

The Incarnations of Eddie Burrup

ROBERT SMITH

FROM THE EDDIE BURRUP TRANSCRIPTS, INCLUDING THE ARTIST'S NOTE ON HIS WORK

Blackfella 'e no got'm map longa paper - on'y 'e got'm map longa inside - that way can't lose'm.

My ol' uncle bin learn'm me right way for readin' country - olden dreamin' time - 'e 'nother one uncle - no more turtle - 'e kite 'awk - 'e got'm eye for read'm country - where 'e bin mak'm first time ...

Alright - we follow'm up follow'm up all dem old tracks - olden day - Dreamin' track now - all dat country l'a top end Yule River 'e bin leave'm mark l'a rock where 'e go down

Well now, I tell'm you - My old uncle 'e bin learn'm me for read'm country - we two-fella gissa-gissa - we follow'm up all t'em oldenday track place where Dreamin' time mob bin put'm first time.

A'right - by'nbye he 'n fella allabout knock up - 'e go underneath' for sleep. Place where 'e go down 'e leave'm mark longa rock - You see'm? 'e there alright! 'e t' one allday singin' out l'a me ...

Same now I put'm l'a picture.

A mild spring day in Perth and, after an *al fresco* lunch, I am talking with Elizabeth Durack, renewing old acquaintance thanks to a stint in Perth as visiting scholar at Curtin University. Several days previously, David Dolan and I had visited her studio together, but now I am back in response to a request from Elizabeth for advice. She has, she says, painted herself

into a corner. This is something on which I doubt that I can help, but in any case I now find myself looking through an unpublished monograph on the life and work of Aboriginal artist Eddie Burrup.

Reproduction of some of Eddie's pictures had elicited an invitation for him to contribute to the 1996 exhibition *Native Title Now* at the Aboriginal cultural institute

Tandanya in Adelaide. The three works entered for that exhibition were subsequently included in a nationwide tour, leading to acceptance of others in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in Darwin. But it isn't until later in the day that I'm told what any of this has to do with Elizabeth's professed difficulties.

From long involvement with Aboriginal society and acquaintance with so-called 'transitional' art of both the south-west and north-west, I find the Burrup text and illustrations interesting, and allow the other matter to rest, beginning to think Elizabeth may have changed her mind. Much of the monograph consists of transcripts from taped interviews with Eddie and, despite difficulties with his language, I am able to follow his account, and find it totally absorbing. Having an inkling that I'm about to be asked to help get the manuscript published, I wonder why people seem to assume I have the ability to get things into print. Were it but true!

Just the same, I can sympathise with the anticipated request, Eddie's story being so fascinating, and support for it so much in character with the feeling of cross-cultural identification underlying Elizabeth Durack's art. Ever since becoming aware of Aboriginal lore through the stories on which she collaborated with her sister Mary, I have marvelled at the aptness and uniqueness of her work.

Where are those stylistic influences so beloved of conventional critics? The strength of commitment in her artistic impulse seems to render irrelevant any analysis dependent on a Western modernist mainstream. No doubt this has something to do with Elizabeth's long association with Aboriginal people in the North, an experience which included the protective attitudes of her parents towards these people on their grazing properties in the early days. Perceived today as paternalism, at the time it was understood and valued by the black population.

I know from independent sources that, for safety of life and limb, Aboriginal workers traversing other properties would let it be known (whether true or not) that they 'belonged' on the Duracks' run. Even while reading (and still unaware of where Eddie Burrup fits in to all this) I'm conscious of the large 1947 painting *War and Peace* on Elizabeth's wall, depicting rock pools near the bough-shelter 'studio' she used in the 1940s.

She often took refuge there from family tensions in the homestead by joining her Aboriginal friends, who are shown in the painting. She had been re-reading Tolstoy's classic novel at the time, and contrasted the peace prevailing in this environment with

Elizabeth Durack, October 1996, with her 1947 painting 'War and Peace'



heated debates up at the house over disposal of family properties. This was also, in a sense, an alternative family, since she is allotted a classificatory place in Aboriginal society as a member of the Ord River Mirawong language group, a relationship still intact and undiminished.

Many another white artist concerned with Aboriginal heritage and equity has the disadvantage of being essentially a well-intentioned outsider, lacking any such integral association. This already occurred to me on seeing Elizabeth Durack's *Cord to Altcheringa* cycle, bought in 1953 for the University of Western Australia, with its linkage between land and people; past, present and future. I became even more aware of the distinction when preparing a special feature on her art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia some time later. It struck me even then that its general lack of sentimentality, condescension or idealisation achieves true freedom from racial discrimination.

Later, I learn of the interest Elizabeth's father had in pre-contact Aboriginal ways. As an impressionable teenager, she had accompanied him and a legendary Aboriginal guide, Argyle Boxer, to view galleries of traditional art, notably in the Keep River Gorge. Latterly, in contact with Elizabeth while preparing entries for the *Concise Dictionary of Australian Artists*, I had noticed how this capacity for moving between two cultures enabled her to perceive the perils of what she called (in a 1970s series) 'The Rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world.' While this expresses her concern with 'forces at work within Australian society' and world-wide, I later find it is also of formative significance in the work of Eddie Burrup.

Now I'm being told how, in about 1975, Elizabeth began producing a series of what she called her 'morphological paintings' - the sort of pictures I've been looking at in her studio, which embody these concerns. They were conceived as elemental works and, at first, she sought unconvincingly to place them conceptually in Mediterranean antiquity. Her daughter Perpetua saw that they make much more sense in the Aboriginal context.

This reconciliation of apparently disparate traditions, comparable in my mind to that between biblical and pagan antiquity during the Renaissance, was in effect the genesis of Eddie Burrup, and to Elizabeth's obvious relief I am not altogether surprised at the revelation that Eddie is Elizabeth's alter ego.

I immediately begin pointing out to her some of the many contentious ideological and ethical issues raised by her invention of Eddie, but she is already well aware of them and anxious to extricate herself from a potentially damaging situation. It is only since Eddie suddenly emerged as a fully-developed artistic persona towards the end of 1994 that developments have got out of hand. That's why Elizabeth is seeking advice from me. Members of her family, when shown Eddie's work and memoirs, had accepted his existence without question, despite, or perhaps because of, their extensive experience of the Kimberleys and their knowledge of Aboriginal culture and language.

Elizabeth now wants to find an appropriate way to reveal Eddie's identity.



The coming of the Gudea, diptych, resist on canvas, intended entry in the 1997 Sulman prize: 'One for early day time where allabout see'm Gudea first time - 'e makim cobber-cobber - big one - an' 'e run that song allaround - 'e comin' up from South an' 'e move allalong - my ol' Daddy got'm when he bin on 'y little boy l'a Yandeearra.'

Consequently, I spend several frustrating months ineffectually collaborating in Perpetua's efforts to arrange an exhibition of his work and publication of the manuscript as a basis for disclosing his real identity while retaining the initiative.

Meantime, the extent of Elizabeth's possession by Eddie is indicated by her decision, contrary to advice, for several of Eddie's works to be entered in this year's Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Obviously the time has come for action, so I agree to make the situation public, and Elizabeth undertakes to provide further clarification by responding to my queries on the background to Eddie. Her

replies confirm my long-term intuitions, and often go way beyond them. The psychic compulsion behind Eddie and his work is best conveyed in her own words:

'If I think things through, I would say that Eddie Burrup is a synthesis of several Aboriginal men that I have known - there is a great deal of Argyle Boxer ... although I only knew this man when he was in retirement, travelling around with a plant of horses of his own on vague prospecting expeditions in liaison with my father, and generally seeing that things were to rights on the properties and reporting any irregularities ... Then there is also a lot of my classificatory son : Jeff Chunuma Rainyerri Djanaiwan of Ivanhoe Station ... Both these men were 'gissa-gissa' ie arm-in-arm ... their philosophy being one of going in harmony - black and white together - *and as equals* ... Then Old Jubul and old Roger of the Ivanhoe Bush camp lived in what Boxer and Jeff would have regarded as the past - they lived apart from change and felt change to be a challenge to the way of life they were responsible for - for the continuance of the old way of life but against overwhelming odds ... I drew very close to these old men, sharing their dilemma ... They are part of Eddie Burrup too, as also were the old Goanna men who let me walk with them on what must have been one of the last of such journeys - this was out from Moola Bulla down toward the desert in 1947 ... And similarly the old men at Cundarlee Mission outside Zanthus ... Then too there is an unknown factor that was at work on the Eddie Burrup story and that knows him to be a character in his own right with a life and career of his own ...'

Though anxious to give appropriate satisfaction to anyone who may have acquired works by Eddie, Elizabeth is emphatic that she does not want to sever the link with him. As she herself puts it: 'At times over the last two - going on three - years since working in direct union with Eddie I have experienced a feeling of tremendous happiness and a sense of deep fulfilment.' It seems to me that the work of Eddie Burrup can be seen as not just a homage to Aboriginal Australia, but a concrete exemplar for reconciliation between two communities and two cultures, in Elizabeth's view 'foundering so badly at the present time.'