

Snake Tales

A review of Roberta Sykes' book *Snake Cradle*

By Gary Foley

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The second instalment of Dr. Roberta Sykes' autobiographical trilogy has generated a great deal of controversy since publication. The author is facing attack on at least two fronts, with the Townsville- based Birri-gubba Juru-Bindal clan challenging her 'Aboriginality' and the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service's respected long term CEO, Ms Naomi Mayers, has accused Sykes of defaming the AMS and exaggerating the role that Sykes played in its historical development. These are issues I do not intend to explore in any detail in this short review of *Snake Cradle*. This is partly because all of the people involved in the dispute are close friends of mine except Sykes, whom I nevertheless regard as a friend, albeit not close. Instead I wish to focus on the book and what it has revealed to me about its author, and also whether or not it is an important contribution to the Koori political history of an era that until now has not been written about in any great detail.

I first met Roberta Sykes (or Bobbi as I knew her then) some time in 1969-70, during the dramatic political upheaval in Redfern that ultimately led to the Aboriginal Embassy protest two years later. My first impressions of her were that she seemed aloof (or shy), remote and, in a strange way, there was a certain vulnerability about her. I was aware only that she lived at Kings Cross, had come from Townsville, was an aspiring journalist and was keen to be involved in the then embryonic Redfern radical Koori political scene.

Because we in Redfern were always pleased to welcome blacks who had ability into our scene, Sykes became a member of the group that went on to organise the most successful Koori political action in modern history. In the midst of the current controversy regarding her identity, it ought to be remembered that Roberta Sykes made a legitimate and significant contribution to the Koori political struggle during the early 1970s. This included being arrested with me at the first of the police riots at the Aboriginal "Embassy" on July 20 1972. Whether or not she is of Aboriginal blood heritage is irrelevant to the question of the legitimacy of her contribution to the Koori political struggle. It should be recalled that to be involved in the Koori land rights struggle at that time was to invite vilification, harassment and political surveillance, and few had the courage to be part of the

vanguard. Sykes at least was there, which is more than can be said of many today who claim to have been.

The horrific events described in Sykes first book, *Snake Cradle*, have helped us to understand about her reserved manner toward those who met her in Redfern in those days. I now have a better grasp of many aspects of my often turbulent political relationship with her in those days, although like Naomi Mayers, I question many of her memories and perceptions from then. Having been a member of the Board of Directors of the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service for ten years in the 1970s, I believe that in *Snake Dreaming* Sykes has exaggerated the role that she played in its creation and early development. And there are too many minor factual inaccuracies scattered throughout the book, like on page 209 where she hears about the first Aboriginal delegation to China and she is upset at the thought of Chicka Dixon, Cheryl Buchanan and myself enjoying China whilst Sykes is alone in England. The only trouble with that anecdote is that I was not on that China trip. I lead the second delegation to China a full 18 months after Chick and Cheryl went.

These are minor factual errors, but they do highlight a significant weakness in this book. In the first book, *Snake Cradle*, there is much more passion and feeling in the writing, no doubt because of the intensely personal, traumatic nature of the material. This enabled the first book to win the Age Book of the Year Award, and the Kibble Literary Award for women writers. But in *Snake Dreaming* the writing lacks a similar strength and passion. Instead it reads too much like a travelogue interspersed with references in the 'famous people I have met and fallen out with' genre. This is a great pity because the importance of this book to me rests with the fact that it is the first time we have seen a first-hand account of the events leading up to the Aboriginal "Embassy" demonstrations of 1972.

The perplexing thing about Sykes' writing is that while she stands at the juncture of one of the most exciting, inspirational and historically important events in Koori political history, the reader does not get any real sense of the significance of the occasion. Nor does she try to explain the fascinating hodgepodge of ideological theories and ideas that were behind the political philosophy that emerged from the "Embassy". For example, she makes a couple of passing references to Denis Walker's Black Panther Party, but doesn't go into how an idea that originally germinated in the mind of Malcolm X in Harlem, was developed by Huey P. Newtons Black Panthers in California, then ultimately found life in Aboriginal

Redfern as the first shop-front, free legal aid centre in Australia. The fact that Sykes was not able to capture the exciting, dynamic and revolutionary feeling of the time made this book less passionate than the first which, to my mind, is disappointing .

The book could have been so much stronger, both as a personal and political statement about an era that has been all but ignored by non-Koori historians. That is why books by the people who were involved in the period known to Koori political activists as 'The Decade of Uprising', from 1964 – 74, are an antidote for the neglect of white historians. I hope that Snake Dreaming does provoke those who object to it to consider writing their own versions of the same era. In that way maybe something constructive and historically important might come out of the current controversies surrounding this book.