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Kevin Gilbert and *Living Black**

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Kevin Gilbert died on the 1st of April 1993 at the age of fifty-nine. He died after a long battle with emphysema, an illness that forced him, in the last years of his life, to travel with a supply of oxygen.¹ On the 8th of April the Aboriginal community held a 'memorial service' for this much respected contributor to Aboriginal identity and culture. However, this service was not bleak, pessimistic or sorrowful, but a celebration of Gilbert's work and life.

Condobolin, near Forbes in central New South Wales, was the birthplace of Kevin Gilbert on the 10th of July 1933.² Often Gilbert went back to Condobolin and the surrounding districts for inspiration or thoughts for his work. Many of the Aborigines he interviewed for his book *Living Black* came from this area where he spent his childhood. He was the youngest of a family of eight children, four boys and four girls, who were the product of an English/Irish father and an half Aboriginal mother.³ The mixture of white and black parentage and the investigation of relationships between black and white were often themes in his writing. Poems like 'Inhabitant of the Third World' is an example, from a first person perspective, that deals with the treatment of a 'half caste Aboriginal'.⁴ This poem appeared in his first collection of poems *End of Dream-time* that was published in 1971 .

But when the day came and shadows departed
I found I was a world apart.
Soon they whispered to me no more,
Said I was different. Only the bravest
came to my shelter at night. I stood apart
from the kinsfolk of my mother.
I left the campfire, turned towards the city,
condemned by the blood of my father...⁵

Gilbert was only one quarter Aboriginal, but growing up he was treated by 'whites' as if he was a full-blooded Aboriginal. Regardless of the extent of his Aboriginal blood, Gilbert would always be an Aborigine to European Australia, and consequently lived on the edge of town in the Aboriginal community. Aborigines, however, also treated him with scepticism. He was caught between two worlds both of which did not acknowledge him as one of their own. The Aboriginal community may have treated him as different, but he was acceptable. His Aboriginal heritage featured prominently in his childhood as both parents remained with the Aboriginal people as Gilbert's mother was a member of the

* This article is a truncated version of a much larger essay based on the Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection held at the National Library of Australia, Canberra. If you would like a copy please contact the author.

1. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 1993.
2. Conversation with Kevin J. Gilbert (Hazel de Berg collection of tape recordings - transcript, 27 October 1971), p. 6543.
3. *Canberra Times*, 3 April 1993.
4. The term 'half-cast' is a description of a person of mixed Aboriginal and European blood. It is a generalisation and is sometimes considered derogatory, but is used as Gilbert himself often applied it.
5. K. Gilbert, *End of Dream-time*, Sydney, 1971, pp. 9-10.

Wiradjuri people⁶ – non-tribal Aborigines. Gilbert in an essay for the Judy Inglis Essay Competition recalls the importance of his tribal background.

... the time before time began, the world was a twilight world ... Aboriginal ancestors and the spirit people, they made the law, they carved the law on the rocks, the trees, the sacred Tjurungas. It was they who, at the request of Ba'aime, the great all spirit, prepared the land, the sky, the sea in preparation for the coming of the 'Kooree', the people ... The Aborigine is the sensitive black cockatoo that withers and dies in captivity.⁷

From his people Gilbert learnt about his origins, Wiradjuri Law and its tragic history. Headon⁸ writes that one memory for Gilbert was recurring:

As a child, I remember how my guts twisted with bitterness as I dug the skeletons of black women and children out of the sands of the Murrumbidgee and examined the squashed and bullet-ridden skulls.

At the age of seven in 1941, Kevin and his brothers and sisters were orphaned, and Gilbert and his sister, June, were juggled between relatives and the child welfare system. Headon states that Gilbert stayed for a time in the welfare institutions, including Erambie Mission near Cowra, but at the age of thirteen, after five years of formal schooling, he ran away.⁹ However in *Living Black*, Gilbert tells a different story about his time in institutions and his means of escape.

At school we were down on two counts. We were black and orphans. We used to fight like hell and it was nothing to see fourteen or fifteen white kids stoning us and shouting names at us. When we caught the little bastards on their own we sat them down on top of Bathurst burr bushes by way of apology. Of course their parents were outraged and so were the police. They gave us 'one more last chance'...

My thirteen-year-old sister and I swam across an irrigation channel to steal grapes. One day we had just filled the four-gallon bucket when the owner's hand came through the bush and grabbed me. My sister took off. He yelled, 'Come back here or I won't let your little brother go.' Now my brothers were pretty smart and they told me not only what some nasty man might try to do to girls but also how best I could discourage it. I wheeled my body around and kicked him in the nuts. It put him in hospital and me and my sister into the police cell and then into an orphanage.

I found out a little more about white society in there. They were big, fat, heavy gutted people in there: shouting, bullying, pigging. And I kept running away, trying to find my way back to the bush. Finally, my seventeen-year-old sister who was newly married and pregnant took us back to the bush.¹⁰

By his early teens he was back with his extended family on the Murie Lagoon, just outside Condobolin living a transient life fruit-picking, burr-cutting and 'rouse-abouting' in western N.S.W.¹¹

6. The Wiradjuri tribe is prominent in N.S.W. and their land extends from Orange down to the Victorian border across to and including some of the Canberra region (*Canberra Times*, 18 April 1993).

7. What do I, as an Aborigine, think about the old traditions and customs of my people, and what place do they have in present life and in the future? – Judy Inglis Essay Competition 1969 – The cherry pickers and other typescripts of poems and plays – Folder 1, Box 1, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969–1970, National Library of Australia.

8. *Canberra times*, 18 April 1993.

9. *ibid.*

10. K. Gilbert, *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert*, Ringwood, 1977, p. 242.

11. *Canberra Times*, 3 April 1993.

I remember watching my heavily pregnant sister laboriously climb the ladders to the top of the apple trees, a great calico bag swung on leather around her neck, to earn a few bob so we could eat and go to school. I remember seeing her in the fog-shrouded morning get up to go into the forest to cut the limbs off fallen pine trees for the sawmills, crying with the pain of her cracked and blistered hands and peeing on the blisters to toughen them so she could work harder. She got one shilling and threepence for a tree. She's still out there, raising kids, working voluntarily with our people, quietly helping where she can.¹²

In an interview with Caroline Jones of the ABC, he expressed what he learnt growing up as an Aborigine and what it means to be part of a larger extended 'family' of people and nature.

Right from our early beginnings we were taught of the sanctity of the total life around us. The Aboriginal way is that everything created is equal and sacred; that the soil, the clay, the rocks, are all sacred; and that all have a personality, a distinct personality.¹³

He later wrote a simple poem in his collection of children's poetry to communicate this feeling of family to all children.

Our Sacred Family
I'm a part of every living thing
and every living thing is part of me.
We're all created of this sacred earth
so everything's our sacred family.¹⁴

These childhood memories were most certainly the basis for his first play *The Cherry Pickers* which focused on seasonal workers, who were 'dependent on seasonal work, the cherry tree for their sustenance moving from one part of the country where they were picking grapes, to Young where they were picking cherries; it became a way of life, a refuge for the people and an involvement – it was a social gathering for them'.¹⁵

This play, written in 1968, was a significant turning point for Gilbert and Aboriginal literature. *The Cherry Pickers* was not only the first drama written in English by an Aborigine, but also the first Aboriginal play to be performed publicly by a wholly Aboriginal cast.¹⁶ It was performed in 1971 by the Nindethana Theatre in Fitzroy, Victoria, and later, in 1972, in Redfern, Sydney where Gilbert and the actors tried to use it to establish a National Aboriginal Theatre Foundation.¹⁷ This was never achieved and the play lay dormant until its revision by Gilbert in the late 1980s.

His mother's people had fiercely resisted the invasion of whites, but by the 1880s their numbers had dwindled, and in *Living Black* Gilbert recalls that only seven of the old people when he was growing up 'knew of the old things: the language, the burial places, the customs and the sacred spots'.¹⁸ This was where Gilbert obtained his knowledge of the Wiradjuri people, their heritage and their

12. Gilbert, op. cit., 1977, p. 243.

13. C. Jones, *The Search for Meaning: Book Two*, Crows Nest, 1990, p. 56.

14. K. Gilbert, *Child's Dreaming*, Melbourne, 1992, p. 62.

15. Conversation with Kevin Gilbert, op. cit., pp. 6557–8.

16. K. Gilbert, *The Cherry Pickers*, Canberra, 1988, p. 1.

17. *Age*, 17 April 1993.

18. Gilbert, op. cit., 1977.

mythology. Throughout his writings Aboriginal mythology is continually used affirming his ties to his people and Aboriginal people in general. There are hundreds of Aboriginal languages, but the understanding of mythology and generalised concepts is widespread. Gilbert often makes reference to 'Ba'aime' – the Aboriginal god or supreme spirit in poems like 'Nocturne'.

The stream ran through
the riverlets of night
swirling in the dawn
of pre-dawn light
mating in the mud.
My fathers sprang
from the dark
created by Ba'aime
who created all
of mortal clay
the rise and fall
of worlds of man
that ebb and flow
while my fathers walk
from dark to light
from death to day
and back to night¹⁹

Other generalised concepts include 'gubbah' or white man, 'baccadul' or tobacco, 'gin' or Aboriginal woman, 'goom' or alcohol, and 'boori' or baby. These general Aboriginal words or mythological references are used to identify these poems as uniquely Aboriginal, adding authenticity.

Gilbert's poems, plays and even his interviews with all types of Aborigines in *Living Black* express an authenticity that is characterised by Gilbert's inclusion of all words, Aboriginal and commonly used swear words. His writing reflects how Aborigines speak to him verbatim and in his work he deliberately misspells language to reinforce the accent or rough talk. He does not edit or correct the language demonstrating the true characteristics of Aborigines as if speaking with them face to face. The text of both *The Cherry Pickers*, and to a lesser extent, *Living Black* follow this adopted style. His poetry often contains misspoken or misspelt words that emphasise the speech patterns; however, the best example of this style is in the introduction to the poem 'My Father's Studio' in his collection entitled *People ARE Legends* published in 1978.

In questioning him the subject, the answer is usually terse, direct. 'Why? We bin always makim 'picher' on rock an' it all belong 'Business'.²⁰

Gilbert had to adapt and edit some of this verbatim when it came to publication. He was not pleased. In a letter written to Kevin Gilbert and his second wife Cora on the 12th of March 1976,²¹ John Hooker of Penguin Books, the would-be publisher of *Living Black*, sees this style as a problem. This verbatim style of the interviews is highlighted again in a later letter on the 7th of September that same year

19. Gilbert, op. cit., 1971, p. 40.

20. K. Gilbert, *People ARE Legends*, St Lucia, 1978, p. 64.

21. Letter to Kevin and Cora Gilbert from John Hooker dated 12 March 1976. Correspondence and Memorandum of agreements with publishers 1973-77 – Folder 7, Box 1, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969-1970, National Library of Australia.

with Hooker again suggesting that the language is too difficult and calling for changes to 'plain English'.²²

Gilbert continued working through his teenage years travelling with his extended family until they had reached Wilcannia, north east of Broken Hill, on the banks of the Darling River in New South Wales. He was still living within the boundaries of the land known to 'belong' to his people. By 1956, at the age of twenty-three, Gilbert married a white European woman who bore him two children.²³ The next event that occurred in his life would be remembered by every writer who wrote about Gilbert himself, his books, plays, or poems. If nothing is remembered or said about his work journalists and reviewers will always label him with the murder of his wife in 1957.

Gilbert describes the events leading up to his wife's death in his own chapter in *Living Black*.

Then I married a European girl. We had two children. There were fights and poverty and jealousy. It ultimately led to a brawl in the middle of the night alongside some country road. I was pissed, she was tired and despairing and grabbed a rifle...²⁴

Consequently he was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment at a prison in Dubbo for the murder.²⁵ The similarity between this crime and the circumstances of his parents' death are remarkable, but they do not go unnoticed by Gilbert who wrote a poem about the parental link entitled 'Think'.

My father was a white
He killed his wife
She was a half-caste
She was my mother

I am a half-caste
I killed a white
She was my wife

I stay on my
side of the coin
you on the other

When it spins
into the air
next time
who will come
out on top?²⁶

Appeals were made by Gilbert on entering prison and they continued for many years into his prison term, but he possessed little knowledge of the law, relied on lawyers, and was no doubt handicapped by his illiteracy.²⁷

Gilbert began his prison sentence at Dubbo Gaol, but throughout his fourteen and a half years, he served time at Long Bay, Bathurst, and Maitland Gaols,

22. Letter to Kevin Gilbert from John Hooker dated 7 September 1976, *ibid*.

23. *Canberra Times*, 3 April 1993.

24. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 243.

25. K. Gilbert, *Because a White Man'll Never do It*, Sydney, 1973, author summary.

26. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 1971, p. 36.

27. W.H. Wilde, J. Hooton, B. Andrews, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Melbourne, 1991, p. 292.

Morriset Psychiatric Hospital, and later at the 'infamous Grafton Gaol'.²⁸ He speaks of each in his chapter in *Living Black* emphasising the brutality of prison officers and the treatment and suppression of inmates' rights. As one of the 'intractables' at Grafton Gaol he relates his experience of prison officers to him as an Aborigine.

Grafton. 'So you're a smart black bastard are ya?' Well, we know how to handle black bastards up here – get your clothes off! You strip your clothes off. 'Turn around, bend over!' They look intently up your arse. Some of them look for so long I'm sure they're queer. 'Straighten up!' They look into your mouth, your hair, your ears then belt you across the mouth with the baton, jab you in the kidneys. One screw steps back when he's a bit winded to let another have a go – four or five beating, pulling, twisting at you at once.²⁹

In the late 1960s, Gilbert began schooling in prison. He learnt to read and write proficiently and he became an enthusiastic reader of all materials.³⁰ In an interview he recalls:

I had wanted to educate myself. There was a prison library where you could get three books a week, and I wanted to study some of these subjects which to me were new.³¹

Through the respective prison libraries he accessed state libraries' materials to study including theology, anthropology and literature,³² and thus added to the knowledge of his people and their history. By his interest in these materials he became 'educated' about the role of Aborigines in 'Australian society', attitudes, Aboriginal and white conflict, historical events and legislation. The knowledge gained would be put to use in his writing and his involvement in Aboriginal affairs.

Prison was also the starting point of Gilbert's literary and artistic endeavours. He began producing art works like Aboriginal motifs (on the pages of *End of Dream-Time*), paintings, and linocuts – pictures chiselled out of lino. These were of a high standard and a linocut exhibition was held after his release from prison. His move towards artistic means of expression were made possible by the encouragement received via the Robin Hood Committee,³³ a prison visitor system, established to assist the New South Wales Association of Mental Health. As part of this system, Gilbert was visited regularly and his talent supported.³⁴

During his prison term, Gilbert used his newly-acquired knowledge and skills to begin writing literature, mainly poems. The poetry written was compiled in a collection published as *End of Dream-Time* which coincided with his release in late 1971. His play *The Cherry Pickers* was also written whilst Gilbert was in prison and its first performance was just before his release. So, on his release Gilbert was already a known-playwright and artist, and he would soon become a celebrated poet. He would also become known for the diverse range of topical issues he addressed through his literature, and his own outspoken opinions as an activist.

From his extensive reading in prison and his involvement in artistic and literary expression, Gilbert gained confidence and the ability to question social issues. In

28. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1993.

29. Gilbert, op. cit., 1977, p. 244.

30. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1993.

31. *Australian*, 8 April 1993.

32. *Canberra Times*, 3 April 1993.

33. *Canberra Times*, 18 April 1993.

34. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1970.

prison he had expressed this newly-found confidence and curiosity through his art and writings, but on his release he developed these abilities into future goals and priorities.

When I came out of prison I was determined to even the inequalities. I decided to put my life to that end, and that I would work through writing, art and continual politicising³⁵

When Gilbert left prison he hoped to move forward and achieve progress for his people, but like anyone else who has spent time inside he found it difficult. Whatever he became involved in, or when he published any literature he was hit with discrimination – as an Aborigine but mostly because he had a prison record. Reviewers of Gilbert's later work often noted the expression of anger through his writing,³⁶ but nothing angered him more than people's mentality, often publishers, toward his past. Gilbert often felt people thought they could take advantage of him, as they stereotyped him because he had done time in prison. He expressed his anger at being labelled in a letter to Robert Sessions of Penguin Books, dated the 26th of February 1975, discussing the soon-to-be-published *Living Black*.

Ever since leaving jail, I have been under the 'he's an ex-crim, gotta watch that bastard' cloud. As a result and in a thousand insidious ways I have been made to pay by society by means of 'can't give him this job', 'can't pay much for that' dodges. As a result I am always subsisting on the poverty line. The car I am driving has 85,000 on the clock and is falling apart. Whatever else I don't have, a reliable car is vital to me and I have no way of getting one unless and until I begin to share in the national wealth like everybody else (except kooris) seems to be doing ... You get a little sick of it after a while, especially as all around me I see people whom, I might modestly suggest, have not a fraction of my talents earning great fat salaries and offering nothing in return for them ... I happen to be in the unique position, as well, of being the single only person in Australia, aboriginal or white, who can at this time bring off the proposed Penguin in the way we have been discussing. I think that you will by now understand why this is so. I don't know, Bob, whether you have ever had to swallow very much shit. Let me tell you that even when you've had a lot of practice at it, it doesn't taste any nicer.³⁷

After leaving prison, Gilbert became heavily involved in the Aboriginal community and affairs affecting his people. Gilbert rapidly became active in editing magazines such as *Alchuringa*, *Identity*, and *Black Australian News*,³⁸ often writing articles or making statements that illustrated his integration into the wider Aboriginal cause. In 'Of Black Patriots and a Black Intelligentsia', an article written in *Alchuringa* in early 1973, Gilbert expresses concern about Aborigines and power in Australian society.

In this society, blacks are powerless in the cocoon of poverty. It is a sad fact that no Aboriginal patriot who deserves the title can work within the system and retain his integrity ... Outside the system a black is powerless; inside it he must in some way become corrupted.³⁹

35. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1978.

36. Comments on Kevin Gilbert's work comes from professionals in the creative arts. Amy McGrath – Founder and Secretary of the Mews Playhouse and the Australian Playwright's Workshop. Kevin Gilbert Biography File. National Library of Australia.

37. Letter from Kevin Gilbert to Robert Sessions dated 26 March 1976. Correspondence and Memorandum of agreements with publishers 1973–77 – Folder 7, Box 1, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969–1970. National Library of Australia.

38. *Age*, 17 April 1993.

39. Kevin Gilbert, 'Of Black Patriots and Black Intelligentsia', *Alchuringa*, vol. 1, no. 14, 1973, p. 5.

Aboriginals' right to land and the struggle to obtain recognition and compensation for land are probably Gilbert's most prominent themes. This is fitting due to the connections all Aborigines feel towards their land. The Aboriginal culture and identity centre on the role of the land and nature in their traditions, customs and history. As an Aboriginal writer, Gilbert expressed this throughout his work, even in his own epitaph.

Weep not for me for Death is
but the vehicle that unites my soul
with the Creative Essence, God.
My Spiritual Being, my love, is
still with you, wherever you are
until forever.
You will find me in quiet moments
in the trees, amidst the rocks,
the cloud and beams of sunshine
indeed, everywhere for I, too, am
a part of the total essence of
creation that radiates everywhere
about you, eternally
Life, after all, is just a
passing phase.⁴⁰

Aborigines are connected to the land. It was where their ancestors lived and they felt a sense of loss when they were dispossessed of their land with the coming of white colonisation. The views Gilbert expresses, through his writing and through the statements of ordinary Aborigines in *Living Black*, emphasise this turning point for the Aboriginal people in Australian history. Gilbert often sees this dispossession of the land as the basis for the Aboriginal problems today – Aboriginal people have suffered and still suffer as the land plays a prominent role in their total identity as a people.

No discussion about Aboriginal affairs can take place without first establishing the fundamentals: land and compensation as a point of justice. To give black people in all states a sense of belonging once again; the restoration of a land base that affirms that the people have a place, a value in this country ... such things are at the heart of a solution to the ills of Aboriginal Australia.⁴¹

The images of the land, the Aboriginal people, and their colour connections with the land are also expressed in Gilbert's poem 'The Blackside'.

It's good to be the Blackside
fitting in with nature's plan
where she selected colour
for this masterpiece of land
and blended it superbly
with strokes of loving care
for each country has its colour
stark and strong and naked, bare.

40. *Canberra Times*, 18 April 1993.

41. Draft of Purfleet Special Works Projects Report no. 4, July 1976, p. 329. *Living Black Part II* – Filder 5, Box 1, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969–1970. National Library of Australia.

It's good to be
the Blackside
when there's justice on our side
empowered by the spirit
and a firm and humble pride
in being on the Blackside
with nature and her might
the Blackside is the rightside
for this land: the colour's right.⁴²

Recognition by white Australians that Aborigines have claims on the land is another issue that Gilbert highlights constantly. By failing to recognise these claims the government is denying the significance of Aboriginal history and culture, and ultimately the people. Gilbert stresses that this is a denial of Aborigines' human rights as part of a democracy, and is discriminatory.

On the land question, the government denies that the Aborigine has any identification or any cultural significance in areas where he claims the land. It claims we have no boundaries, and indeed the Aborigine has not – according to European concepts. But I believe that every thinking person must recognise that the original inhabitants certainly had prior claim to the land, that these people are entitled to their place in Australia. They're entitled to see the European at last try to live up to the concepts, or at least the professed ideologies, of justice, democracy and human welfare.⁴³

The young Aborigine faces no social requirements, no 'initiation'. He is expected to shape up to nothing – and that is what he does. His life, therefore, is a constant search for self-indulgence, the pleasures of the moment, the avoidance of anything unpleasant from whatever source. He is total irresponsible.⁴⁴

In 1973 Gilbert established the Kalari Aboriginal Art Gallery which was an experiment in the training of young Aboriginal artists.⁴⁵ He started it as an art school and commented that he hoped it would 'revive the creative heart of his race'.⁴⁶ Aboriginal art was a means of expression for Gilbert, but he also addressed the art of his people as a topic of his poetry. As in Gilbert's other work he highlights the influence of white society on the realm of Aborigines. Poems like 'The Spirit of Progress' describes and criticises the emerging commercialism of Aboriginal art forms.

Abos!
Photos!
Buy a spear
Buy a boomerang!
Bark art here!
How much?
Pay him!
A dollar do?
Twenty cents! He

42. K. Gilbert, *The Blackside: People Are Legends and Other Poems*, cited in *Age*, 17 April 1978.

43. C. Tatz, *Black Viewpoints: the Aboriginal Experience*, (Race and Aboriginal Studies, no. 1), Brookvale, 1975, pp. 8–9.

44. Draft of Purfleet Special Works Projects Report no. 4, July 1976, op. cit., Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969–1970. National Library of Australia.

45. W.H. Wilde, J. Hooton, B. Andrews, op. cit., 1991, p. 293.

46. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 1973.

don't eat like you
he's an Abo
don't need much
wastes it all
on wine and such!
Don't need tucker
it's all in bush
goanna, grubs and
nardoo mush!
Dirty Abo!⁴⁷

But of course Gilbert poems are not simple exposes of a specific topic with Gilbert adopting the sarcasm he associates with white images of Aborigines. He addresses the commercialisation of Aboriginal art for profit by whites, and to a lesser extent by Aborigines, whilst also attacking the whiteman's view of Aborigines and their ability to manipulate his people and culture. Apart from the cultural degradation he associates with Aboriginal art, he also considers the beauty and cultural significance of his people's art. The poem 'Wahlo Deserts Soak' deals with the mythology and symbolism present in the art, giving meaning to images, cultural symbols and history. An example within the poem is the snake which is 'directly representative of life and death, fertility and drought, as the physical aspects of fertility was not accredited to any action of mere man'.⁴⁸ Eventually Gilbert's interest in Aboriginal art dwindled as he continued to write and became increasingly involved in Aboriginal political activism.

In the Bicentennial year, which celebrated 200 years of white European settlement in Australia, Gilbert, because of his strong views and determination, became the spokesman for Australian Aborigines in Canberra and was made chairman of the Treaty '88 campaign.⁴⁹ In an interview as chairman he discussed the direction and variety of subjects that his literature addressed.

Most of my writing is based on actuality of Aborigines living in the South Land and most is based on their experiences and to the experiences I feel as an Aboriginal. The topics include personal anecdotes about life on missions, government reserves, cattle stations and fringe dwellings to implications of various Aboriginal Ordinances, Acts and official government policies.⁵⁰

The treaty campaign was a protest against white Australia and the dispossession of Aborigines and their land. Throughout his life Gilbert focused heavily on land rights, its history, and the relationship between the land and the Aboriginal people in his writing, but the bicentennial celebrations would see the climax of this struggle. His last political action dated March 3, 1993 was concerned with land rights: Gilbert served a Notice of Trespass on all the embassies in Canberra because they had not received permission to be there from the Aboriginal people, the rightful owners of the land.⁵¹

47. Gilbert, op. cit., 1971, p. 30.

48. Draft of Wahlo Desert Soak and comments. The *Cherry Pickers* and other typescripts of poems and plays – Folder 1, Box 1, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969–1970. National Library of Australia.

49. S. Coleman, 'Ethno-centric – interview with Kevin Gilbert: Chairman Treaty '88', *Ethnic Spotlight*, vol. 12, 1987, p. 17.

50. *ibid.*, p. 17.

51. K. Gilbert, *Bicentennial Boycott*. Pamphlet Collection, Australian Institute of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Rejecting his oppressors was important to Gilbert and he projected these thoughts in his writing by attacking the white man. Gilbert criticised white Australia directly in poems like 'Turn Back the Fold' and 'Grandfather Koori' questioning the society's need to interfere with his people and their culture. His poem 'Aboriginal Query' brings together all his thoughts about white society and he confronts whites with his reasons for their exploitation of Aborigines.

What is it you want
Whiteman?
What do you need from me?
You have taken my life
My culture
My dreams
You have leached the substance
Of love from my being
You have leached the substance
Of race from my loins
Why do you persist?...
What do you seek?
Why do you destroy me
Whiteman?
Why do you destroy that
Which you cannot hope to understand ...⁵²

This poem demonstrates the passion and authority that Gilbert exerts as a poet and as an Aborigine struggling to understand why his people have been treated like second class citizens. This treatment of Aborigines by white Australia is, to Gilbert, unforgivable as it is considered the root cause of the Aboriginal situation in Australia today. Gilbert suggests that people are a product of their social and racial history and sees contemporary White Australia as the current generation of English wanting to maintain control. English colonisation is a prominent theme in Gilbert's literature and always related to Aboriginal cultural loss and mistreatment. His attacks on England are illustrated in poems like 'The First Ship', 'When Cook Came', and 'Visiting Royalty, 1977', and the conflict of the 'Endeavour' and the 'primitive people' is also the major focus of an essay written for the Judy Inglis Essay Competition in 1969.⁵³ However, his most successful attack, in terms of publicity, on the colonising power came when Gilbert was charged in 1974 for sending a letter to Queen Elizabeth threatening to kill her.⁵⁴ He was eventually exonerated but he had achieved notoriety for Australian Aborigines and highlighted the significance of his people's cause to both black and white Australia.

Gilbert could be equally critical and forthright about his own people. He depicts Aborigines as they are without superficial layers. In his writings his people are characterised as drunkards, social security dependents, poverty-stricken, and worthless, but these stereotypes are never portrayed without identifying their cause. Gilbert states that 'the once free, proud, nomadic hunter has become a caricature

52. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 1978, p. 48.

53. What do I, as an Aboriginal, think about the old traditions and customs of my people, and what place do they have in present life and in the future?, *op. cit.*, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969-1970. National Library of Australia.

54. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1974.

of man and his humour: a cartoon quip or a wretched drunk or grovelling beggar'.⁵⁵ White society and historical circumstance is always blamed for the consistently negative images of Australian Aborigines. Poems like 'The Black Drunkard', and 'Regrets' address alcoholism and suggest it is used by Aborigines to combat their being born black in a society that values white skin. 'Song of the Brolga' and 'Trying to Save Joan Ella' are also poems that address the negative images white Australia attributes to Aborigines. In the latter poem, Gilbert confronts the generalised views of his people.

She was all we really had –
wish to God I'd never reared her
way out here where blacks are bad!
If the bloody gin had ridden
faster through the night –
the whole lot are bad and useless,
can't be trusted out of sight!⁵⁶

Gilbert's concerns lie with his people who may begin to believe and adopt the images that whites concentrate on. In *Living Black* he states that he realises that the white population of Australia devalues Aboriginal life, religion, culture and personality, and he underlines this as the cause of modern Aboriginal feelings of shame.

Whites since colonial days have regarded Aborigines as sub-human and Aborigines, too, doubting the humanity of whites, doubt their own capacity for kindness, warmth and natural regard.⁵⁷

For this and other reasons, Gilbert adopts a plan of attack for his people through his writing. In his poetry, he emphasises cultural pride and unity, wanting Aborigines to overcome images, discrimination and historical oppression and grasp justice for themselves. His poems 'The Gurindji', 'Look, Koori', and 'Roll of Drums' all stress the need for Aborigines to continue to fight for justice otherwise they will always remain unrecognised.

Die as a man if die you must
Die as a man born free
It's better to die than to live a life
As gutless scum, Koori.⁵⁸

Back in time: throughout history
Justice, deprived of a strong voice slowly
Inexorably dies
And the seeker of justice dies with it
Or silently becomes a slave.⁵⁹

In other poems including 'Roll of Drums' and 'The Flowering ...', Gilbert is adamant about all Aborigines standing up and fighting injustice and discrimination. 'Roll of the Drums' is the best example of his encouragement of his people and his determination to overcome the inequality that they face.

55. What did I, as an Aboriginal, think about the old traditions and customs of my people, and what place do they have in present life and in the future?, op. cit., Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969-1970. National Library of Australia.

56. Gilbert, op. cit., 1971, p. 28.

57. Gilbert, op. cit., 1977, p. 268.

58. Gilbert, op. cit., 1978, p. 52.

59. Gilbert, *ibid.*, p. 46.

Let loud and long discordant truth
Reverberate castle wall
And humbler den, abode of men
Who slipped yet hide their fall
Scream out wail out screech loudly
'Injustice gags the truth'
And points the finger sternly
So life and lives find truth
Drum drum drum
Beat on discordant
Though repercussions come
'Tis best to die
Unjustly
A MAN
Not silenced scum.⁶⁰

This poem raises one of the most important aspects of Gilbert's literary work – his blunt depiction of the truth. In his poem 'Anthem: The Blessed Land', the line 'Truth shall be our sword' accurately describes the meaning and purpose of truth to Gilbert. Gilbert used the truth, about Aborigines and the atrocities of white Australia, in all his writing as a weapon to increase the impact of the messages presented. The truth may have offended or hurt some but it was the best means of making all Australians, particularly whites, aware of the position of Aborigines in Australian society. Gilbert was aware of the strength of his truth-telling and used it specifically to create an effect or gain a reaction to him as a voice of his people.

Write beauty
sweet and gentle things
Don't write a morbid line
Never never bitter be...
Folk are somewhat like cows
They'll moo into a milking pail
Where hay is sweet and thick;
But lift the goad, upon them load
the TRUTH
then all cows kick!⁶¹

Much of his writing is essentially personal and this is evident in his means of inspiration.

Usually a poem is sparked off by a feeling, it may be something in a news item concerning social conditions of the Aboriginal people and when I get this feeling I might think of a line, the first line, or some emotional reaction, and then I'll get a pen, even in the middle of the night ...⁶²

Kevin Gilbert experienced the life of the people he depicted in his writings. He wrote about what he encountered and what he knew as part of the Aboriginal race or 'family', in contact and often in conflict with white society. His life and writings overlapped as he became devoted to the Aboriginal cause. His literary themes therefore reflected not only his development as a writer, but also illustrated

60. K.J. Gilbert, 'Roll of Drums', *Labor News from 326 Sturt Street*, vol. 10, 1975, p. 11.

61. K. Gilbert, *Once Upon a Poem*, (unmodified version), *The cherry pickers and other typescripts of poems and plays – Folder 1, Box 1, Kevin Gilbert Manuscript Collection 1969–70, National Library of Australia.*

62. *Conversation with Kevin Gilbert*, op. cit., pp. 6560–61.

the continual development of Australian Aborigines. Gilbert was more than just a writer, he was a spokesman and voice for Aboriginal self-determination and he represented strength and purpose to a people who were marred by history. He was critical of and understood both black and white Australia, and consistently contributed to an awareness of Aboriginal needs through his work and involvement in Aboriginal affairs. His combination of anger, truth and purpose enabled him to accomplish much for his people and Australia as a nation of many cultures. Gilbert's ability to address and criticise both cultures from an Aboriginal and a literary viewpoint made him one of Australia's greatest contributor to history and literature.

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