

Review of Bill Day's book, *BUNJI*: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement (1994)

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Asked the old chestnut, "Why did you climb that mountain?" Andrew Hogarth would probably reply with the simplest answer: "Because it was there."

Not so easy to answer would be the question of what it is that drives a man to give up so much of his own life to chronicle in words and images a way of life completely foreign to that which he was born into.

The same questions could be asked of another Australian historian, Bill Day. Like Hogarth, Day's "immersion" in a different world has been recorded for posterity in print and photograph.

The pair are from entirely different backgrounds. Scottish-born Hogarth, 52, works part-time in a Sydney aged care hospital. Day, 65, is a West Australian anthropologist working in a remote WA mining town.

Both answered a calling when, exactly 10 years apart, one began living as a self-confessed "outsider" among Darwin's Aboriginal community, and the other embarked on his quest to discover and begin documenting the American Indian.

That two adventurous, humble white sojourners from the same country who never met should set off at roughly the same stage in their lives (Hogarth was aged 30, Day, 33) to champion oppressed peoples is, *bien entendu*, merely co-incidence. But the bridges the pair built into completely disparate, yet such similar cultures, in the same lifetime, is a rare juxtaposition in the history of indigenous people who have been displaced, dispossessed and decimated in the name of white imperialism.

In 1971, Day was a writer when he settled in the Top End and founded the humble but immediately controversial black rights newsletter *Bunji*, which would become a sweetly written book.(1).

Despite the great loss and hardship it brought the author, *Bunji* was still being typed, photocopied and handed out more than 50 editions and 10 years later when Hogarth decided it was time to realise a long-held childhood dream.

He embarked on the first of a series of hire-car road trips that have seen him criss-cross the American west, living among the people he studies with great loyalty and devotion. What began as a hobby is now a lifestyle, and his determination to do them justice is borne out by the fruits of his epic labours, which have come at great financial cost.

His 11 trips to date have translated into a formidable collection of priceless photographs and a growing resource base that adds a dimension to existing records as well as the six books he has already written and published on his chosen subject – the Native American.

Obvious differences in the Hogarth-Day case studies are the numbers involved and timeframes during which arguably the worst havoc was wrought upon the respective indigenous groups: one, formerly dependent on the horse to migrate and hunt, and which now lives on reservations; the other, skilled bush people who

survived by hunting and gathering, and now live in communities. How successive generations coped with the ensuing upheavals forced upon them by white supremacist governments is as different as it is identical. Suffice to say, the treatment of both populations – the original inhabitants – is a blight on humanity and an unequivocal international disgrace.

Socio-demographics and distributions differ, as do circumstances and contrasting outputs of the authors. There is no doubt that both hold a deep and abiding love of the people, and this shines effulgent to the joy of readers, permeating their narratives like gold lace through a tapestry. It is clear that this love, plus an overriding sense of social justice, was at one turbulent time, the driving force for one, and allows the other to still indulge his passion.

Wanderlust was also there in great and copious quantities. Day travelled to the UK and worked his way around Australia before heading north to fulfill a destiny he could never have foreseen. Hogarth was a seasoned European traveller before he emigrated first to New Zealand, then to Australia, where he settled in Sydney. In Darwin, *Bunji* (2) was hitting its stride, Day finding himself in the front line of the local aborigines' fight for land rights and equality, at a time when undeclared but overt apartheid ruled. Day says he "identified" with the victims and Hogarth uses the same word, stating in his introduction to *Great Plains: the American West*, that he simply wanted "to know (the) story" of the Plains Indian.

From the outset, I identified and empathised with (them). I wanted to know their story (3).

Parallels are unmistakable, the value of their legacy beyond question. Each has debunked in his own persuasive way the paternalistic, sanitised and often misleading versions of history disgorged by the two countries' respective education systems. In middle-class Australian schools, for instance, Europeans were the "early pioneers/colonists" and were never discussed in the context of a protracted invasion by a foreign power (4). Nor was there reference in this reviewer's schooling to human rights abuses, or the institutionalised racism seen from close quarters by Day and for which Australia is now renowned worldwide.

Post-modernist debate sparked by the "history wars" (5) questions the existence of official policies of genocide or "organised massacres" Down Under during 200-odd years of colonisation. Hogarth, though, is categorical about what occurred on the Great Plains. Between the late 15th and 19th centuries, he writes, six million Native Americans died through "diseases, such as cholera and smallpox, massacres, by civilians and soldiers, relocation . . . to remote and desolate areas . . . and the intended and unintended dissolution of Indian culture".(6)

Comparisons are inescapable – Day's Larrakia are Hogarth's Lakota – and the stories merge profoundly at two points in Day's often poetic and touching, *Bunji: a Story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement*. The first comes on page 43:

Indigenous people around the world were waging. Armed members of the American Indian Movement fought against paramilitary federal police in a seventy-one-day siege at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Parallels with the Aboriginal struggle, and the smell of blood, stirred the Australian media . . .

It was a true, a spirit of rebellion was emboldening black Australia and with Darwin being much smaller than other southern cities and having the greatest concentration of indigenous among its population,(7) the ensuing activism was more “visible”. Doubtlessly inspired by his courageous and defiant kin across the sea – the siege ended barely two months before – one protestor firebombed a surveyor’s truck when a work crew tried to peg a road through Larrakia land. The ploy succeeded in the short term (8) and in the years ahead, “scuffles and arguments” (p.47) blockades and marches (9), debates, petitions and tent embassies (10) comprised black Australia’s “awakening”, before the inevitable tide of “progress” and big-money bribes from developers and mining companies emasculated the last of the opposition. To this day, Australia has never seen an act of resistance like that famous 1973 siege, to which Day was referring. That’s not to say, however, that the Larrakia would not have drawn battle lines, had they had the numbers, weapons and resources on that explosive July day the same year.

Day begins Chapter 5 with a letter from a “Sioux Indian” that appeared in the following year’s June/July *Bunji*:

Dear Bunji

The sacred four winds tell me there is death and sadness in your land . . . Your names are different to ours, but when you cry, so do I. May the sacred four winds blow a beautiful life to you and your people . . . (11)

With somber clarity in an observation straight from the history of Aboriginal Australia, Hogarth reveals that the four winds were nobody’s saviour:

Poverty and alcoholism, the potent symbols of the much deeper malaise of despair, hurt, fear and disenfranchisement, became the silent killers as . . . communities across the country struggled to define their identity.(12)

The *Bunji* version of the same grim scenario was expressed by Day in verse:

In days gone by we had no fear

We fought the whites with club and spear

Brave old people died for their land

Their bones are buried in the sand

When white man gave us wine and beer

We put away our club and spear

Now we drink and fight each other

The whites are laughing at us, brother (13)

In the end, both authors ask in different ways with equal poignancy *How different would history have been . . .?* (14)

In North America, the Abramoff (15) Affair suggests that the 21st century might not be any kinder to the tribes than any previous.

Bunji depicts a past that is only marginally worse than the present. If anything, the rebellious, optimistic 70s were better because of the prevailing spirit of unity and cohesion . . . an *esprit de corp*, long since

smashed by political corruption and bickering among the mobs (tribes). Today in Australia's Top End, there is hardly a soul who does not know that the Northern Territory's prison population – already by far the highest per head in Australia – is about 80 per cent black (16). The cattle barons and others who in 1974 facetiously demanded "rights for whites" (17) probably have the answer off pat for such a damning statistic – that blacks break the law most often. Depressingly, this is still a response of choice among many Territorians. Quick from the same white mouths no doubt, would be a simple explanation for the riots in recent years in Redfern and on Palm Island, as well as the endemic problems of petrol sniffing and domestic violence currently ravaging Top End communities, where descendants of hunter-gatherer nomads are often forced to live in third-world conditions (18).

The American Indian Movement reveals the magnitude of problems being confronted and dealt with by AIM members (19). Concomitantly, the group that so dramatically rekindled the spirit of bravery of warrior times past at the famous Pine Ridge siege, illuminates the dignity, honour and glory that once were its people.

Hogarth and Day, in some ways poles apart, are irrevocably linked by the power of their stories, which transcend the time and distance separating them. Each reminds us that anger and discontent linger in both hemispheres, and for good reason.

Day's work *de profundis* is done. He has moved on. The man once described as a drifter, a radical, a ratbag and a white stirrer, has scaled his mountain. He can look back on the 12 years it took, proud in the knowledge that despite all the attendant frustration and sorrow, his achievements, impermanent as they were, were nonetheless a triumph of Herculean proportions.

Hogarth is focused on one final visit to the place that keeps drawing him back like a moth to a flame. He, too, has scaled the summits: every bit the modern-day trail-blazer whose boyhood longing has made him part of the history he yearned to write.

Among all the rewards reaped through his tireless endeavours – the friendships, the paintings, the memorabilia, his collection of priceless Indian artifacts, the exclusive ceremonies he has been invited to attend – none could be surely greater than the love, respect and trust that have been returned to him in kind.

The privilege that both writers say was theirs is now a luxury to be cherished by those who would follow, and posterity is richer for their experiences.

One would hope that the collective efforts of selfless authors such as Hogarth and Day inspire those in power to see themselves clear to scale their own mountain.

End Notes:

- (1) Day, William, *Bunji: A story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994.
- (2) "Bunji" is to Australian blacks what "comrade" is to Europeans.
- (3) Hogarth, Andrew, *Great Plains: the American West*, Andrew Hogarth Publishing, 1989, p.3.

(4) To the Kooris (blacks) and within left wing politics, January 26 is known annually as Invasion Day, not Australia Day.

(5) See Windschuttle, Reynolds, Manne, Ryan, Macintyre, et al.

(6) Hogarth, op.cit.

(7) Thirty per cent of the NT's total population of 200,000 (approx) is indigenous – the highest proportion of any state or territory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003 [www.abs.gov.au]).

(8) Dick Ward Drive cuts through [the Kulaluk land claim] and links the northern suburbs to the city.

(9) In 1980, Aborigines from all over Australia descended on the Aboriginal community of Noonkanbah, in WA's far north, where they blockaded State Government-backed mining operations on a sacred site. The mine later yielded nothing of value to the mining company Amex.

Two years later, 224 protestors, including the daughter of then Governor-General Sir Ninian Stephen, were arrested and fined for their involvement in a series of mass protests at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games.

In 1987, disillusioned Aboriginal poet Kath Walker (1920-93) handed back the MBE medal awarded to her in 1970 and reclaimed her traditional name, Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

In 1998, thousands of protestors joined the Mirrar people to protest ERA's plans to mine uranium at Jabiluka, in Kakadu National Park.

In 2000, up to half-a-million people around Australia participated in the Reconciliation March.

(10) Tent embassies sprang up temporarily around the country. But the one erected outside the old Parliament House in Canberra, on Australia Day, 1972, has been maintained ever since and will be replaced by a permanent structure.

(11) Day, op.cit., p.61

(12) Hogarth, op.cit.

(13) Day, op.cit., p.14

(14) Ibid., p.129

(15) Jack Abramoff, a “super lobbyist” for US President George W. Bush, is alleged to have stolen up to \$US66 million from tribes in at least four states, in what has become the biggest scandal in US politics since Watergate.

(16) Australian Bureau of Statistics, June, 2003 (www.abs.gov.au).

(17) Day, op.cit., p.57

(18) *The Guardian*, March 2, 2005; the *Koori Mail*, February 23, 2005 (<http://www.cpa.org.au/garchve05/1217health.html>). See also Charles Sturt University's Aboriginal Studies curriculum at http://hsc.csu.edu.au/ab_studies/rights/global/social_justice_global/sjwelcome.status.front.htm

(19) www.aimovement.org