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Kwementyaye Perrurle Perkins: a personal memoir

This memoir recounts my personal association with Kwementyaye (Kumantjaj), better known to most outside his family as Charles Perkins, from the 1930s to 2000. Before he was made human through initiation ceremonies in the Arrernte way, Charles and I were both born in the Native Institution, the Bungalow Telegraph Station, in Alice Springs, where his ashes were scattered. In 1942 our paths diverted: he went to live in Alice Springs, where his mother Hettie Perkins (Senior) worked for the military and I was evacuated away from the expected Japanese invasion to a wartime refugee camp at Mulgoa, New South Wales.

While working in military kitchens, Hettie and her younger children lived in overcrowded accommodation; Charlie was left to the devices of his young peers who came under the notice of the townsfolk and the military and civil police. The Reverend Percy McDonald Smith took Charlie under his care first at St John's and then the St Francis Anglican home for boys of mixed Aboriginal and other descent in Semaphore South, Adelaide.

Meanwhile, I stayed at Mulgoa while my mother Eileen went to work in Sydney under the wartime Aboriginal employment program. She worked as a cook and occasionally we spent time together. While in Sydney my mother had another child and with them I set off to return to Alice Springs. *En route* we were prevented from returning due to the martial law in force. The military authorities placed us in an aliens' camp at Balaclava in South Australia until the Pacific War ended. My mother was given the opportunity to place me under the care of Rev. Smith. They both knew that there were no proper schools in Alice Springs for half-castes and my mother took up the offer of schooling in Adelaide. Like Hettie Perkins, my mother consented to leave me at the St Francis boys' home. So Charlie Perkins, who was just two years older, and I together became inmates at the St Francis home.

Charlie was outstanding in singing and this is one of my earliest memories of him, although he never made much of an impression upon me until the numbers at St Francis grew in 1950. The Commonwealth government introduced endowment and extended this to parents of half-castes. We in St Francis drew Commonwealth support because of that and also because we were Northern Territory wards being educated outside the Northern Territory. These payments also enabled us to play sport and some of us began to attend high school, whereas before that the Australian Board of Missions had to pay. At St Francis the Anglican Church leased land to a local soccer team, Port Thistle. Charlie played for the senior colts and I played for the junior team. We became much closer. I always cleaned Charlie's football boots after milking the cows on Saturday mornings. He gave me a small payment in kind and I tracked him to watch his games. He soon gravitated into the first team. He quickly became a soccer star and was

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in demand among many of the ethnic teams such as International, a mixed ethnic team, and Budapest, the Hungarian team. I left for work in the country and Charlie went overseas to play for Bishop Auckland near Newcastle in England.

We teamed up again in 1967 when I came back to Adelaide to play Australian Rules and Charlie had returned from England. I switched to soccer and signed for the Croatia club, where Charlie was captain-coach. Together we played in the first team. Charlie was selected in the South Australia team with John Moriarty, another former St Francis boy who played with Juventus, and the three of us were inseparable. We shared our social gatherings and travels to the country, and I was with Charlie on the night he met his future wife, Eileen, at the Hendon pub.

Charlie worked for the South Australian Railways and enjoyed the power that came from trade union membership. He talked of his impression of learning how to deal with Railways bosses, arguing for employment conditions for his workmates. At the very same time we were involved with the Aboriginal Progress Association with other Aborigines and South Australians with Labor Party connections. There were Malcolm and Aileen Cooper, Vince Copley, John Moriarty, Maude and George Tongery, Geoff and Nancy Barnes, Charlie and myself. We sought emancipation from South Australia's race legislation. We held meetings with Don Dunstan (later the Premier) and Cameron (later Justice) Stewart. These meetings focused on, first, a repeal of exemptions under the Aboriginal legislation and, second, Aboriginal human rights. Then Charlie entered national politics too.

In 1958 he had drawn the criticism of Dr Charles Duguid, the Presbyterian missionary of Ernabella and an Adelaide ear, nose and throat specialist. Duguid had created the Aborigines Advancement League in South Australia and had helped establish the Colebrook Girls Home for girls of mixed Aboriginal descent from the northern area of South Australia. Duguid's criticism focused on Charlie's election in Brisbane to a national body called the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines. Duguid believed he was more qualified than Charlie, who found a sense of power in belonging to this body and wouldn't allow himself to be diverted by Duguid's views. Soon I left for England and soccer and he left for Sydney to get married, take up matriculation studies and emerge as the most profound Aboriginal social and civil rights thinker of his era.

When I returned from England Charlie was studying Arts at Sydney University and playing football for Bankstown. He went on to conduct the freedom ride and become the first Aboriginal university graduate. His achievements influenced me, encouraging me to follow in his academic footsteps. He, however, achieved much more. He played an important role in securing a 'Yes' vote at the 1967 referendum on the Commonwealth's powers in Aboriginal affairs; he created the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney; and then he joined the Commonwealth Public Service, but not before conducting a world tour to study race questions overseas. While away he met important British and American Black leaders and maintained his contacts with them.

Charlie led the fight to change white society. He conflicted notoriously with government ministers, and was so determined he was not afraid to defy them. It was that which caused his downfall. Under the Hawke government he humiliated the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Jerry Hand, by encouraging Aborigines to revolt in 1988. As

Prime Minister, Hawke was forced to side with Perkins. This began a conspiracy among Aboriginal bureaucrats. Charlie never forgave those involved and he retreated inwardly before returning to central Australia, where he went through traditional initiation ceremonies. He created the Arrernte Council and ran successfully for further public office, this time as a member of the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. He had earlier written an autobiography, *A bastard like me*, but in 1990 was also the biographical subject of serious scholarship in Dr Peter Read's *Charles Perkins: a biography*. Charlie received an honorary doctorate from the University of Western Sydney in 1999 and many of his publications were his public speeches on Aboriginal affairs. Thousands of Australians mourned his passing, but mostly Aborigines will mourn and remember him.

Dr Gordon Briscoe
Historical Studies
Research School of Social Sciences
Australian National University

Charles Perkins: 'no longer around to provoke, irritate, and inspire us all'

I met Charlie Perkins on the Freedom Ride. We were both students at the University of Sydney in the mid-1960s; I was 19 and white, he was 29 and Aboriginal. With other students we had in common the desire to draw attention to racial discrimination in New South Wales, specifically in the country towns visited by the Freedom Ride – Wellington, Gulargambone, Walgett, Moree, Boggabilla, Lismore, Bowraville and Kempsey. Charlie and 28 white students travelled for two weeks in February 1965 on a bus tour subsequently dubbed the 'Freedom Ride', protesting against discrimination in various ways, such as holding up placards outside pools and RSL clubs. The high levels of hostility to us in some of the towns we visited – especially Walgett, Moree, and Bowraville – drew national and international media attention to our protests.

The Freedom Ride was the product of the ideas, actions, and commitments of many people, especially the students on the bus itself, and also their supporters in Sydney and in the towns visited. Its success in making connections with Aboriginal activists in those towns, and in drawing public attention to the high levels of racial discrimination and hostility still prevalent in New South Wales at that time, was, however, very largely due to Charlie's own outspoken presence. Without him, the Freedom Ride would have been seen as, and would have been, a bunch of white students without much direct knowledge or understanding of the issues. With him, we could meet Aboriginal people in the towns, extend our own understanding, and above all capture the interest of the media. All of us, I think, recognised Charlie's pivotal role, and despite some disagreements amongst us over tactics from time to time, we remained a remarkably cohesive group.

That political action in February 1965 affected many people's lives – Charlie's, ours, and those of many others, including young Aboriginal people in the 'Freedom Ride' towns. The students, black and white, went on with our lives in various ways, many going on to develop our interest in Aboriginal rights and issues as teachers, lawyers, academics, journalists, writers, administrators, and public servants. Most important of all, however, was the role of the Freedom Ride in making Charlie into a national leader of Aboriginal people for the following 35 years. From that time, he was rarely out of the public eye. After a period as manager of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney, he began his long career as a public servant when he became a research officer at the new federal Office of Aboriginal Affairs in 1969. He helped create the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee in 1972, and became chair of the newly created Aboriginal Development Commission in 1980 and Secretary to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1984. Although a public servant, he was never quiet and discreet, publicly criticising superior departmental officers and ministers when he thought criticism

was warranted. Even after he ceased his career as a public servant in 1989, he continued to speak publicly on Aboriginal issues, becoming chair of the Arrente Council of Central Australia (1991-94) and deputy chair of ATSIC.

Charles Perkins had a full and active life fighting for Aboriginal rights, and with his passing we have lost one of the most courageous and forthright Aboriginal activists this country has so far seen. I am glad to have known him, and very sad that he is no longer around to provoke, irritate, and inspire us all.

Ann Curthoys
Manning Clark Professor of Australian History
School of Humanities
Australian National University

The imprimatur of Charles Perkins on *Aboriginal History*

Perhaps more than anyone else in 200 years, Charles Perkins changed the ways other Australians thought about Aboriginal people and the way Aboriginal people perceived themselves. Certainly when Peter Corris and I discussed founding a journal of Aboriginal history in the early to mid-1960s it was difficult to arouse interest. Historians were largely apathetic and anthropologists actually opposed the idea. One senior anthropologist told me that such a journal would raise expectations in the community at large and eventually backfire against Aborigines who were not able to live up to these expectations. Certainly those who had the best interests of the Aboriginal people at heart and who influenced official policy – such as Paul Hasluck, WH Stanner and HC Coombs – were committed to an assimilation policy, and much Aboriginal policy reflected the mistaken conclusions of the Porteus intelligence tests and the negative paternalism of the missions. Indeed the lack of a sense of self-direction in many Aboriginal communities was so frustrating that a Maori activist friend, afterwards the Hon. Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, a minister in the New Zealand government 1972-75, who had been trained as a social worker, told me that she gave up in despair any attempts to get the Aboriginal groups she met with to act for themselves in matters of social justice.

After Charles Perkins organised the freedom rides around western New South Wales towns in 1965 the climate gradually changed. Even before this, organisations such as Abschol were beginning to make a difference. In 1965 I was elected chairman of the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC) of the ACT, an organisation supported by the churches and service clubs to promote the interests of the Aboriginal people. From 1965 to 1968 we had a very active committee providing speakers and promoting books, school essays and an annual bark painting exhibition on National Aborigines Day in July. In 1968 the climate had so changed that we felt that it was no longer appropriate that a committee such as NADOC should be run by European Australians and we made arrangements to hand over the running of National Aborigines Day in Canberra to the newly formed Aboriginal group, the Kanangra Society.

Peter Corris and I had never given up the idea of Aboriginal history and after Peter removed to Sydney I had further talks with Bob Reece who had joined the Department of Pacific History. Nevertheless, as I chaired a committee that was voting itself out of office in favour of Aboriginal leadership and direction, I did wonder about the appropriateness of founding a journal of Aboriginal history. The idea of the journal was therefore very much in the background when I went down to Sydney to see Charles Perkins. I told him that our NADOC committee was disbanding but that there was a lot of goodwill and that I would like to know what we could do to help the Aboriginal

cause. After some general discussion which provided no solution he suddenly said to my surprise 'You're a historian aren't you, do something about Aboriginal history'.

Here was the imprimatur enabling us to revive the idea of Aboriginal history. Charles Perkins had given the idea his blessing without any prompting or prior knowledge. We had a mandate to go ahead. The idea was to model the new journal on *The Journal of Pacific History* of which I was an editor. Funding was the major problem but Peter Grimshaw, then Business Manager of the Joint Schools, proved a valuable ally and convinced the Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies to make a grant available. Bob Reece and I appointed ourselves editors and wrote to all those we thought would support the venture. By then the climate had so changed, following the Perkins era, that there was almost complete support from the historians and anthropologists canvassed. Initially we planned to confine the journal to historians but with Peter Corris being in Sydney, Bob and I invited Diane Barwick to be an editor and we also agreed to make the journal interdisciplinary. Diane, who was to become principal editor, brought with her a notable band of female scholars affectionately known as the 'sisterhood' and provided a colophon of excellence to accompany Charles Perkins' imprimatur.

Niel Gunson
Pacific and Asian History Division
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
Australian National University