

After all, these kids were on the adventure of a lifetime.

They'd just been on a ride to a swimming pool. And they'd swum in white man's water. They had broken through the lucky country's colour bar.

Ann Curthoys recalled this poignant story this week when she delivered a National Institute of the Humanities public lecture, *The Freedom Ride its Significance Today*, at the National Museum.

A photograph of the Aboriginal children clustered around Charles Perkins in the Moree public pool adorns the cover of Curthoys's book, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*, which will be published by Allen and Unwin on September 16.

Because of the circumstances, Curthoys describes it as "an enduring image of desegregation in action".

It was most decidedly the defining moment of the Freedom Ride, a bus odyssey undertaken by 29 Sydney University students through north-western NSW to confront and protest at racial apathy and discrimination in country towns. Curthoys, the Manning Clark Professor of History at the Australian National University, was one of the freedom riders.

"Moree was a tough town," was Curthoys's understatement these 37 years later. Moree's artesian baths and swimming pool were barred to indigenous people in 1955. The baths were a tourist attraction and the pool was for whites only beyond school

hours. The Freedom Riders decided to tackle the discrimination head-on by taking a group of six Murri youngsters to the pool, while protest leader Perkins drove the bus to a mission outside town to collect 20 more children.

At the gate to the pool, the Riders were left waiting for tokens for 30 minutes. A bystander told them, "You've come up here, we're living in peace, we're living in peace until you come up." The pool manager, Don Ford, eventually refused entry, but after a crowd of 100 had gathered, Ford, town mayor Bill Lloyd and four police officers agreed to allow the children through.

This week Curthoys admitted Moree was one of the places she and her fellow Freedom Riders had actually felt scared during their 14-day crusade.

Curthoys met Zona Craigie (then Zona Moore) again in 1991, when she went back to Moree on a visit. She remembers her as "a little girl with a fantastic voice [who] led the singing . . . The spirit was tremendous."

It was with an infectious spirit that Curthoys gave her lecture. She has published widely on Aboriginal policy and history, national identity, immigration, racial thought and relations, the Cold War, women's history and feminist thought, and the media, and her latest work is one straight from the heart. And also from her own dairies.

The result is iced by the vital touch of a professional historian. This, after all, was a landmark event in the history of race relations in this country. It is worthy of the words Curthoys has devoted to it. First nudged by mentions of the crusade in Perkins's *A Bastard Like Me* in 1975, then by Peter Read's *Charles Perkins: A Biography*, in 1990, Curthoys has given us a far greater depth of understanding of the Freedom Ride.

The most important element in all this is, perhaps, that in "revisiting the actions of the past . . . we can explore anew the question of what kinds of political activism for indigenous rights might be appropriate today". Curthoys considers "the politics of remembering, the complexity of apparently simple events and the importance of political activism".

The Freedom Riders' activism struck at the very heart of rural Australia, the country towns where a blind eye had for many years been turned to blatant segregation and mistreatment of Aborigines. It was a form of racism still euphemistically referred to as an "ingrained yet unacknowledged feature" of the NSW bush.

In Curthoys's book, NSW Premier Bob Carr writes, "In the '60s, segregation and discrimination were no less a part of Aboriginal life than of the lives of black people in the Deep South [of the United States]. We needed a civil-rights movement . . . and in Charles Perkins and company, we got one."

Carr describes the "conscience-searing" and "moral" triumph of the Freedom Riders, saying they helped edge into being "lasting change".

The Canberra Times editor-in-chief, Jack Waterford, writes that in the early '60s "most Australians could afford ignorance or feel comfortable about the racism, discrimination and poverty affecting Aboriginal Australians". The Freedom Ride, he said, marked the time when "those who had been comfortable with what was happening were confronted with reality. It forced other Australians to look at the darker side of the past and the present."

Forcing this upon Australians meant, for the Freedom Riders, repeated confrontations, intense street debates, some unprovoked violence and considerable courage, matched in large doses by the local Aborigines the Riders encountered along their way.

Curthoys says the physical abuse of the Riders outside the Moree swimming pool attracted the interest of the urban media, "who saw it as a sign that NSW was little different from the American South".

In this, the cause was helped by the arrival of American-born Gerald Stone among six journalists to be assigned to Moree to cover the protest there. Stone, who had joined the Sydney Daily Mirror three years earlier, was more aware than most of what it was like to live through the racial troubles in the US in the early '60s. So, too, was the Mirror's editor, Zell Rabin, who had been the paper's New York correspondent for some years.

Stone was a reporter and assistant editor with United Press International from 1957 to '62 and before that had worked for the New York Times. Curthoys said, "Stone and Rabin between them ensured that the Mirror gave extensive and sympathetic media coverage to the Freedom Ride, and it was they who most often made the comparisons with the Deep South."

Curthoys remains positive the changes in our society started by the Freedom Ride are being felt today. But it's perhaps as well she has waited so long to write this book. It is, if nothing else, a timely reminder of what we were like at our worst. The changes came slowly, very slowly, and there are still those among us who fear that, if we have progressed at all, the abyss is but a few steps back.

Five years after the Freedom Ride, the Mirror was taking up no cudgels, but Perkins and The Canberra Times and many others were when the South African rugby team toured Australia. Manning Clark himself wrote in the foreword to Stewart Harris's Political Football, "Despite all the curses of affluence, the alleged apathy, and the social bankruptcy of our public life, and the 'who cares' mentality, our society was as deeply divided as it was during the Spanish Civil War and the Strikes of 1890-93.

"But whereas in those earlier crises people were divided over class issues, this time people were dividing over the race question, and the type of society in which we wanted to live."

That argument goes on still. But the fact that, by 1971, white Australians were dividing on the race question shows what a deep impression the Freedom Ride had made on them.

Curthoys and her fellow travellers deserve some credit for starting the process by which this country reassessed itself.