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Walking in two worlds

By Noel Pearson
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TWO of my maternal grandfathers, each of whom I would call Ngaji in our Kuku Yalanji language, and great-uncle in English, served in the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East in World War I.

Brothers Norman (1888-1970) and Charlie (1890-1966) Baird were fathered by a Scotsman, Robert Baird, a tin miner, pastoralist and one-time mayor of Cooktown. Unlike most white men who fathered Aboriginal children, Robert looked after his two sons, who grew up at China Camp on the Bloomfield River, north of the Daintree. The brothers therefore received an English education as well as a Kuku Yalanji education in the bush.

Charlie enlisted and left for Egypt in 1915. Norman enlisted in 1917 and served in France. He returned to Bloomfield and is probably the most illustrious Yalanji person in the colonial history of this people.

The brothers were two of an estimated 300 indigenous servicemen during World War I.

The Anzac tradition has gained an increased devotion among contemporary Australians, but it is a tradition from which the country's indigenous people feel estranged. I do not know of any of Norman Baird's descendants who have attended an Anzac Day memorial. Norman's two elderly daughters, Polly Fisher, 76, and Annie Kulka, 78, still live at Mossman and have numerous children and grandchildren. At this week's launch of Kathleen Denigan's biography of Norman Baird, A Spark Within, my brother Gerhardt, as chief executive of Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, presented replicas of Norman's war service medals to his daughters. Norman's descendants are proud of him.

However, there is an inconsistency between non-indigenous Australians urging Aboriginal Australians to "put history behind you" and that famous lapidary reminder "lest we forget". Reconciliation raises the challenge of how the country deals with its histories and accommodates its traditions. One sign that reconciliation has begun will be the inclusion of Norman's descendants in the Anzac rituals.

Despite his national service, like other indigenous servicemen, Norman returned to a country that did not accord him the same rights as his fellows. Although as a young man he had remained outside the purview of the Queensland legislation that provided for the removal of Aborigines from their families and their homelands and their confinement to missions and settlements, in his post-war life he was under constant threat of removal to that notorious destination, Palm Island.

Norman resisted the removal of Yalanji people from their homelands. He was considered a troublemaker and vigorous efforts were made to remove him. He often had to elude the authorities when attempts were made to force his family's removal from Bloomfield. One of his sons, Joseph, was removed to Yarrabah Mission near Cairns at the age of 10. Norman was not to see him again for another 10 years, when he applied to the authorities to allow Joseph to visit him. Despite this treatment, Joseph later served his country in World WarII, as his father did.

In 1935 the deputy chief protector of Aborigines in Queensland sent an "order for the removal from Cooktown to Yarrabah of a half-caste Aboriginal named Norman Baird" to the minister for signature. In the removal order, the deputy chief protector mentioned allegations that Baird had threatened other Aborigines. But the first and main reason given in the order was that Baird "exercises a considerable amount of control over the natives in the district. His control, however, is not conducive to the other natives' welfare as he compels them to support him and also to give warning of the approach of the police at any time in order that any native sought by the police can be allowed to escape. He has also interfered with the employment of Aboriginals on fishing vessels." The removal order included a caution that "this half-caste is particularly intelligent".

It is clear from his long struggle with the authorities that Norman felt his war service entitled him to respect as a citizen and he felt his people were treated unjustly.

Despite this, during World War II he enlisted to serve the country, a country in which his son had been taken from him against his wishes.

Norman's agitation of the authorities through the course of his life caused me to reflect on this fact: it is not possible for people who serve in national wars to not develop a sense of entitlement to proper citizenship. No greater commitment can people show to their nation than service in the armed forces. I am at one with Samuel Johnson, who famously averred: "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier."

As well as his steadfast advocacy for the needs of his people and his resistance to their maltreatment, Norman Baird was concerned about the survival of the language and culture of his Yalanji people. He compiled the first word list of Kuku Yalanji and translated many hymns and bible stories. A linguist who worked with Norman, Lynette Oates, remarked that he was "the only Aborigine I have spoken with who was fully bicultural and fully bilingual".

Oates's formulation "fully bicultural and fully bilingual" is precisely the vision that we have as the objective of our Cape York reform agenda. It is about the ability to walk in two worlds.

To prosper, Aboriginal Australians will have to be integrated in the national and global economies. But we also want to remain distinctly Aboriginal and retain the connection with ancestral lands.

I have introduced the concept of orbits as a solution to the problem of how we can avoid economic integration becoming a one-way ticket for the young away from their origins, a prospect that many parents and community elders dread.

Even though Norman travelled and worked in other areas, he retained a strong link with Kuku Yalanji country and spent much of his life there.

He was a person who would have been able to embark on orbits of the kind I envisage. His example shows that it is possible to choose to maintain an Aboriginal identity and be completely able to interact with modern society. His published writings and letters reveal a high level of education, and non-Aborigines said he "conversed as an equal".

But his knowledge and patriotism - on behalf of his Aboriginal as well as his British-Australian heritage - did not save him from the oppression my people endured when we lived under the protection legislation.

The fate that almost befell Norman was eerily similar to the fate being suffered by Stalin's victims at the same time as Norman's removal order was signed in 1935: loyal service to one's country counted for nothing; the reason for the persecution was ridiculous and it was impossible for the victim to counter the charge.

And as the descendants of some of Stalin's victims still live in Siberia, Norman's descendants might still have lived on Palm Island had he not used his knowledge of Kuku Yalanji country to avoid the authorities.

Norman steered clear of the police until a decision was made that the removal order be "held in abeyance". His descendants therefore live in relative happiness in Kuku Yalanji and Guugu Yimithirr country instead of in dysfunctional exile.

At the launch of Norman's biography, one of his descendants and a young leader of the Yalanji community at Mossman, Matthew Gibson, said he had read the book and felt that "there was a lot to learn from in the life of Norman Baird". Matthew is dead right. Norman Baird was the first modern Kuku Yalanji and should be a model for our people's future.

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