

## Rikki Shields

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As written by Jim Beatson

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### European Dreaming

Rikki Shields' Aboriginal features and slim, wiry frame attract wandering eyes in London. He stands outside the Natural History Museum, Kensington, where, he believes, hundreds of tormented Aboriginal spirits are entombed calling "we want to go home".

Film-maker, poet, photographer, Aboriginal rights publicist and tireless campaigner for European museums to repatriate Aboriginal remains, Shields is a driven man with a romantic soul. Few Aborigines willingly endure Europe's four seasons more than once. Shields has experienced six European winters [by November 1991].

Shields says: "I know of only a few Aborigines who live here permanently. Cherry Lee-Klut, from Cherbourg mission in Queensland, who became a model in Europe and is now 71 and living in Holland. The other is a Koori man, one of London's homeless, for whom I've been searching for three years."

Shields wears his 50 years lightly. He is a softly-spoken man passing for 30-something, married to a red-haired English journalist he met at an exhibition of his poetry and photographs, *Mantrika: the Land of Broken Dreams*, at the Commonwealth Institute two years ago. He has no plans to return to Australia.

"I can't because I don't have the right," he explains. "My ancestors told me to come here – they've given me money, given me friends and kept me in contact with my people back home because here lies a key. If us Aborigines are to have a future, we need to know more about ourselves, the horrors of colonialism, body-snatching, how our people were locked up in jails, medical institutions...and libraries as historical curiosities."

"Some of us have been torn away from our language and culture. For us to get respect from the traditional people, who are our leaders, we have to bring our history back. If we fail, we'll be a lost generation forever with no past and no future."

Shields' journey of discovery to Europe has been frequently recounted in the European press and is his film *Journey of Discovery*, winner of the Maltese Film Festival's Golden Knight. He believes his film was the first completely independent Aboriginal production; he wrote, produced and financed it. "It still doesn't have an Australian distributor, yet here the British Film Institute bought the film for public exhibition and archival use."

Shields' family came from the Kimberley but he was born under a tree on the Katherine riverbed and moved to Darwin when his grandfather, a leprosy sufferer, was sent to Darwin's Channel Island leper colony. Growing up on a mission he was constantly in trouble with "the two Aboriginal nemeses – church officials and the police", once being given "24 hours to get out of Katherine". He ended up a wharfie, working his way around Australia's coast. But his dreams were troubled.

"I kept having this vision," he says. "I was the wild sea and a great blue rock where flocks of birds would soar. Loyoranna, the wind, would sing, 'Come with us to a time where you have your place.' This dream was in my head for 10 years."

Then he found the rock, Mantrika, an extinct volcano in Stanley, Tasmania, 80km from Burnie. "I sat on the rock all night. It was there my totem, Kowinna, the sea-eagle, gave me the message from my ancestors to come to Europe. I retired and was given a redundancy payment. It was as if my ancestors were giving me the payment to send me on this odyssey."

Arriving in Europe, he set to work producing his film, wrote a book of poetry, was appointed artist in residence at Glasgow's Third-Eye Centre and gave lecture tours and exhibitions throughout Europe. In 1987, along with Aboriginal film director Tracey Moffat, he was arrested in Southampton for flying the Aboriginal flag in front of the Queen at the start of the Second Fleet re-enactment.

Because of the familiarity of Australian programs on Europeans television, Shields says he is often asked why there are no Aborigines in *Neighbours*: "It was reported here that a new series of *Boney* was being made. I was regularly asked why a white Australian, Cameron Daddo, had been cast in the title role." His impish, normally smiling face darkens for a moment. "Whites are endlessly making documentaries about us but won't give us a role. It can be a bit like body-snatching all over again."

Jim Beatson

1991

## RIKKI SHIELDS – BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES, 1991.

Rikki Shields was born in 1942, and grew up on Melville Island Catholic Mission, north of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia. He left school at twelve, and walked his land for the next thirty years. He has experienced extremes of discrimination to which all Indigenous Australians continue to be subject.

He worked as a docker for 16 years in Darwin and elsewhere in Australia until he finally stayed for four years in Stanley, Tasmania, where he retired from the wharf; also where the ancient Aboriginal rock, “Mantrika”, put him in touch with his Aboriginal self and released his energies.

In August, 1985, the journey of the spirit began. He bought his first camera, and took photographs of his people and land which were later made into the film *Journey of the Spirit* and the exhibition, *Mantrika*.

He travelled to Germany and carried the message from his people to his new friends in Europe. He spoke in the streets, showed the photographs and slides, and was soon invited to speak publicly for the first time. However, he realised that these interventions although successful, were too slow: the white Australian Bicentenary was only two years away and an Aboriginal voice had to be heard at an international level.

He was commissioned by the Berlin Children’s Culture Department to entertain children and for this he made costumes for the children to perform with him. At this time, the film *Journey of the Spirit* was made into a work copy. He was dissatisfied with it, and wanted to start again but was prevented by a lack of funds.

In December, 1986, he arrived in Denmark, where he gave similar performances, which earned him enough money to travel to England.

In May, 1988, he was arrested for flying the National Aboriginal flag when the Queen of England attended the commemoration of the departure of the first fleet from Portsmouth to Australia.

The *Journey of the Spirit* film was finally remade in Portsmouth. In 1987 it was awarded the Golden Knight Award at the Malta International Film and Video Festival. It was nominated for the British Film Institute “Grierson Award”, also the Margaret Mead Anthropology Award in the USA, and shown at various international and local venues during his travels; as well as at the festivals and special screenings in Copenhagen, Denmark; Tromsø, Norway; Leipzig, East Germany; Tokyo, Japan; Portsmouth; Hull; Bradford; Cornwall; Newcastle and London venues, including the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the National Film Theatre at an Aboriginal film season.

The film was bought by the British Film Council in January, 1988. In 1989, it was distributed by a Danish publisher, Forlaget Futurum, who wrote a manual in which the issues raised by the film are discussed. It is available in schools, universities, and libraries there and also in Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Faeroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland and Lapland. Addresses of Aboriginal communities are included in the manual, so that children may communicate with each other.

In April, 1989, he took part in a documentary produced by BBC TV, *Open Space*, about the effects of colonial slavery. It was commissioned by the Anti-Slavery Society and narrated by Dennis Waterman. Rikki has also done some storytelling for BBC TV films about the Aboriginal poet, Jack Davis.

His independent photographic exhibition *Mantrika* was shown at Kulturhuset, Stockholm, in April, 1988, accompanied by screenings of *Journey of the Spirit*. This exhibition was then shown at the Commonwealth Institute in London between September 19<sup>th</sup> and November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1989. He has written poems and a book of short stories, *Tales from Stanley*, and in 1991 was looking for a publisher.

In late 1989, Rikki went to live in Ireland in order to concentrate on his writing. On learning of the existence of the preserved head of the Aboriginal man, Shinall, in the Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin, Rikki became the man behind the campaign to force the institutions to return Aboriginal cultural treasures. Through lobbying the Irish President, Patrick Hillery, various Senators and the media in Ireland, Britain and Australia, he brought enough attention to focus on the issue of Aboriginal remains in museums that the College relented and handed back Shinall’s head to the appropriate elders. Following that victory, Rikki featured in an Irish TV production, *Open Eye*, and a British TV program, *Heart of the Matter* - both discussing the campaign.

August, 1990, bought Rikki back to Britain, where he was appointed Artist in Residence at the Tagari Lia Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal Arts in the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, Scotland. He was sponsored for the post by Malcolm Williamson CBE, AO, Master of the Queen’s Music, and also The Mackintosh Foundation.

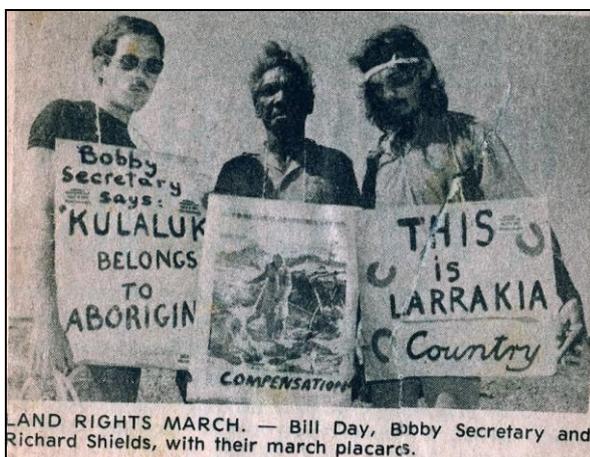
While in Britain he was awarded the Axel Poignant Award by the Royal Anthropology Institute. This award is for Indigenous Artists from the Pacific region and independent artists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Note from Roslyn Poignant, 11 July 2012: “There is no such thing as an Axel Poignant award from the RAI. I may have got him some funds from the Harry Watt fund (I set up at the RAI) at the time he took his film and exhibition to Stockholm.”

For five years Rikki Shields survived on the redundancy money he received from working for 16 years on the docks. He now [in 1991] relies solely on donations obtained when showing his film and photographs, giving talks and running workshops.

Rikki had no financial support from any organisations here or in Australia during his five-and-a-half-year journey. At the time of writing in 1991 he urgently needed donations to carry on his mission.



**Above left: Richard Shields, as he was then known, protests for Larrakia land rights in Darwin (Photo from *The Maritime Worker*, August 1971). Right: Rikki Shields (centre) leads protesters in UK.**

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**The Text Below is from Rikki Shields' website <http://www.mantrika.co.uk/bio.htm>**

Rikki Shields was born in Katherine, Northern Territory in 1942 and grew up on Melville Island Catholic Mission, north of Darwin. He left school at 12 and then walked his land for the next 30 years. He has experienced the extremes of discrimination to which all indigenous Australians are subjected. For a period, he went to live with the Larrakia people, custodians of Darwin, and was both inspired and frustrated by the landscape and the past. In 1981, having worked his way southwards as a docker, he arrived in Stanley, Tasmania. Its setting and life are dominated by an extinct volcano rock, overlooking the sea. On one level, *Tales from Stanley* describes the people and daily life in a small town. On another, it tells of Shields' acceptance of himself and the beginnings of his understanding of the relationship, symbolised by the rock, between the real and the unseen world.

*Tales from Stanley*, though inspired by his four years there, was not written until he started a longer journey, through Germany, Denmark and England, where he has been working and writing for several years. His writing contains both conflicts and harmony between his aboriginality and Germanic thoughts. Rikki's father was an Australian born German, whose family came from Bavaria during the late 1890s to Australia, where at the outbreak of World War II there was hostility towards people with German names. So his Father changed his surname from Schild to Shields before he enlisted in the army to fight the Japanese in New Guinea, in the Engineering Corp. He was decorated for bravery. Rikki's mother was an Aboriginal from the Beagle Bay Catholic Mission in Western Australia. The family moved to Darwin in the 1930s, due to a new Leprosy colony built there, as his grandfather and uncle were sufferers. In time they were cured with the modern medicine. Rikki lives in west London, with his wife and youngest children.

“Notes about Kululuk for a photographic exhibition, *Mantrika: The land of broken dreams*”.  
by Rikki Shields

Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory with a population of 60,000 people, is built on Larrakia Land. The Larrakia tribe is small in number, only a few hundred mixed and tribal Aborigines.

The Larrakia struggle for Land Rights began in 1976 when six old women and four old men led by Topsy [Secretary], Violet [Adams] and Bobby Secretary, they chained themselves to the bulldozers and fended off the police and land developers with sticks when they tried to take their land for a hotel and sea-leisure complex.

There are both Men and Women’s sacred places in the waterhole where the water snake protects them and gives them food – fish, shellfish and edible roots! He is visible as a gentle breeze. Nothing has changed since the old days - Aboriginal Law survives.

Since 1980 the Larrakia have for a time stopped the push for this ugliness called civilisation. They have stopped them from stealing their small beach front, mangroves and fishing holes.

I, as relative of the Larrakia who carry their blood and the message stick from Kululuk, hope that the outcome of this exhibition of my photographs in Sweden will lead to an International movement to give my people their true rights as custodians of Australia.

**Rikki Shields**  
**London**  
**1988.**

[Note: The struggle for Kululuk in Coconut Grove, Darwin, NT, actually began in May, 1971. Rikki is referring to an incident on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1973, when residents of Kululuk were arrested for confronting surveyors at the Ostermann Street subdivision on land claimed by the Larrakia. Rikki returned to Darwin in August 1985 to take his photographs for the exhibition].

**Note from John Baylis on Facebook:** Richard’s sister Bernadette had two sons, Steven & Michael McGregor. Perhaps you have heard that Steven is a film producer and his latest film was premiered down South recently. It was the story of the Croker Island trek to Sydney

Further reading:

*We have bugger all: the Kululuk Story*, Cheryl Buchanan, Australian Union of Students, 1974.

*The Complete 64 Editions of the Newsletter Bunji, 1971-1985* (bound photocopies), PO Box 425, Maylands, WA 6931.

*Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement*, Bill Day, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994.

*Town camp or homeland? A history of the Kululuk Aboriginal community*, Samantha Wells, unpublished report to the Australian Heritage Commission, 1995.

*Saltwater People: Larrakia Stories from around Darwin*, Samantha Wells, Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, 2001.

*Risk v Northern Territory of Australia (with Corrigendum dated 29 August 2006) [2006] FCA 404. William Risk, Helen Secretary & Pauline Baban on behalf of the Larrakia people and Kevin Lance Quall on behalf of the Danggalaba & Kulumbiringin people v Northern Territory of Australia and Darwin City Council and Amateur Fishermen’s Association of the Northern Territory & Others*, Federal Court of Australia, Mansfield, J, 2006.

*Fred Fogarty: forgotten hero of the land rights struggle*, Bill Day, Darwin, 2011.

**A Poem by Rikki Shields**

**“KULULUK”**

A handwritten note by Rikki Shields on this copy of the poem reads:  
“To my old Bunji, Bill Day, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1992”.

**TEN YEARS I TALK TO NO-ONE**

**I HATE MYSELF WITH SHAME**

**FOR NOT FIGHTING**

**I WALK WITH MY MOTHER**

**OUR EARTH**

**SHE CARED FOR ME**

.....

**KULULUK !**

**MY TRIBAL LARRAKIA PEOPLE**

**SAID COME HOME - YOU ARE READY**

**TO LEARN OUR STORIES AND LAWS**

**I BECAME A WARRIOR AND FIRST**

**TIME IN MY LIFE**

**I FEEL A PROUD MAN**

**I HAVE SECRETS OF RED RIDGE**

**DREAMING PLACE**

**RAINBOW SNAKE MAN SHOW ME ALL**

**THEN IT WAS TIME TO LEAVE**

**BECAUSE NOW I AM BROTHER OF THE WIND**

**I AM BIRD ... SEA EAGLE**

**I AM KOWINNA ... I FLY WITH THE WIND**

**Rikki Shields**

**Denmark**

**1987**

**R.I.P. Rikki Shields**

**July 1st, 2012**

**U.K.**

*You can come home now Rikki, your job is done...*