

Tangled up in black:  
a journey through  
education and history

— Gary Foley

Respondent:  
Tony Birch

RUPC #4

Tangled up in black



Tangled up in black:  
a journey through education and history

Gary Foley & Tony Birch



Tangled up in black:  
a journey through education and history  
Gary Foley

My PhD dissertation interrogated the emergence in Australia in the 1960s of a new political force in Aboriginal politics. It was the first major, detailed analysis by a participant of the events, people, organisations, interactions and dynamics that resulted in the emergence of a new political movement in Aboriginal Australia. This new approach became known as the Black Power movement, and whilst it was never a movement as such, but rather loose collectives of activists in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, it was nevertheless a set of ideas and aspirations that captured the imagination of large numbers of Aboriginal and Islander people, especially the young. The subsequent political battles that occurred around Australia from 1968 to 1972 on the issue of Land Rights had a huge impact on Australian history and politics.

My dissertation showed how the Black Power movement caught Australian media and politicians, including then leader of the Opposition, Gough Whitlam, by surprise and as a result Whitlam was forced to impose dramatic change in Federal ALP Aboriginal Affairs policy during 1972. The McMahon Liberal/Country Party administration is shown to have faltered when its inept handling of the Black Power movement's *Aboriginal Embassy* protest had a deleterious effect on the Government's reputation and credibility. This in turn played a significant role in the McMahon Government's landslide defeat in the 1972 federal election.

I examined these aspects of Australian political history because they had been to a large extent ignored by historians and political scientists. So the purpose of this exercise was twofold. Firstly, I explained the context of my interest in history and examined the existing literature on these events to demonstrate that the broader understanding of the era is

very limited due to the minimal historical analysis that has been undertaken to this point.

Secondly, I set out to examine a period of Australian history in which not only were Aboriginal voices in the ascendancy and being heard, but during which Aboriginal issues were receiving extensive support in white Australia. In the aftermath of the 1967 Referendum, it was necessary to examine, in more detail than has yet been the case, the story of the individuals, organisations and events that were associated with the Aboriginal civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the more aggressive Australian Black Power movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This history is important to current political debate in Aboriginal politics because of assertions by some Aboriginal voices such as Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine, and non-Aboriginal voices such as Peter Sutton, Keith Windshuttle and former Government Minister Gary Johns. Many have argued that these voices, as well as the cultural wars that have ruffled feathers in academic history departments in Australian universities, have served to distort, denigrate and diminish the ideas, aspirations and achievements of the Land Rights movement of the 1970s.

If the narrative and analysis in my dissertation are considered to be an accurate historic account, then many of the assertions that form the ideological basis of those voices mentioned above can be shown to be false. If that is the case, then there should be a strong case for reconsideration of many of the Aboriginal policies put in place by the former and present federal Government, including the NT Intervention and education and welfare quarantining policies.

One aspect of my argument is that because so little independent academic study has been undertaken about the Land Rights movement, it is not possible to say whether the ideals and achievements of that era were a failure or not. Nor is there sufficient evidence to support the contention that some of the ideas on Aboriginal community economic development

held by those such as Pearson and Mundine are either new or innovative. Contrary to the revised history asserted by today's revisionists, the Black Power movement was ultimately all about economic power.

As will be seen in this paper, the young activists of the early 1970s saw economic development (based on Aboriginal community control of the process) and self-sufficiency to be central to their idea of Land Rights. The difference as revealed here is that Noel Pearson appears to support economic development that is presided over by a managerial and entrepreneurial elite, whereas the Black Power movement saw economic development controlled and administered by democratic cooperatives of Aboriginal people.<sup>1</sup> The importance of this subtle but fundamental difference in approach cannot be understood fully without knowledge of the history examined in my thesis.

Without at least some basic understanding of the events, people and politics of the Black Power era, it is not possible to make an informed assessment of what is happening with Aboriginal affairs today. Without a significant body of historical analysis to assist in a better understanding of that era, it is difficult for a student of history or politics today to explore what the truth might be in relation to the Aboriginal Embassy and the Land Rights/Self-Determination/Black Power movement. In the absence of that historical literature, too many students merely opt to accept the assertions of some that the idea of self-determination was either flawed or a failure. We have seen in the past decade the imposition of draconian restrictions on Aboriginal human rights in the form of the NT Intervention, income-management policies, and the use of punitive measures to force Aboriginal parents to send their children to school. These policies were/are implemented with the apparent consent of the media and public, almost all of whom believed the Government propaganda that had depicted Aboriginal people as dysfunctional people, delinquent parents and alcoholics.

This demonisation and vilification of Aboriginal people is only possible in Australia today because in the absence of informed public opinion, the government was able to accept the ideas of ersatz leaders like Pearson and former ALP President Warren Mundine who have insinuated that problems confronting Aboriginal people were of their own creation.

The advocates of this flawed analysis of history also assert that the policies of Self-Determination had been the primary cause of what they claim is a form of 'welfare dependency'.<sup>2</sup> The only thing wrong with that argument is that it is not true. That is, in the sense that no Government in Australian history has ever adopted a genuine policy of 'Self-Determination' for Aboriginal people. Instead, ever since the Whitlam era many governments have appropriated the term 'self-determination' and applied it to government policies that clearly were designed to inhibit Aboriginal peoples' control over their own affairs rather than promote and encourage genuine self-determination. Therefore, it could not have been possible for any imaginary policy of Self Determination to have failed, for the simple reason that such a thing never existed in reality.

So the myths of history promoted by Pearson and others are able to gain acceptance and then underpin the latest in Australian Government repressive policies against Aboriginal people. That alone is a good reason for the need for more information to be available on the history of the Aboriginal self-determination/Black Power movement.

Thus in my doctoral thesis I sought to shine some light on the story of an important period in the evolving struggle for political, civil and land rights in the Aboriginal community. In particular with specific focus on south-eastern Australia and the decade between 1963 and 1973. I examined events and people associated with the Aboriginal political struggle in the ten years that led up to the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in December 1972. It is important to focus in detail on this period of the Aboriginal political struggle for the simple reason that so much of this story remains largely

untold, and very little meaningful political and historical analysis has to date been conducted in relation to that era.

However, despite the excellent work of a small number of research academics, what little is now known is already subject to distortion, misinterpretation and revision, in the context of the so-called 'History Wars'. The primitive and politically motivated arguments of the History Wars have already changed the nature of debate and policies on Aboriginal matters over the past two decades. These misrepresentations of the History Wars are clearly outside the boundaries of legitimate historical re-evaluation and they highlight the importance of a more accurate and detailed examination of the events of the so-called 'Self Determination' era. This is necessary to encourage a more critical and elevated debate that does not consign Aboriginal people to the status of powerless victims with no agency in the historic proceedings occurring around them.

Rather, as the narrative in my dissertation revealed, Aboriginal political activists since the early part of the twentieth century had fought to have Australians take notice of their plight, and to have Aboriginal Affairs placed firmly on the national agenda. This long-term struggle culminated in the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy protest on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra, a time in which the Aboriginal campaign for justice reached its apex. My project sought to examine the people and events that led into the most successful actions of the Aboriginal rights movement in Australia.

The 1960s Black Power movement in the United States has been described as having an approach to politics with 'vitality, variety, wit, and creativity that shaped the way future generations approached dealing with ... societal problems'.<sup>3</sup> I was able to show that young Aboriginal Black Power activists had a similar approach and effect here in Australia. The clearly evident political and cultural resurgence in Aboriginal Australia in the past forty years can be traced directly back to the era of the Australian Black Power movement.

As an active participant in many of these events of that era, I am well-placed to provide such an account, despite the problems of personal and political bias that will inevitably intrude on some of my account. In that respect I would only encourage the reader to be aware of the fact that all historical accounts ultimately reflect the personal standpoint of the historian, and that needs to be taken into account when determining one's own understanding. Thus one should always try to read a range of accounts of the same events to get a broader perspective for greater personal understanding.

The problem both for those who would seek more information, as well as for the historian seeking to assemble a reasonably accurate analysis of these events, is that there seems to have been very little work done in the form of serious historical study of this period and aspect of Australian history. Whilst in the past twenty years we have seen more material published on the 1965 Freedom Ride, the Gurindji land rights struggle and the 1967 referendum, there has been minimal examination of the dynamic Black Power movement that emerged from the black ghettos of major Australian cities in the early 1970s.

I will identify and examine the lives and work of some of those activists who made major contributions but who remain largely unrecognized and unacknowledged. In writing this account I am also very conscious of the contemporary suggestions by a new generation of Aboriginal 'leaders' who dismiss the importance and ideas that grew out of the era of Black Power. It is for this reason that I have tried to present a period of Australian history that is fascinating and interesting, as a narrative that will enable readers to gain a greater understanding of the people and events that shaped a critical period in Australian history.

It should give us a better understanding of who we are as a society and how we got to be like we are today. Whether Australians will concede it or not, the events related in my dissertation are an important part of our mutual history. A

more sophisticated analysis of events such as these is necessary if we are to engage in rational and logical debates about Aboriginal issues today.

In writing my thesis I had to contend with the problem facing any Aboriginal person in the academy trying to give an accurate account of historical events within conventional Western academic constraints and as a linear narrative. But, as Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her book *Decolonising Methodologies*, has asserted,

A critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as Aboriginal peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by Aboriginal peoples with a view to rewriting and re-orienting our position in history... The sense of history conveyed by these approaches is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other.<sup>4</sup>

So this analysis must be read in the context of an Aboriginal academic attempting to reconstruct our understanding of the important moments, influences, events and personalities of that period. As a participant in most of the events discussed, I have not only the advantage of firsthand knowledge and experience, but also the disadvantage of the constraints imposed by such inherent subjectivity, as well as the problem of unreliability of memory.

But I have an advantage over some earlier historians like Scott Robinson, who in 1993 wrote the best academic account of this era, in that I am able to draw on resources not available at the time he wrote his thesis. I refer to the numerous volumes of ASIO files and Cabinet documents that have since become available under the thirty year rule for Government documents that provides for their release to the National Archives. And it was those ASIO files that unexpectedly led

into one of the more remarkable aspects of my research which ultimately became the focus of a television programme called *Persons of Interest* that recently screened on SBS TV. I would therefore like to digress for a moment to relate the story of how that came about and what transpired.

This extraordinary series of events during my research actually led to a major reconsideration on my part of certain aspects of my theories about a key period in the 1960s. It also led to me making peace with one of my oldest political enemies and assisting in the publication of his own book. I feel that I have to tell this story to illustrate how my research had effects that I never anticipated before I began my thesis. It shows how the past can intervene today and cause us to alter our understanding and perception of it. This is a story that began about six years ago after, I had been carefully examining the ASIO files on myself and some of my old comrades.

I reached a point where I found myself very upset at seeing the same name on thirty-year-old documents asking ASIO to investigate myself and others in the Black Power movement. Most of these documents had been signed by Mr. Barrie Dexter, who had been Secretary of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs and later from 1972 was head of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. When I realised that many of the clandestine investigations and surveillance operations against me had been instigated by Mr Dexter, I was angry. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Dexter and I had been serious political enemies, but, even taking that into consideration, I still felt strongly offended that Dexter could have behaved in such a surreptitious manner.

So I decided to see if he was still alive, with the thought that I might be able to talk to him about the past. I concede that at that stage I was keen also to confront him about why he had apparently believed that we in the Black Power movement had wanted to kill him. As luck would have it, I managed to find out that he was indeed still alive and at ninety-two years old was living in a retirement village in Canberra.

Having also managed to acquire his telephone number, one day in 2009 I rang him and said, 'G'day Barrie, Gary Foley here. Remember me?'

A frail voice replied, 'Oh, yes, Gary, I certainly remember you!'

Having broken the ice, I put it to him that I was an historian nowadays and as such I was interested to know if I might come up and visit him in Canberra and have a chat about the old days. His response was what I had expected because I had theorised that if he is stuck in a nursing home he is probably bored and would love some company. I was right, and he readily agreed to meet and talk. I was pleased with the friendly response I had got, but during the long drive to Canberra I was apprehensive about how it might transpire. As it happened, he greeted me cordially and we began in a friendly tone, but what surprised me was his mental alertness and excellent memory. I was not expecting that in a man his age.

I was soon able to steer the conversation to the ASIO files, and in particular the alleged Black Power death list (an incident from 1974). I asked him why he thought we would want to kill him. That resulted in a lively exchange during which we were able to quickly resolve outstanding differences after I was able to assure him that as much as I disliked him back then, there was never a Black Power death list. We then moved on to a general discussion about the period between 1967 and 1972. We began to compare notes on what today is each of our interpretations of significant events during that era, and, to my surprise, I found that we were agreeing on more than we disagreed about. I think that this was quite a surprise to both of us.

As we talked, Dexter revealed to me new details about his experience working firstly for Prime Minister Harold Holt, and then after Holt's unfortunate swim from which he never returned, working for Prime Minister John Gorton. This discussion in particular was a revelation for me, as I had always

been one of those who blamed the Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA), of which Dexter was the Secretary, for the failure of the 1967 Referendum to bring significant change to Aboriginal communities in south-eastern Australia. But Dexter's account of what happened during that period transformed my interpretation of these important historic events. I found myself very impressed with Dexter's alert and lucid mind and eventually I found myself saying to him,

'You know, Barrie, you should have written a book about this stuff.'

To my surprise, he replied, 'Well, I did.'

When I told him I had never seen it, he informed me that no-one had been interested in publishing it. I was flabbergasted, and said to him, 'Are you telling me you wrote a manuscript and nobody wanted to publish it?'

He confirmed that that was the case. I then asked him where the manuscript was, and he told me it was locked away in the archive in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSIS) in Canberra, and that nobody was allowed to look at it without his permission.

I asked him if he would give me permission to read it, and he graciously agreed. A few days later, after I had completed a speed-reading of the manuscript, I contacted Dexter again and I told him that I regarded this to be a significant and important historical document and that with his permission I would like to edit the manuscript and find a publisher for him. He happily agreed.

With the assistance of my research associate Dr. Edwina Howell, we have now completed a preliminary edit of the manuscript and have secured a publisher for the book. I regard Dexter's version of the events and era that I am writing about in this thesis as an extremely important one, because he was the most important person in the Government Aboriginal Affairs bureaucracy from 1967 to 1978. He is a man who knows who within the public service and politics in Canberra during that time were supporters and opponents of

Aboriginal rights. He knows of the dirty tricks played against Aboriginal interests; he knows where the skeletons are buried, so to speak; and as a former senior public servant had been meticulous in his documentation. This all means that Dexter's account of his career is an important missing part of the jigsaw puzzle that should reveal some fascinating new insights into Australian political history, especially during the Holt and Gorton Governments.

Thus, my research for this thesis had sometimes led me in unexpected directions and created extraordinary end results. I would never have predicted that I would become very close friends with Barrie Dexter, who forty years ago I regarded as a political enemy. The irony is that forty years ago I would have been very happy if Dexter were to drop dead (though I firmly assert there was never a Black Power death list with his name on it), whereas today I am anxious for his health and I keep telling him to stay alive because I want him there to accept the accolades when his book is published and I have the honour of launching it.

Another extraordinary moment in the course of my research related to my discovery of independent verification of a defining incident from my youth. I had spoken on numerous occasions over the past forty-five years about the fact that my educational opportunities had been suddenly terminated when I was expelled from Macksville High School in NSW at the end of 1966, and indeed my assertions of that incident have been duly recorded in many historical accounts of my life. But I had never really sought or found any form of independent verification of my experience. I had never bothered to seek out such verification because the experience had such a profound effect upon me in the sense that it abruptly ended my schooling and instantly demolished my educational self-confidence and personal self-esteem, and this had made me so angry that for almost fifty years I simply chose to tell the story confident of my own memory of the experience. Then in the course of my research for my doctoral thesis I

made a remarkable discovery. I will therefore relate this story largely as I told it in my dissertation.

In early 1965, I was fifteen years old and living in a town on the north coast of NSW called Nambucca Heads and I was following news of an Aboriginal man, Charles Perkins, and a group called Student Action For Aboriginals who were travelling through north-western NSW on a political action dubbed the Freedom Ride.

Having two years earlier moved to the Nambucca Valley (back to the homelands of my Gumbaynggirr grandmother) from Tenterfield where my family had lived since 1954, I had experienced white racism so deeply entrenched and embedded among the local community that it genuinely shocked me. I had escaped a lot of this petty and brutal form of Australian racism whilst living in Tenterfield, ironically because my father was a local rugby league star and town hero. However, when I arrived in Nambucca at the age of thirteen I encountered segregation for the first time. The Tenterfield picture theatre had not been segregated in the 1950s, which had been the norm for me but not apparently in other rural areas in NSW.

The activities of the Freedom Riders therefore naturally captured my attention. I had resented the experience of segregation and to see a black man standing up to the sort of white bigots that I had encountered in Nambucca and Macksville High School was a significant experience for me. It was the first time that the thought that one could and should stand up to racism was planted in my mind. I wasn't able to go to Bowraville, which was fourteen miles up the Nambucca River, when the Freedom Riders arrived and staged their famous confrontation there, but nevertheless the fire had been ignited in my mind. Charles Perkins has since said that he saw the importance of the 1965 Freedom Ride as being able to show Aboriginal people that they did not have to tolerate the denial of their rights, and that they could and should resist racism. If that was his intent, I would say that

he succeeded beyond all expectations in regards to me and a whole generation of young Aboriginal people who were watching and taking notice. It would be this generation that later produced the Black Power movement.

Perhaps this change induced in me by the Freedom Ride became too apparent to my fellow students and teachers at school over the following year.

I became a 'troublemaker' and 'difficult' in the minds of my teachers, merely because I began to question and challenge the status quo, and to refuse to meekly accept the daily racial slurs and insults. Then came the final blow when I was about to begin Year 12 in 1966, I was called into the office of the headmaster who made it clear my presence was no longer permitted in the school. Despite my being one of the first Aboriginal students to ever achieve senior level at Macksville High, I was castigated rather than encouraged to go further. It seemed to me that the school regarded my achievement as an embarrassment rather than an asset or source of pride. The Headmaster expelled me with these brutal words, 'We don't want your kind here!'

My expulsion from Macksville High left a deep emotional scar on my soul and my pride; a scar I can still feel deeply some forty years later. It meant the loss for me of my chance at educational opportunity which in turn meant that it was not for another thirty years before I ultimately was able to begin studies at University of Melbourne at the age of forty-six.

I had always maintained my anger at this particular injustice and always, for 40 years, told the story of what happened to me then. In all that time, in part because I have rarely gone home and have lived a thousand miles away in Melbourne for thirty-seven years, I had never needed or sought independent verification of my story. But as an historian nowadays, I had begun to worry about the nature of memory and history, in particular about the fact that I regard individual memory as extremely unreliable when it comes to historical analysis and understanding.

Then, in late 2008, after most of my dissertation was complete, as part of my research I came across a speech that had been delivered in Federal Parliament by Government Whip in the House of Representatives, The Right Honourable Jill Hall, on the occasion of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology speech. Whilst it is not normally my practice to spend any time reading the speeches of politicians, this one caught my eye because I saw my name on the page. As I read it, I realised that here was an independent verification of my memory of the events. It seemed that the Right Honourable Ms Jill Hall had been a contemporary of mine at Macksville High School and the Prime Minister's speech had triggered within her deep memories of life in the Nambucca Valley in those days. Her version of my story should be quoted in depth because it is a perception from across the void that divided us. In her parliamentary speech that day, she said,

I grew up on the north coast of New South Wales... The school I attended was Macksville High School. The non-Aboriginal population generally were streamed into the top classes; the Aboriginal kids were generally streamed into the lower classes. The expectation placed on those children was totally different from the expectation placed on me. Their treatment was very different from the treatment that I received.<sup>5</sup>

She then went on to describe my own personal experience that I had talked of over all those years, and as I read it I was deeply moved that someone else had remembered. She described the situation thus:

There was one Aboriginal student by the name of Gary Foley. I think he now lives in Melbourne. When he did his school certificate in year 10 he performed outstandingly. He came back in year 11, and I can remember it as if it were yesterday. The then principal of the school stood up and said, 'Gary Foley, what are you doing back here?'

Gary Foley was not there the next day. These are the types of things that have been perpetuated through our education system.<sup>6</sup>

Thus for the first time since 1966 I had the independent verification of an incident I had been certain that no-one but me had ever even noticed. It was a dramatic moment in my research that reduced this tough old Black Power man to tears. I would later make contact with Right Honourable Ms Jill Hall and personally thank her for her thoughts and words.

Another advantage I had in my research was the fact that I also had exclusive access to the private archives of activist Bruce McGuinness, who was the person who, as Director of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in 1967, had introduced the term 'Black Power' into the Australian political vernacular. I also was able to draw upon my own archive collected over forty years, and which included a comprehensive personal collection of ephemera, media reports, newsletters and minutes of some of the key organisations that emerged during the Black Power era.

In attempting to combine the subjective material of my memories and anecdotes with the documentary evidence from academic accounts, media reports, ASIO and Cabinet documents, and other primary source materials, I had been able to provide the most comprehensive account yet of this era and its key personalities. In the process, I not only provided a social and political history of an important period in Australian history, but I also tried to show that Aboriginal aspects of our mutual history are not as boring as many may think, but rather can be interesting, exciting and compelling. The events and people featured in my description of the life and times of the Australian Black Power movement are immensely interesting and an important part of the history of how Australia continues to evolve as a nation and society.

My dissertation took many years to complete and during that time, as I developed different aspects of my argument,

I published some of those ideas in different forms and places. Some of the ideas and stories put forward in my thesis formed part of the one-man theatre production, *Foley*, which I performed at the 2011 Melbourne Arts Festival and at Sydney Opera House in 2012. In addition to my normal teaching of history at Victoria University, I have also been extensively involved in producing radio history programs, conducting a wide range of public lectures and giving keynote speeches at conferences, as well as developing history exhibitions for art galleries and museums. All of these activities have been part of the way my dissertation was assembled.

This illustrates that my work also involves an exploration of alternative ways of presenting Australian history to a largely disinterested public. I believe it is regrettable that Australians display such apathy toward their own history because without some understanding and appreciation of the past mistakes, we are destined as a nation to continue making the same mistakes. This is particularly so in terms of past neglect and dehumanising policies applied against Aboriginal people. These are sensitive issues in a denialist Australia, so an additional challenge for any historian is how to penetrate the broader indifference and make Australia interested in its own past.

It is important that this story be told, if for no other reason than to give validation to the efforts and gains achieved by small groups of Aboriginal activists in many parts of Australia. But it is also important so that future generations of Aboriginal peoples might have access to a version of their own history that has not been written by non-Aboriginal people. My doctoral thesis was therefore not the definitive account of the Self-Determination/Black Power movement and the Aboriginal Embassy; it was rather an attempt to begin to fill the information void that currently exists regarding this period, and to stimulate further debate and discussion.

‘We will overcome’, or:  
‘does the stack-hat maketh the man?’  
Tony Birch

I like to make up stories, but let me begin with a true story. After the election of the Kennett conservative government in Victoria in 1992, institutions and individuals came under attack from the economic rationalist policies dominating government policy. The doors closed on many public assets, from post offices, to medical clinics, child care centres and state schools, both primary and secondary. State schools across Melbourne were under threat. One of those schools was Northlands Secondary College, located in the heavily working class and multi-ethnic northern suburbs of Melbourne. It was a school with a relatively high enrolment of Koori students, although it was not, as many people claim ‘an Aboriginal school’.

This is a vital point to make with regard to the struggle to save the school, as the protests and the legal fight to save the school brought people together in the community who might otherwise be regarded as having competing interests — particularly in the minds of politicians who prefer the divisive ‘dog whistle’ to inclusion when dealing with disadvantage in Australian society. A leading figure in the struggle was Gary Foley, who is, without doubt, one of the true radical figures of both Aboriginal and Australian history; a man often called upon by his community to utilise his political energy and intense intellect to stand up for the powerless. That the Northlands fight was successful is remarkable, considering the brutal approach that the government took to any opponents to its bulldozing approach to change.

My lasting image of the fight is an image of Foley standing on the front steps of the court after the decision to allow Northlands to remain open. There he stood, resplendent in a yellow ‘stack-hat’, perhaps the daggiest piece of cycling fash-

ion ever marketed. I'm not sure why he did not take the hat off his head. Perhaps he was concerned about a stray missile from some rightwing nutter? Not likely. Some say Foley has a healthy ego. I've occasionally thought so myself. But being reminded of the stack-hat image, I think not. No person concerned with their own image, particularly when the cameras were capturing every moment, would make such a mistake. I make this comment for a serious reason. Foley is an altruist when it comes to political work. Every campaign he has been involved in has been driven by a desire for the betterment of others. He is an unselfish collectivist.

On the day after the court decision, I was at the Aboriginal Health Service in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy — an organisation Foley played a major role in establishing. Out the back of the service is a small open area where people gather to smoke a cigarette, meet up with friends and have a yarn. (Although in recent years the smoking has been banned). My father was out there that morning, puffing away. When I walked out to say hello, the first comment he made to me was 'did you see Foley on the TV? He stuck it up them! He stuck it up them!'

A chorus rang out amongst the coughing and spluttering. 'He stuck it up them! Foley stuck it up them!'

This group of largely older and frail Koori people are amongst the most disenfranchised in Australian society. They have very little in the way of material possessions. Several of them that morning were members of the Stolen Generations, taken from their families as children to spend their lives in cruel and violent institutions. I don't know that I've seen more happier Koori faces gathered in the one spot than I did that morning. And they were not only happy. They were strong and proud. Foley has always stood up for such people. He has done it at great cost to his personal life, most particularly his own health, and any *individual* success. (Although I'm sure he would either disagree with this statement, or simply accept that it comes with the turf of political struggle.)

Gary Foley has often been misrepresented by Aboriginal

public figures who prefer to sit at the bottom of the political table, feeding on the scraps of politicians and business. He is painted as an anarchic loose cannon, which he may have been on rare occasions, when such a strategy was required. What these self-appointed Aboriginal 'leaders' know, but are loathe to admit in public, is that Foley is not a leader amongst Aboriginal people, certainly not here in Victoria, or in many other communities across Australia, both black and white, that he has worked with. He is one of us. He shares his political philosophy with grassroots Aboriginal communities, both in the contemporary and historical struggle, with Aboriginal people defying the racism imposed on us by State and Commonwealth governments.

The mistake that some non-Aboriginal people make, particularly in institutions like universities, is that it is best for them to 'back' individual Aboriginal people who promise to 'keep the natives in line'. The strategy has always failed and will continue to fail into the future. It is wedge politics at its dumbest. More importantly, what is lost in following such an approach is the growth of Aboriginal intellectual culture within the wider culture of the institution, which becomes stifled by the gatekeeping imposed by individuals.

Let me end with another story. A potentially sad story that also ended in victory, and considering Foley's status today, is rich with irony. I taught Aboriginal History at the University of Melbourne from 1996 to 2001. I loved the job. I was able to work with a remarkable group of young people who were determined to question the narrow view of Australian History imposed on them in high school. The late nineties was a remarkable, if occasionally fraught time to teach history at tertiary level. Conservative political forces marshalled against new and dynamic ways of thinking. As a teacher, I dealt with these challenges on a daily basis. I taught with a one-sentence statement to my students, delivered in the first lecture each semester — *I want you to leave this course better informed, enabled to think for yourself.*

The students responded and I feel proud of them to this day.

One of several people who provided a guest lecture to the students was Gary Foley. His lectures were charged with energy, intellectually sharp and, importantly, *empirically based*. He did not come as a propagandist. He came as an educator and the students responded accordingly.

In the year 2000, three professors at the University of Melbourne attempted to have Foley banned from delivering a lecture in my course. I knew that I had no option but to oppose these attempts. Not out of fear of retribution from other Aboriginal people, but out of a sense of my own self worth and dignity as a Koori man. I refused the direct order given to me, and was prepared for any consequences. Fortunately, to the credit of the University of Melbourne, the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sally Walker, supported my right to academic freedom, a principle which she held to be the 'first commandment' of academic life.

I remain grateful to her and the University of Melbourne for the stance taken.

The next week Foley gave his lecture to my students. As expected, it was professional, informative and challenging. I sat up the back of the theatre in the low light and cried. We had 'stuck it up them' again, largely for the benefit of young non-Aboriginal students in support of their intellectual growth. I left the History Department the next year, not because I wanted to write poetry, as some claim. One of my lifelong mentors, Professor Janet McCalman once said to me, 'university life should always be about challenging yourself and your ideas'. My department was not up for the challenge.

In the age of Facebook, we can be 'liked' by our own enemies. True friendship is a rarer and valued thing. I unashamedly admit that Doctor Gary Foley is a close and loyal friend of mine. This does not colour my views of his status in the Aboriginal community. We have different approaches to political issues, and I know in my heart that I will never have his courage. There is nothing wrong in admitting this.

It is a testament to his remarkable capacity as both a major intellectual in Australian life, and as a person.

- 1 See: Pearson, N., *Up from the Mission: Selected Writings*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2009.
- 2 Karvelas, P., and Murphy, P., 'Ban Aboriginal dole until 21, Noel Pearson pleads', *The Australian* 22 August 2008.
- 3 McCartney, John T., *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African-American Political Thought*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, p. 188.
- 4 Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999.
- 5 Hall, J, MP, speech, 'Apology to Indigenous Australians', House of Representatives, Hansard 14 February 2008, p. 468.
- 6 Ibid.

## Notes

## Notes

## About the authors

Dr Gary Foley is one of Australia's most prominent commentators and activists. He was born in Grafton, northern NSW, of Gumbainggir descent. Expelled from school aged fifteen, he became an apprentice draughtsperson in Sydney. Since then he has been at the centre of major political activities including the Springbok tour demonstrations (1971), the Tent Embassy in Canberra (1972), the Commonwealth Games protest (1982) and protests during the bicentennial celebrations (1988).

Dr Foley was involved in the establishment of the first Aboriginal self-help and survival organisations including Redfern's Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Health Service in Melbourne and the National Black Theatre.

Most recently he has completed an outstanding report which was also the basis of a documentary on SBS TV and written and performed in his own one-man theatrical show at the 2011 Melbourne Arts Festival and the Sydney Opera House. He is the author of the forthcoming book *An autobiographical narrative of the Black Power Movement and the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy* and has been published in numerous journals including *Griffith Law Review* and the *Australian Journal of Human Rights*.

Dr Foley completed his Bachelor of Arts and then gained First Class Honours in History in 2002. Between 2001 and 2005 he was also the Senior Curator for Southeastern Australia at Museum Victoria. Between 2005 and 2008 he was a lecturer/tutor in the Education Faculty of the University of Melbourne. In 2012, he completed a PhD in History at the University of Melbourne.

Dr Tony Birch is an academic in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He is a Koori writer who has published widely in the areas of short fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction. He has also worked as a writer and curator in collaboration with photographers, film-makers and artists. He was the senior curator on the

## About the authors

'Koori Voices' exhibition at Melbourne Museum's Bunjilaka Centre. He has a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne and a PhD in Urban Cultures and Histories. Tony lectures in Creative Writing; Autofictions; Writing Literary Non-fiction and Writing Genealogies of Place. His work has been widely published both nationally and internationally. He has presented his work in Australia and internationally (in Europe, North America and South America). Tony's academic writing is concerned with the deconstruction of colonial fantasies — particularly the writing of history.

## Acknowledgements

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

The Research Unit plays a role in facilitating scholarship, enhancing research opportunities and enabling collaborations between creative industries, cultural institutions, research institutions, academic research centres and public communities. It houses a number of collaborative research projects across various disciplines, such as: education for a multicultural society; digital networks and participatory public space; art as a platform for global culture; transnational cinema practices; aesthetic cosmopolitanism; mediated public spaces; and cultural citizenship.

Nikos Papastergiadis is the Director of the Research Unit and is supported by co-founders Scott McQuire, Alison Young and Audrey Yue.

Tangled up in black:  
a journey through education and history

Gary Foley & Tony Birch

All rights are reserved. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by print, photocopy, or any other means, without written permission from the publisher.

Third edition 2020  
ISBN: 978-1-922099-43-3  
Design: Brad Haylock  
Printed in Australia

First published 2014

Published by Surplus Pty Ltd in co-operation with the  
Research Unit in Public Cultures, University of Melbourne.

Surplus and the RUPC respectfully acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin nations as the traditional owners of the unceded lands upon which the development of this volume has principally taken place.

Surplus Pty Ltd  
PO Box 418  
Flinders Lane 8009  
Victoria, Australia  
[www.surplus.com](http://www.surplus.com)

RUPC #4 / Surplus #13.4

Based on his award-winning doctoral dissertation, Gary Foley chronicles the development of the Black Power Movement within the Australian Aboriginal community and the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy. Focussing on a specific and under-researched period that was crucial in Australian history, Foley challenges the prevailing academic understandings of this period and overturns many of the popular misconceptions. His research shows that as a participant and historian, an innovative approach can be found to reveal the achievements and legacy of Aboriginal activism. Foley's dissertation is a seminal piece of Australian political history, unique in its autobiographical approach, and steeped in academic practice. It was awarded a Chancellor's Prize for Excellence in the PhD thesis in the Humanities, Creative Arts and Social cluster at the University of Melbourne in 2014.

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

RUPC #4 / Surplus #13.4

ISBN 978-1-922099-43-3