

The prison writers

Anywhere in the world where Black and white people are "living together", racism and discrimination have been institutionalised by the white man. The only institutions in such a society that are always open to Blacks are the prisons. It is ironic that they have become places of higher learning for Blacks throughout the world.

It may seem strange to many whites that some of the best, most respected Black freedom fighters have been raised in the white man's prisons. Very often when Blacks are sent to the white man's jails it is not so much because they are guilty of any crime against a just society, rather, they are guilty of being Black.

One of two things happens to a Black man when he is sent to prison. It can break him beyond repair and he will let the white man make him feel a slave to his colour, or locked into an even smaller world, he will begin to see and understand the sickness of the man who holds the key to his freedom. A freedom fighter is born.

Life sentence



In 1957, Kevin J. Gilbert received a life sentence for the killing of his European wife. As with most Aborigines in 1957, Gilbert had no "formal education". In fact at that time, Aborigines did not even have legal citizenship in Australia. It was only with a Referendum as late as 1967 that white Australians voted to give Aborigines the right to Australian citizenship. Kevin J. Gilbert became a citizen of the country he was born in while serving a life sentence.

While in prison, Gilbert began the long process of self-education. After fourteen and a half years he had become an accomplished artist in oils and lino cut, a poet, dramatist and writer. He used these abilities to demonstrate to white Australians the injustice and inhumanity that they have continued to tolerate toward the Black people in Australia.

Released

When Gilbert was released from prison in 1971, he was instrumental in organising a major protest in Canberra (the capital) where the Aboriginal "Embassy" was set up on the grounds of Parliament House. Gilbert was told by the parole board that if he set foot in Canberra he would go back to jail for the rest of his life.

The choice was clear; politically it would have been asinine for Gilbert to walk back into the white man's prison. The running of the Aboriginal Embassy was taken over by other Blacks including Bobbi Sykes, Michael Anderson, Maureen Watson and Lorraine Mafi-Williams.

When the protest began to get outside news coverage, Gilbert said he knew it was then "just a matter of time before the white man would move in with force". It happened as he had predicted. Most of the leaders of the protest were arrested, but Gilbert believes it was a major step on the long march by his people.

He writes: "The details about the removal of the Embassy, the police violence and its aftermath are all reasonably familiar to Australians; they had to get the tent off the lawns of Parliament. The Blacks, on the other hand, weren't just fighting for a tent — they were fighting the whole of Australia, for the land, the dying babies, the misery."

Earth

Of the earth am I
The breast that nurtured all the young
Of the earth; with earth to earth again I fly
With every thought I thought and song I sung
Was earth and earth in all its bounty
Gave to me and mine a wise increase.
I am earth; and when the first ship came
They spat and cursed the earth as foul base
Most miserable of all the earth was I
Without the spice or wine of their much wiser race.

The learned came; and said gods had I none
but totems and an animism dull
There was no high god somewhere in the sky
No higher metaphysics in my lower type of skull.

I am earth, missionaries looked askance
Upon my nature undisguised: my earthly lance
Was to them unclean; a blight to God
And such disgusting things hide from His sight.

Of the earth am I; benighted anthropologist
Wont to declare: The basest of the base and
by their skull
No glimmer of intelligence is there
They measured vacuity to fill their empty space.

I am earth; my God, my High God had I one
Ba'aime, though I did not know the high
And separate classes making God apart
From me and spirit beings who did his will.

Of the earth am I; the high God ne'er
considered
Together, as he breathed so breathed I
Together, to the hunt, was he and I
Together walked we two on earth
And sometimes in the sky.

The learned came; and said gods had I none
No politics nor sovereign embassy
Their learned ignorance served as a pass
for pioneers to kill the god in me.

Kevin J. Gilbert

Place of dreaming

Although the Aborigines have a theatrical tradition older than the white man's so-called civilization, it has all but been destroyed since his arrival.

Urban Aborigines are now trying to revive that tradition within the framework of Western theatre. The group of Black writers behind the Black Theater is small but dedicated. Gerald Bostock's play "Here Comes The Nigger" conveys a strong political statement for both white and Black Australians.

"The Cakeman" by Robert Merritt is a masterpiece that portrays Aboriginal depression. Other writers behind the Black Theater include Maureen Watson, Bobbi Sykes and Lorraine Mafi-Williams.

Lester Bostock, administrator of the Black Theater, states: "The movement at the Black Theater is concerned with self-betterment, with humanising the Black man and his self-image, and incidentally, the White Australian view of the Blacks. It is a communal expression of identity which we can't express so effectively as individuals."

Lorraine Mafi-Williams says of the Redfern group behind the Black Theater: "Our aim is to provide a place, a city place of dreaming for Black audiences — so that a strong Black image will emerge and a place where we can re-establish contact with our traditions. And of course, we want the Black Theater to also be a place of political education for our people."

The first step

The first step away from the graveyard by Black Australians has been made. The long overdue struggle for control of their lives has begun.

There will be some deaths, but freedom has always been paid for with death. The white man in Australia is not going to change his ways because it is the humane thing to do, nor is he going to let Black people in Australia have their freedom until some blood flows. It is sad, but it is the way of the white man all over the world.

The written word amongst Aborigines is only about twenty years old. The first poems by the black hand have been written and the Black poets are crying out to be heard: It can be no more, it can be no more, I am of the earth!

