

Angela Woollacott

Drawing Southerners' Attention to the Far North

Kylie Tennant's Mission as a Public Commentator in Mid-Century Australia

Abstract: Kylie Tennant was one of Australia's most popular and influential writers in the mid-20th century. Having gained fame in the 1930s and 1940s for her eye-witness accounts of the suffering of the poor and unemployed, in the late 1950s she used her public platform to draw attention to the terrible consequences of colonialism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the far north. Her books 'Speak You So Gently' and 'All the Proud Tribesmen' sold well nationally and internationally, fulfilling her aim to promote community co-operatives as a solution. Here I position her as an activist who sought to shift Australian public opinion away from racism. I suggest that we might see her as a transitional figure between Xavier Herbert, who in the 1930s profited from colourful depictions of Aboriginal degradation, and Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the celebrated Indigenous poet whose works from the 1960s evoked Aboriginal oppression and called for human rights and full citizenship.

Kylie Tennant was one of Australia's most prominent writers in the mid-20th-century decades, known especially for her socialist realist portrayals of the hardships of the working class and unemployed swagmen (as itinerant labourers were called) – occasionally referred to as Australia's John Steinbeck. Tennant is a complex figure: from a middle-class background, but accomplishing feats such as walking hundreds of kilometres from Sydney to Coonabarabran, camping out with the unemployed along the way. One journalist put it that her name became "legendary for a certain mad courage that took her into brothels, bars, and jails to get material for her novels".¹ A firm socialist (very briefly in 1935 a member of the Communist Party of Australia), she gained fame following her portrayals of the unemployed during the Depression. Her 1941 book 'The Battlers' made her, according to biographer Jane Grant, a "household name" – partly because the stoicism she captured resonated with a wartime readership.²

She is one of a group of ten activists and internationalists who comprise my current study of how Australian general public opinion on race was persuaded to shift in the mid-century decades. Tennant was influential as a popular writer, while radical on both class and race. Her subjects included daily life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with vivid accounts and fictional portrayals that condemned racism and abysmal living conditions, while evoking the richness of Indigenous cultures and community life.

In this article, I locate Kylie Tennant in a lineage of evolving Australian cultural conceptions of First Nations people, and thinking about race and human rights. In the 1950s Tennant used her fame as a platform to draw attention to the living conditions of First Nations people in the north. Grant notes that Tennant hoped her books would educate the public about disadvantage, and thus shift the "climate of opinion".³ Tennant lived in New South Wales practically her

1 The Bulletin, 29 April 1967, p. 32 (April Hersey: Back to the battling).

2 The Weekend Australian, 10 June 2006, p. 32 (Jane Grant: Life of Kylie).

3 Jane Grant: Kathleen (Kylie) Tennant (1912-1988).

whole life, mostly in Sydney – so in that sense she was an unlikely champion of the far north.

Arguably, southerners – the majority of the Australian populace – had little detailed knowledge of Australia's northern expanse prior to World War II. Awareness of the far north, especially of Aboriginal people, increased abruptly in 1938 with the publication and success of Xavier Herbert's sprawling novel 'Capricornia'.

'Capricornia' won the Commonwealth Sesqui-Centenary prize and was widely read and reviewed. Frank Ryan, writing in 'The Workers' Weekly' called it "an outstanding book":

Xavier Herbert has written a powerful story, chock-a-block with realism, which is a grave indictment of the governing class of this country, for their infamous treatment of colored [sic] and half-caste Australia. ... [O]nly last week official figures showed the rapid extermination of the aborigines [sic] in the north ... But while the author's sympathy is clearly on the side of the victims of this color [sic] prejudice, he never idealises these characters, nor allows his vision to become clouded by his allegiance to their cause [...] [W]hen he sees degradation he knows exactly where to point the finger of blame.⁴

The 'Sydney Morning Herald' called it "a virile novel" about the "injustice" "meted out by the conquering whites" in the Northern Territory.⁵ Brisbane's 'Telegraph' considered that Herbert used "unrestrained realism" to show "life in the Gulf country as it is lived by low-caste whites and lower half-castes".⁶ 'The Bulletin' judged that the book "makes clear that White Australia, in the increasing number of northern half-castes, has a home-grown color [sic] problem on its hands".⁷ And 'The Australian Quarterly' deemed miscegenation to be the book's main theme; it called the book "a challenge thrown in the face of the nation".⁸

In response to, and perhaps defiance of, the huge success of 'Capricornia', one of Tennant's motives for her post-World War II writing about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was to indict Herbert for being so "wrong" about them. As she summed it up in 'The Bulletin' in April 1962: "It is ungrateful of Mr. Xavier Herbert to abuse the aborigines [...] for the lust, drunkenness and misery out of which he has made his writing reputation".⁹ (Of course, Alexis Wright's landmark 2006 novel 'Carpentaria' was also a later, very powerful riposte to Herbert.)

My interest in Tennant includes her transitional role in Australian cultural awareness of colonial inequalities and racism. Her writing challenged the impact of Xavier Herbert and may have helped to open the door, for example, for prominent Aboriginal poet Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal's huge readership from the 1960s.

First in 1955 and then again in 1957 Tennant travelled to the far north of Queensland. The first trip was specifically to the Lockhart River Co-operative Mission

4 The Workers' Weekly, 17 May 1938, p. 2 (Frank Ryan: Book Reviews. 'Capricornia').

5 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 February 1938, p. 5 (Novels of the Day. The Colour Question).

6 The Telegraph [Brisbane], 10 February 1938, p. 12 (A Novel of the North).

7 The Bulletin, 30 March 1938, p. 2 (North Australian Canvas).

8 Furnley Maurice: The Literary Value of Human Agony.

9 The Bulletin, 14 April 1962, p. 26 (Kylie Tennant: How wrong is Xavier Herbert? The Case for the Aborigines).

on Cape York, and the other extended to Moa Island in the Torres Strait (Fig. 1). Both times she funded the travel there herself, through earnings from her own journalism and creative writing.¹⁰ Both were research trips, which resulted in the

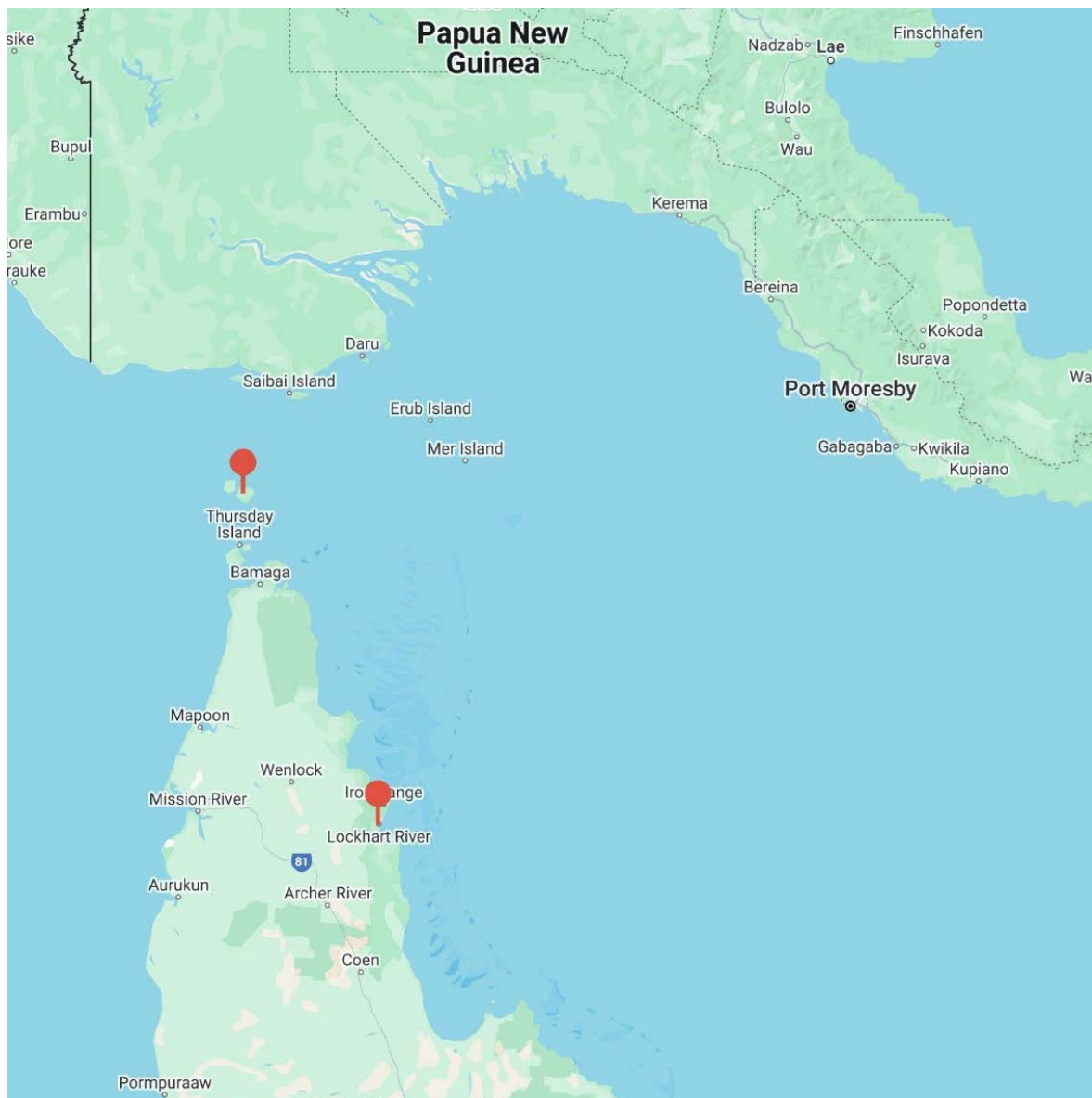


Fig. 1. Far north Queensland and its proximity to Papua New Guinea, indicating Lockhart River and Moa Island

publication of two of her most successful books: 'Speak You So Gently', published by Gollancz in 1959, and 'All the Proud Tribesmen', published by Macmillan in 1959. While Tennant had previously shown support for Indigenous rights, she had not before made them as central to her writing as they were in the late 1950s.

Tennant's motivation for these two, generically different, evocations of Indigenous life in the far north sprang from her Christian socialism. She and her school-teacher husband, Lewis Rodd, shared an active and long-standing commitment, albeit with differing emphases: for Tennant, her emphasis was on the socialism, while Rodd's was on Christianity. Rodd was active in the High part of the Church

10 See Kylie Tennant: *The Missing Heir*, p. 138.

of England; Tennant converted to it for his sake.¹¹ As noted above, while Tennant had even joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1935, she quickly left, alienated by the party's workings, and settled on socialism. Christian socialism was an important strand within Australian radicalism in the mid-century decades. Tennant recalled being at the foundation meeting of the Sydney branch of the Christian Socialist Movement, describing the group colourfully as a: "rabble of individualists, Quakers, old lady suffragettes, students, pacifist parsons, vegetarian cranks, crackpots and intellectuals".¹² Her jaundiced views of the CPA are clear in the pleasure with which she reported that Communist Party attempts to gain control of the movement failed.

In Tennant's account, Christian socialism in Sydney was anchored at Christ Church St Laurence (near Central Station) under the Reverend John Hope; Lewis Rodd served as a rector's warden there. Through Christ Church St. Laurence, Rodd met the Rev. Alf Clint whose determined work for social justice began with coal miners in rural New South Wales. Rodd, Clint and Tennant developed a strong friendship which they shared for decades.

Clint's first job had been with the Balmain Co-operative store. In 1930 he was involved in the shearers' strike; his whole life he was connected to the trade union movement. His early priesthood was spent among the New South Wales coalmines. After World War II, Clint went to New Guinea to proselytize about both Christianity and co-operatives.¹³ According to Tennant, Clint's mission in New Guinea included combatting both endemic illness and the planters who were exploiting local labour. His program to do this was to teach the New Guinea people to form co-operatives, to work their own plantations and use their own boats to raise and sell crops of rice, copra and coconuts. Goals included tribal self-sufficiency, a higher standard of living and health, and independence from the exploitative colonizing planters. Particularly, the aim was to help the tribes to retain and claim back their own lands. After establishing his work in New Guinea, Clint was stricken with a serious skin disease, which required months of treatment first in Port Moresby and then Sydney. He was devastated when doctors told him he must not go back to Papua New Guinea.

Instead, he was appointed Director of Native Co-operatives for the Church of England's Australian Board of Missions (ABM). His remit was to found co-operatives among Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The first was established in 1954 at Lockhart River Mission, which had been founded as an ABM mission in 1924 close to the tip of Cape York Peninsula, on the eastern side. There would soon be another at Moa Island in the Torres Strait. These Christian co-operatives represented a radical development in mission policy and the administration of Aboriginal communities; a significant shift when considered in national context. But Clint was disappointed that they attracted little media attention: just one ABC story and some commentary in small publications.¹⁴ So he enlisted Tennant – a successful and prominent journalist as well as an award-winning novelist –

11 See Jane Grant: Kylie Tennant, p. 15.

12 Kylie Tennant: Speak You So Gently, p. 98.

13 See Noel Loos, Robyn Keast: The Radical Promise, p. 289.

14 See Noel Loos, Robyn Keast: The Radical Promise, p. 293.

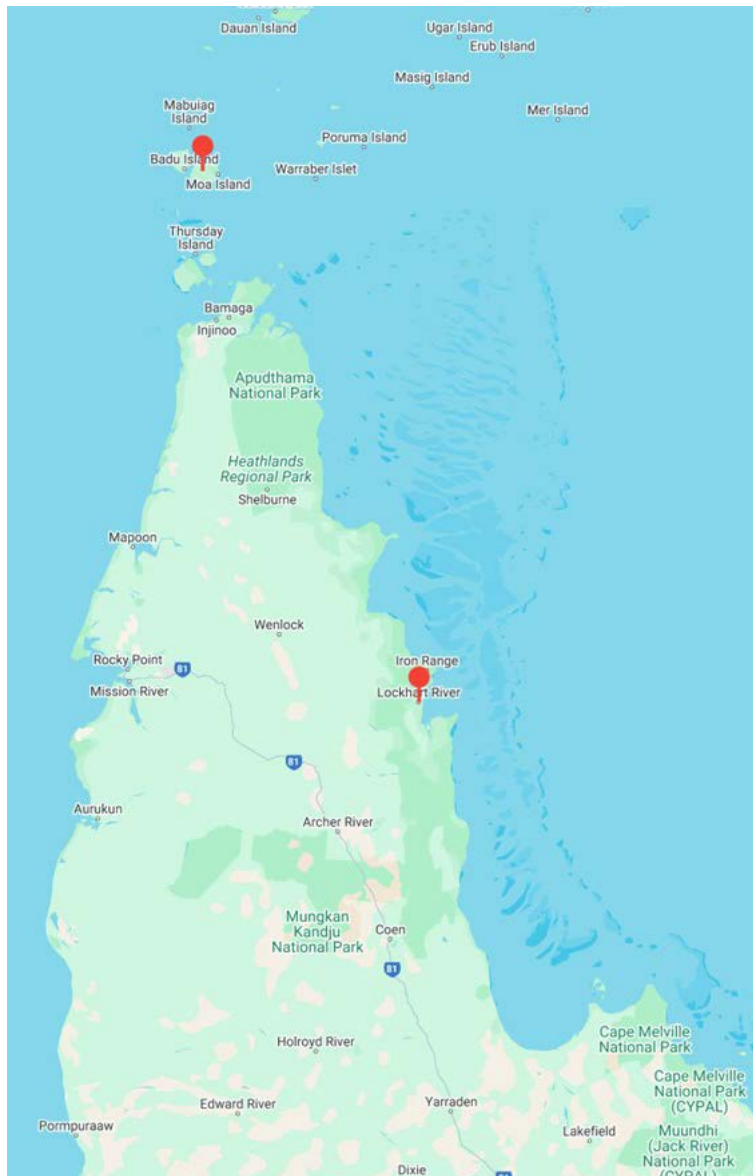


Fig. 2. Close-up of the area, including Moa Island and Lockhart River

to write their stories.¹⁵ In effect, Tennant agreed to undertake her extended visits to Cape York in order to become the publicist for Clint and the Aboriginal co-operative movement (Fig. 2).

Tennant's earlier books had been driven by her desire to tell the stories of people's struggles for daily life and the widespread suffering in the Depression. One interviewer claimed that: "Anyone knowing nothing about Kylie Tennant could deduce when she was born by reading two or three of her novels. They are the novels of a writer who, in her own words, 'is not so much interested in emotions as in how people make a living, because I belong to the generation who couldn't get jobs'". John Hetherington contended that Tennant learned

about life in the Depression years. Yet, she was not cynical but a realist. Indeed, what impressed him most about her was "her almost boundless enthusiasm, her elasticity of mind, and her surging joy of life [...] her vitality is prodigious". She told him that while she'd always been interested in politics and sociology, she chose to write novels "because back in the depression you couldn't get the truth published unless you pretended it was a lie. My writing principles are simple. Try to make it interesting, and, if you can, make it funny. While they laugh they'll think. And every writer wants to make people think".¹⁶

On her project that became 'Speak You So Gently', Tennant asserted in 1956 that "Lockhart is an important place, because it has the first registered aboriginal [sic] co-operative in Australia, and the co-operative, which has been in operation for several years now, has shown just what aborigines [sic] can do when they

15 See Kylie Tennant: *Speak You So Gently*, pp. 9-16.

16 *The Age*, 24 September 1960, p. 18 (John Hetherington: Kylie Tennant. A Novelist Who Knew The 'Great Depression').

are working together as an economic unit".¹⁷ She described the Lockhart River community as comprised of around 300 Aboriginal people, from five different First Nations whose lands met at that place, as well as eleven settlers. Today, Lockhart River is an Aboriginal community of around 640 people, of six language groups: the Kuuku Yau, Wuthathi, Kanthanumpu, Uutaalnganu, Umpila and Kaanju peoples.

Tennant's first visit in July 1955 came when the co-operative had established its trochus diving and was looking to expand its enterprises into cattle raising. She even put out a call for a man familiar with cattle to go north to help them out, casting the Aboriginal co-operative movement as "their long-delayed 'New Deal'".¹⁸ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries First Nations people in this area had suffered terribly from dispossession, disease and malnutrition. They had been vulnerable to labour exploitation by settler fishermen and woodcutters, and the women had been sexually abused. After the ABM mission was set up in 1924 the community existed on a subsistence level, with many of the men absent while working on cattle stations and fisheries further afield. The move towards community self-sufficiency and enterprises began in 1951 with the appointment of John Warby as superintendent. He sought to embed profitable work to keep the men home, particularly through trochus shell fishing with the community's own boat; small-scale cattle raising, and even attempting to grow cotton – which worked but proved financially unviable. He instituted adult education to develop people's skills and capacity for self-management, laying down a basis for the co-operative system which Alf Clint introduced. Warby would recall how during Clint's visits in 1953 and 1954, he would explain cooperativism to the people: "we used to gather at 9 o'clock each morning before starting the day's work and hear Alf expound, illustrate and answer questions, day after day for about three months".¹⁹ At first the co-operative made a modest profit, but the economic viability of their enterprises continued to be a challenge for various reasons.

In 1957 when Tennant returned for a second extended visit the stakes were even higher. The Presbyterian mission at Weipa on the other side of the peninsula was being moved because bauxite had been found and big corporations were grabbing the land. Lockhart River was threatened because BHP wanted to prospect there. The Aboriginal cooperative, now turning some profit, could be closed with no compensation for its Indigenous members. Tennant's public plea was impassioned:

The only thing that can save the colored [sic] people and their cooperative movement from being swallowed up by the big monopolies is public support, a firm stand in their favor [sic] by people and Parliament. For 150 odd years the original inhabitants of this land have been killed off or driven into deserts. Their land has been taken from them and is still being taken from them. It is not just in the past, it is happening today. It is still going on. And only the people of Australia, when they know the facts, can stop it.²⁰

17 Tribune (Sydney), 25 July 1956, p. 8 (Kylie Tennant: Lockhart – Not On The Map But It's An Important Place).

18 Farmer and Settler (Sydney), 26 August 1955, p. 2 (Aborigine Cattle Plan).

19 Noel Loos, Robyn Keast: *The Radical Promise*, p. 292.

20 Tribune, 27 November 1957, p. 5 ('Only the people can save them': Writer hits out at monopoly grab of Aborigine lands in North Queensland).

It wasn't only that the Lockhart Indigenous cooperative might not be properly compensated. The Lockhart site was traditional land for all of the tribes who comprised the community – a conjunction and connection which could not be replicated. Further, they had laboured hard for years at this point: they had painstakingly laid a pipeline, established vegetable gardens, and built houses, a school, a hospital, a kindergarten and a child centre as well as their cooperative enterprises.²¹

Stephen Davies, who was Bishop of Carpentaria from 1922 to 1948, told Tennant that the threats presented by mining to mission reserves in the far north were evident from the early 1920s – noting that some government officials then held shares in the tin mines. Davies had sought to locate the Lockhart River settlement so that it wasn't too close to tin and iron deposits, to prevent the potential exploitation of Aboriginal labour. He decided that the most secure future lay in teaching the Aborigines agriculture and encouraging commercial fishing that they could control themselves rather than do for others for nothing. He oversaw the introduction of cattle raising, and crops ranging from bananas, yams and paw-paw to cotton – the latter to sell to Japanese shell divers. Some crops worked, others did not.²²

Reviewers of 'Speak You So Gently' grasped the significance of co-operatives' potential benefits for First Nations peoples.²³ The 'Tribune' asserted that this account of "the remarkable and little known co-operative of Aborigines known as the Lockhart River Mission" is "[o]ne of the most beautiful and powerful books recently published"; and called it "a travel book of unusual fascination".²⁴

The book's success was also due in part to Tennant's vivid writing and character detail. A reviewer in the 'Manchester Evening News' commented: "until I read Mrs Kylie Tennant's bracing, sprightly and entirely engrossing 'Speak You So Gently', I had not realized that barren land [the northernmost tip of Australia] bristled with so many muscular Christians. To be a Church of England parson up there, it seems, you need to have the enthusiasm of a good Boy Scout, the physique of a professional footballer, the guile of a trade union organiser, and the cheerful dedication of St. Francis of Assisi ... I salute a book and an author who reminds us that religion can still be a joyous thing".²⁵ For the reviewer in the 'Canberra Times', it was a book to be welcomed: "The writing is refreshing, sensitive, vivid and she makes her reader share her experiences in living among these so-called 'primitives' of Northern Australia".²⁶ It is possible that the book's serious purpose was a bit lost on the advertising copy writer who called it "a vivid and intensely interesting book about her 'walkabout' in Northern Australia

21 See Sydney Morning Herald, 24 October 1957, p. 25 (Native Centre in the North).

22 See Kylie Tennant: *Speak You So Gently*, pp. 173 ff..

23 See The Birmingham Post, 8 September 1959, p. 26 (Gilbert Thomas: *Round the Shelves*).

24 Tribune, 28 October 1959, p. 7 (Books); Tribune, 2 December 1959, p. 6 (Outstanding Xmas Books).

25 Manchester Evening News, 5 September 1959, p. 2 (David Brett: They find their parish in the wide, open spaces).

26 Canberra Times, 19 September 1959, p. 13 (Books ... *Speak You So Gently*).

and Cape York Peninsula".²⁷ Nor would she have appreciated the 'Birmingham Post's comment on her "charming pen-pictures of a simple and lovable people".²⁸

More insightful was the reviewer for 'The Observer', who said the book had "wit, tenderness and a fierce and engaging irony":

Miss Tennant describes these warm, haunted communities, their pioneering struggles to put down roots [Lockhart was a merged community of five distinct language groups], the fearless and selfless white men and women who live among them, sharing their feasts and festivals, their dancing, and spearthrowing and trochus-diving [the trochus mollusc was harvested and sold], and who fight their battles for recognition.²⁹

The 'Guardian's' review captured Tennant's surprising stoicism and constant enjoyment of the physical and cultural novelties she encounters. Isabel Quigly noted: "Irony, indignation, amusement, an unfastidious acceptance of people – all these, with her very great charm, make up this very personal account of her work and journeys, with its sidelong looks at Australia's present policies and its backward looks at the long disgrace, in relation to the aborigines [sic], of its past".³⁰

'All the Proud Tribesmen', aimed at adolescents, won the Australian Children's Book Council 1960 Book of the Year Award. [An interesting footnote here is that the judge for the award was feminist writer and critic Nettie Palmer.] Tennant would later say that 'All the Proud Tribesmen' was her best-selling book, which is notable because earlier books had sold widely and won prizes. And she had this to say about *why* she wrote it: "I can con myself that I wrote 'All the Proud Tribesmen' because Macmillan's wanted a children's book but I know damned well I wrote it because at Lockhart River the aborigines [sic] had no books to read that were not about The Little White Boy and I was determined there was going to be a book about A Little Brown Boy".³¹

The novel was based on her 1957 trip to the Torres Strait during which she visited Thursday Island, the Strait's commercial entrepot which she described as dispiriting and seedy, and Moa Island which she enjoyed. Tennant's eleven-year-old daughter Benison accompanied her.

The 'Little Brown Boy' character Kerri was an adolescent Islander who had been given by the village as an infant to schoolteacher Miss Buchanan, who adopted him and mentored him educationally with a view towards his succeeding her as teacher. Tennant based Buchanan on a historical missionary who had gathered together a mixed group of Pacific Islanders, deported from Queensland after the prohibition of Islander labourers under both Queensland and Commonwealth legislation, and founded a community at Moa Island.³² The character of Miss Buchanan – transparently one of the story's heroes – was also shaped by practical and stoic women missionaries whom Tennant encountered at both Moa

27 The Age, 5 September 1959, p. 20 (At Angus & Robertson Ltd.: Speak You So Gently).

28 The Birmingham Post, 8 September 1959, p. 26 (Gilbert Thomas: Round the Shelves).

29 The Observer (London), 6 September 1959, p. 25 (Alan Ross: Back to the Outback" [review of Speak You So Gently]).

30 The Guardian, 25 September 1959, p. 6 (Isabel Quigly: Shadow in the Mind of Australia).

31 Untitled typescript article, Box 23, Series 3, File 27, Papers of Kylie Tennant: MS 10043, National Library of Australia.

32 See Kylie Tennant: Speak You So Gently, p. 148.

Island and Lockhart River: women whose efforts to improve the locals' health, nutrition, literacy and general living standards, in Tennant's estimation, weighed more in the moral balance than their religious evangelising.

The book was so successful that, in 1961 when Gollancz published a collection of stories for adolescents by authors from fifteen countries, Tennant wrote the Australian one with a story from Cape York Peninsula called "Such a Long Way Home".³³

At the time of its release, the book was reviewed positively around the globe. A reviewer for the 'Chicago Tribune' called it "a thrilling and genuinely moving tale" by "a well known Australian novelist" in "her first book for children".³⁴ A brief notice in London's 'The Observer' praised Tennant as "one of the best" Australian novelists, and the book's story as "gripping and moving".³⁵ One press notice of its winning the Children's Book of the Year Award commended Tennant as a "distinguished and distinctive author", describing the book as "a gripping story for 12 to 14 year olds that has as well a serious theme: the impact of our culture upon those of neighbouring islands".³⁶

Some press coverage of the book was evidently written by people who had not read it, such as the journalist for 'The Age' who called its imaginary Torres Strait community "fun-loving islanders" – and also confused Tennant's daughter as a son.³⁷ A Canadian newspaper suggested that the story's location was somewhere between New Zealand and Australia.³⁸

As late as 1982, when the 'Sydney Morning Herald' ran a column during "Book Week" asking four children from different suburbs, ostensibly dissatisfied with that year's Children's Book award winners, to choose a favourite older book, Shawn Whelan from Rozelle declared that 'All the Proud Tribesmen':

[W]ell deserves a medal now [...] [T]he book is now out of print. I think it should be readily available for school students to read [...] I seriously think that publishers should consider reprinting this book so that today's generation of youngsters can enjoy it the way I have.³⁹

More recently, 'All the Proud Tribesmen' has been criticised for its positive portrayal of some of the white settler characters and the deference of the islanders towards them. In 1998 it was condemned because the story showed "'the child-like faith of the local people in [school-teacher] Miss Buchanan and white officialdom'".⁴⁰ This criticism is sound, but overlooks the fact that the adolescent Islander boy Kerri is the hero of the story, who takes charge of events towards the end, and who was mentored – culturally and in diving – by a clan elder and other

33 Sydney Morning Herald, 25 February 1961, p. 20 (Kathleen M. Commins: Books for Children).

34 Chicago Tribune Sunday, 11 September 1960, p. 182 (Polly Goodwin: The Junior Bookshelf).

35 The Observer (London), 29 November 1959, p. 39 (Marghanita Laski: Novels for the Teens).

36 The Age, 9 July 1960, p. 52 (Talking of Books).

37 The Age, 9 July 1960, p. 7 (Woman Writer Winner of Book Award).

38 See The Leader-Post (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada), 27 August 1960, p. 11 (Charles Paul May: Books can be linked with school activity).

39 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 July 1982, p. 39 (Older books are not forgotten).

40 The Age, 9 August 1998, p. 14 (Jane Sullivan: Childhood's naïve racism revisited). Sullivan quotes the criticism from 'The Oxford Companion to Australian Children's Literature'.

senior men. Tennant's term "Proud Tribesmen" reflected her intention to show this passing on of cultural traditions.

Dale and Lynne Spender, in their obituary of Tennant for the 'Sydney Morning Herald', saw her as linking an older generation of writers and a younger. In the 1930s she was published alongside Flora Eldershaw, Marjorie Barnard, Dymphna Cusack, Eleanor Dark and Miles Franklin. The Spender sisters saw Tennant as the start of a new generation, noting that "her commitment to Aboriginal rights was characteristic and enduring".⁴¹ Within two years of her death, Tennant was published in an anthology of women writers supposedly representative of the mid-century decades; several others – Katharine Susannah Prichard, Judith Wright and Dorothy Hewett – were also outspoken on Indigenous matters.⁴²

The mid-century movement for Aboriginal co-operatives fits into the longer history of co-operatives in Australia. Research by Greg Patmore, Nikola Balnave and Olivera Marjanovic tells us that co-operatives began in Australia in the 1820s, with waves of interest in them from 1882 to 1894, 1916 to 1924, 1943 to 1950 and 1953 to 1972. Their high point was in 1981, after which they declined.⁴³ Balnave and Patmore suggest that "consumer co-ops tended to be established at the back-end of an economic slump, or when prices and the cost of living were increasing" and "there was disillusionment with the prevailing economic system".⁴⁴ Indigenous co-operatives have sprung up in Australia in two waves, the first being that partly instigated by Alf Clint in the 1950s and of which Lockhart River and Moa Island formed key components, and all of which faced the big challenge of "the economic sustainability of remote communities". Another prominent instance in the 1950s was the Aboriginal mining cooperative formed at Pilbara in Western Australia following the strike there in the late 1940s.⁴⁵ That the Aboriginal co-operative movement was growing in the mid-1950s is evident too from Tennant's mention of one started in Armidale, NSW, by a Roman Catholic priest around 1957.⁴⁶ The second and more successful wave came in the wake of the 1967 Referendum and the Commonwealth government funding which flowed from it. In this wave, Indigenous co-operatives hit a peak of 49 in 1975, at least 30 of which were in Queensland.⁴⁷

One difference between the Moa Island co-operative and Lockhart River was the former's longer roots. Tennant attributes its origin to the London Missionary Society's arrival in the Torres Strait in 1867 and its subsequent promotion of basic co-operative production systems: in boat-building and in establishing coconut plantations for copra. The Society maintained its missions in the Strait until World War I, which disrupted its finances. Their missions were taken over by the

41 Sydney Morning Herald, 1 March 1988, p. 14 (Dale Spender, Lynne Spender: An outsider who will be missed).

42 See The Canberra Times, 17 February 1990, p. 22 (Marian Eldridge: Restless years for women storytellers).

43 See Greg Patmore, Nikola Balnave, Olivera Marjanovic: Worker co-operatives in Australia 1833-2024, p. 7.

44 Nikola Balnave, Greg Patmore: Rochdale consumer co-operatives in Australia, p. 999.

45 See Anne Scrimgeour: To Make It Brilliantly Apparent to the People of Australia, pp. 16-31.

46 See Kylie Tennant: Speak You So Gently, pp. 105 f.

47 See Greg Patmore, Nikola Balnave, Olivera Marjanovic: A History of Australian Co-Operatives 1827-2023, pp. 159 f.

Department of Native Affairs, and the Church of England with its High Church rituals, under the Bishop of Carpentaria.

The 1950s advocacy of co-operatives for Aboriginal communities was caught between the policies of assimilation and its successor, that of self-determination. When Tennant returned to Sydney from her 1957 trip, she met with the chair of the Australian Board of Missions to raise her concerns about the mining prospectors at Lockhart. When she put it to him that the reserves had been given to First Nations people as land for them to live on, he contradicted her. Queensland's 1897 Act which set up those reserves, he said, had been based on the government's assumption that Indigenous people would die out. But they did not. In the late 1950s in Queensland around 9000 Indigenous people lived across four government-run settlements and twelve missions; part of a total Indigenous population of over 43 000 in the state. The government had finally accepted that Indigenous people were not dying out, but they were not willing to let them live on land now found to have economic value. His view was that missions would be superseded, and ought to be turned into co-operatives. Co-operatives could provide Indigenous people with skills and training to help them assimilate.⁴⁸

The historian who has produced the most work on the Aboriginal co-operatives is Noel Loos. In an article published in 1992, Loos and co-author Robyn Keast provide an assessment of the whole movement, focussing their research on Lockhart River. Loos and Keast see the cooperative movement of the postwar decades as an interim stage in the running of Aboriginal reserves: a transition point between church-run missions and government-administered communities. In the 1950s governments around Australia adopted assimilation as the broad policy towards Aborigines. Its main architect, Professor A. P. Elkin, was himself an ordained Anglican priest.⁴⁹ While the Christian co-operatives on Aboriginal reserves did not last long, Loos and Keast assess it as a mixed success. While it was founded on the "naïve" belief that cooperativism fitted well with traditional Indigenous communal life, they see it as "a radical attempt to effect an assimilation based on white working-class idealism".⁵⁰

But the challenges for Lockhart River proved overwhelming. The market for trochus shell collapsed because buttons became made of plastic; even though their land contained minerals of commercial value, the community did not have land rights to mine it. Men again left to find work elsewhere. The cooperative was reduced to just a store, and was wound up in 1963. Problems included government and Church hierarchy hostility to Clint, whom they painted as a Communist. A Queensland government minister who visited Lockhart River even compared it to a "Russian collective farm".⁵¹ As part of the ABM closing down its co-operatives program, in 1962 the Lockhart River community was moved to a different location within the reserve, closer to a wharf and the aerodrome.⁵² In 1967 the Queensland government assumed responsibility for the Lockhart com-

48 See Kylie Tennant: *Speak You So Gently*, pp. 172f..

49 See Noel Loos: *From Church to State*, p. 77.

50 Noel Loos, Robyn Keast: *The Radical Promise*, p. 287.

51 Noel Loos: *White Christ, Black Cross*, p. 123.

52 See Noel Loos: *From Church to State*, p. 80.

munity. By the 1990s, an Aboriginal Community Council was in charge. Traditional ceremonies were still performed but attenuated; alcoholism was prevalent and life-expectancy still short; and Christianity continued in a somewhat reduced form with a priest from the Solomon Islands. The old mission site from before 1962 still retained cultural significance.⁵³

Loos and Keast view the demise of the co-operative communities as perhaps inevitable considering the Church of England's unwillingness to fund them realistically for such development, combined with the lack of Aboriginal land rights that would allow them to decide their own futures or to borrow sufficient funds to establish sustainable enterprises. Yet there were lasting benefits. Queensland government administration with greater funding helped to improve aspects of the standard of living. And the Commonwealth government adopted parts of the co-operative movement as the basis for assisting Indigenous communities to implement self-determination. In Loos and Keast's assessment, the wonderful outcome was the establishment of Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative College in Sydney, by Alf Clint when he was director of the ABM's Co-operative Department.

On Tennant and Clint's 1957 visit to Moa Island, Alf Clint gave a lecture in the village of Kuban on co-operatives, with the local school-teacher assisting with translation. Clint explained co-operatives could be used for different economic purposes: gardening, fishing, trochus and pearl diving, building houses, and mining. He explained the origin of co-operatives at Rochdale in England, and urged that a co-operative system needed to be built slowly and democratically. His vision included the islanders becoming sufficiently independent that men would no longer have to sign up for work on pearling and shell boats that took them away from home for long periods.⁵⁴ After Moa, stopping at Badu island, Clint also lectured to the community on co-operatives, casting them as a practical way of practising Christianity by taking care of others. He sought to recruit young men to come to Sydney to attend Tranby, the college in Glebe he himself had established and which was run by the co-operative section of the Australian Board of Missions to train Aborigines for management and administrative roles not least in co-operatives.⁵⁵

Tranby is located in "a charming old house" that had been bequeathed to Rector John Hope of Christ Church St. Laurence, who had used it as a hostel, then gave it to Clint for the co-operative section.⁵⁶ Tranby has trained many Aboriginal people with skills that empower them individually and also their communities. Loos and Keast's summary view of Lockhart River and Moa Island is that: "The surprising thing is not that the Anglican cooperative movement failed but that it was introduced at all in Queensland in the 1950s and that Tranby still exists as an instrument for the Aboriginal and Islander empowerment that the Christian Co-operative Movement hoped to achieve".⁵⁷

53 See David Thompson: *Bora, Church and Modernization at Lockhart River, Queensland*, pp. 275f.

54 See Kylie Tennant: *Speak You So Gently*, pp. 183ff., 189-192.

55 See *ibid.*, p. 218.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

57 Noel Loos, Robyn Keast: *The Radical Promise*, p. 301.

Tennant's support for Indigenous education and self-determination, subsequent to the two 1959 books, included fund-raising for Tranby.⁵⁸ In 1980 Tranby shifted to Aboriginal control when Kevin Cook, a Wandandian-Yuin man from the south coast of New South Wales, took over as general secretary from Alf Clint, who had first recruited him through their mutual trade union connections. From the mid-1960s, Tranby recruited Indigenous students from around Australia, the Torres Strait, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands. Clint even assisted a couple of Tranby students, including Cook, to enroll at Coady International Co-operative Institute in Canada.⁵⁹ In the 1970s and 1980s, those involved in Indigenous co-operatives included Eddie Mabo, who in 1971 was the initial secretary of Meriam Co-operative Trading on Murray Island in the Torres Strait and in the late 1980s director of the ABIS Community Cooperative Society in Townsville.⁶⁰

If the Aboriginal co-operatives of the 1950s arose in the context of the policy of assimilation, and the transition from Church-run missions to government-administered communities, we need also to consider the significance of the impact of World War II. Xavier Herbert's blockbuster novel 'Capricornia' had been published just on the eve of war. When Tennant was writing in the late 1950s, the war had left its legacies. The Pacific theatre of the war, the presence of Australia's own forces in Queensland and the Northern Territory, and the large numbers of American troops stationed there all helped to draw southerners' attention to the north. Even though the extent of the Japanese bombing of Australia's north was largely concealed from the metropolitan public, Australians paid much more attention to the region than before the war. Aside from newspaper and radio reports, some Australians learnt details of the war zone from family members stationed there.

Historians who have studied the impact of the war on race relations in Australia mostly agree that, while it was a dynamic period, the institutional structures of White Australia were left largely intact. Of course there were changes. Karen Hughes has pointed to the mobility and opportunities the war allowed Indigenous women.⁶¹ Scott Sheffield and Noah Riseman contend that the war accelerated the urbanisation of Aborigines, and provided greater economic opportunities; Aboriginal people who had been working on cattle stations under abysmal labour conditions found new jobs at the military installations in the Northern Territory and the myriad services they required.⁶² The large numbers of African Americans among the US service personnel in Australia attracted both interest and controversy. Settler Australians gave them a mixed reception, while Indigenous Australians were often welcoming. Sean Brawley and Chris Dixon

58 See Sydney Morning Herald, 18 September 1965, p. 8 (Festival aids aborigines).

59 See Kevin Cook, Heather Goodall: Making Change Happen, Chapter 4: 'Tranby, co-operatives and empowerment'; Heather Goodall, Heidi Norman, Belinda Russon: Proper deadly, p. 2.

60 See Greg Patmore, Nikola Balnave, Olivera Marjanovic: A History of Australian Co-Operatives, p. 160; Noel Loos: Edward Koiki (Eddie) Mabo.

61 See Karen Hughes: Mobilising across colour lines, pp. 47-70.

62 See R. Scott Sheffield, Noah Riseman: Indigenous Peoples and the Second World War, pp. 162-190.

suggest that African Americans reported being treated with less discrimination in Australia than at home.⁶³ Yet they had to contend with systems of segregation imposed by both the US military command and Australian Commonwealth and Queensland governments. The war, several scholars suggest, sparked debates about race and racism, pointing to the potential for changes in the postwar period.⁶⁴ But in 1945 Australia was still White with systems of racial subordination still in place.

In the 1950s organisations ranging from trade unions to church groups, Christian socialists, Communists, feminists and others became active on questions of human rights and racial inequalities, despite the Cold War chill. In that context, some bold and motivated individuals spoke out. Kylie Tennant not only raised her voice but found a wide readership.

It is reasonable to think that Tennant intended her chosen epigraph for 'Speak You So Gently' to encapsulate her core message. She quotes Orlando in Shakespeare's play 'As You Like It', Act 2, Scene 7, a full stanza including the lines:

Speak you so gently? Pardon me, I pray you:
I thought that all things had been savage here;
And therefore put I on the countenance
Of stern commandment...
Let gentleness my strong enforcement be:
In the which hope I blush, and hide my sword.⁶⁵

Certainly the book calls for the Australian nation to make reparations for the violence and oppression suffered by First Nations peoples. Tennant suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community co-operatives were a plausible way forward. But they needed governmental and financial support; without such support they were vulnerable to mining companies and others' voracious interest in their land. In pointing to these needs, she presaged the cooperatives' mostly short life spans.

Far from being a lone voice drawing attention to Indigenous issues, interestingly, Tennant believed that in the mid- to late 1950s interest in Aborigines coalesced in radical Australia:

I knew that at Lockhart was tied a knot that brought together all the strands of my lifetime, people I had not seen for twenty years were rising up out of distant places and joining, converging beginning to ask questions about what was happening to the aborigines [sic]. People who had pressed for legislation to protect children and animals, people who had queer, crank "questions" they wanted settled, suddenly decided that the aborigines [sic], the most despised of the population of Australia, were a symbol for them. I just happened to be part of a blind, many-motivated consciousness that was aware at this particular time of what was called The Aboriginal Problem.⁶⁶

Late in life Tennant explained to an interviewer that she had been "pretty far to the left" because "I just didn't like the society in which I found myself and thought it should be altered"; "I intended to make ordinary people understand factors in

63 See Sean Brawley, Chris Dixon: *Jim Crow Downunder*, pp. 607-632.

64 See Kay Saunders: *Inequalities of Sacrifice*, p. 145; Sean Brawley, Chris Dixon: *Jim Crow Downunder*, pp. 630 f.

65 See Kylie Tennant: *Speak You So Gently*, p. 5.

66 Kylie Tennant: *Speak You So Gently*, p. 102.

their society that they might otherwise ignore because they didn't know about them".⁶⁷ In the mid-1950s she thought that southern Australians were ignoring the disastrous effects colonialism had had on First Nations people in the north; and she wanted to bring them to metropolitan attention – as she had done in the 1930s and early 1940s with the unemployed and the very poor.

She noted too that her books were readily published in England and America. At a time when one international reviewer, at least, could refer to "Australia's Stone Age men",⁶⁸ Tennant's national and international literary fame gave her a platform from which to describe First Nations people's historic oppression and their desperate living conditions, and to promote a movement for their economic self-sufficiency. It was a movement which not only looked to governments for support but one which, at least temporarily, depended on the labour of missionaries – albeit in Tennant's rendition missionaries whose religious evangelism was yoked to their work for health, housing, education and cultural retention. She insisted that she was sceptical of religious evangelism: "I was not going to convert or improve or try to change aboriginal [sic] people. Nor did I care very much for some of the Christian doctrines they were taught, such as the power of sin".⁶⁹

She was, however, very concerned about the ubiquity and power of racism, which she saw as subconsciously driven: "The emotional fear and hatred of dark people goes deep in the subconscious of white people. With white races it is significant that Satan is pictured as a black man".⁷⁰ Tennant's determination to show all of her characters – Indigenous and settler – as individuals with personalities was undergirded by her constant awareness of racism, not least on the part of some government officials and mining company prospectors. The gentleness, warmth, humour, intelligence and individuality that she evokes in portraying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people among whom she stayed were integral to her books' appeal, and at once presented a stark contrast from the reductive depictions of Aborigines in earlier works such as Xavier Herbert's 'Capricornia'.

Perhaps we can see Tennant's impact in changing literary appreciation. By the 1980s, Oodgeroo Noonuccal – from Minjerribah in southeast Queensland – was a national and international Indigenous leader. Known first as Kath Walker, she became a prominent activist and published poet in the 1960s. One of her most powerful poems, written in 1962 – only three years after Tennant's books were published – is titled "Aboriginal Charter of Rights". Its lines include

We want hope, not racialism,
 Brotherhood, not ostracism,
 Black advance, not white ascendancy;
 Make us equal, not dependants...
 Give us welcome, not aversion,
 Give us choice and not coercion,
 Status, not discrimination,

67 s.n.: Undergrowth to orchard, p. 148.

68 The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post, 18 September 1959, p. 14 (Campbell Dixon: Australia's Never-Never).

69 Kylie Tennant: Speak You So Gently, p. 102.

70 Ibid., p. 101.

Human rights, not segregation...⁷¹

Walker's first collection of poetry 'We Are Going' was published in 1964, and by the late 1960s she won several national awards. According to one biographer, her poetry sold second only to the iconic early 20th-century verse-writer C.J. Dennis.⁷² Without suggesting any direct causal link, perhaps there is an instructive evolution here of nationally prominent writers: from Herbert's writing which Tennant saw as abusive and exploitative of Aborigines; to Tennant's own 1950s empathetic, informative and engaging stories; to Walker/Noonuccal's 1960s and later searing testimonies.

References

List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1: Far north Queensland and its proximity to Papua New Guinea, indicating Lockhart River and Moa Island. Map by Emily Gallagher.
 Fig. 2: Close-up of the area including Moa Island and Lockhart River. Map by Emily Gallagher.

Newspapers

Age
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71 Kath Walker: Aboriginal Charter of Rights, poem presented to the 5th Annual General Meeting of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement.

72 See Sue Abbey: Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993).

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