

Albert Namatjira

"Rides Forth to Claim His Own"

THE YEAR was 1943 and the war was in full swing.

In fact it had been going on for so long as to have become more a way of life than an emergency. I, for one, saw no reason why it should interfere with my seasonal migratory pattern. Thus it was that in March that year I found myself marooned in Alice Springs. The former neat connection between the old 'Ghan up from Adelaide and Eddie Connellan's 'plane direct from the Alice and on through to Wyndham broke down and to my chagrin there I was immobilised in the old Stuart Arms Hotel on the corner of Todd and Parsons Street. Worse, so located I fell prey to the military authorities in the town drunk with their new-found powers to obstruct the forward progress of civilians. Down in Melbourne, Eddie himself had become similarly entangled and his return kept being postponed.

After a couple of weeks I had pretty well exhausted the hospitality of kind friends who rescued me from the hotel which was alive with lice, particularly a savage nocturnal bug that sprang to action as soon as the erratic electric engine petered out. ("Not our boys, it's the Americans down from the islands..." I was told in response to my complaints).

I was restive and acutely aware of having out-stayed my welcome, for while anyone is pleased enough to put up someone in transit, no host, I felt sure, really wanted a guest who didn't know how long she was likely to be staying or if, in fact she had moved in for the duration. Then I learned that the Lutheran mission at Hermannsburg, 130 kilometres from Alice Springs, was prepared to accept boarders for the fee of two pounds a week and I leapt at the chance to leave town.

My spirits rose once I was careering along the road in company with the Reverend Pastor Grosse. It was an overcast day with big clouds massing up to the south and west and we drove right into a thunderstorm. The red road was soon awash and it took seven hours to reach our destination. All along the way between numerous detours to avoid deep pools and a number of stops to test their

depth, I was regaled with a sombre account of the mission under the stress of war-time conditions and of the life and career of the mission's brightest member — the already famous Aboriginal artist — Albert Namatjira.

Nowhere has this man's story been better put together than in the recent publication — *Albert Namatjira — The life and work of an Australian painter*. Compiled and edited by Nadine Amadio it contains four informative introductory essays and thirty-nine reproductions of the artist's work. Appearing as it does nearly three decades since Albert's death it will serve, coupled with the 1984 exhibition that opened the Araluen Art Centre in Alice Springs, to rescue this artist from the obscurity into which he was falling in the pell-mell of the contemporary art scene and it does more than anything else on the subject to date to sort out Albert Namatjira's place in the hierarchy of the Australian art pantheon. Rightly, it places him in an honourable position. This was one that the average man-in-the-street had always accorded him though denied by Art savants.

* * *

By 1943 Albert had already held two successful exhibitions and his work — Pastor Grosse continued the story as the sun set in cloud-strewn glory — was in such demand by the military personnel in and around the Alice that they were battling to get together sufficient paintings for another show in Melbourne the following year. The publicity and goodwill generated by the exhibitions in southern capitals were invaluable to the Lutheran cause. The mission was in darkness as we swung at last into the compound. There was a note on the kitchen table and embers glowed in the stove. By the light of a candle I saw a bed was made up for me in the guest room. Did I imagine eyes in the night? Blowing out the flame I undressed in the dark. A dog barked, then all was silence.

The next morning I met Pastor Grosse's wife and their three little flaxen-haired daughters who spoke German most of the time. I also met Rex Battarbee who was acting as a resident Security Officer. Since the outbreak of war the mission had been carrying on under a cloud of suspicion but because the Aborigines were dependent upon it for sustenance it was never under real threat of closure. Rex Battarbee's tact and diplomacy and Albert's

Albert Namatjira — The life and work of an Australian Painter, compiled and edited by Nadine Amadio; Macmillan Australia.

paintings kept relationships with the authorities reasonably cordial.

Rex told me a great deal more about Albert and enlarged upon the story of their artistic partnership — their first meeting ten years before, Albert's intense interest in his water-colours of the surrounding landscape, his desire to learn the white man's way of bringing his country alive... stories familiar now in all biographical accounts of Albert Namatjira but fresh to me at the time.

The guest room was apart from the other houses but meals and the long Bible readings that accompanied them were shared. On some evenings Pastor Albrecht, the Superintendent, invited me to his place for a German-style meal — nutmeg soup, meat pudding, and date cakes made from the fruit of the palms planted by the early missionaries in the 1880s. Although bearing prolifically, the fruit was small and dry and hardly sweet at all.

I spent my time drawing, in and around the straggling camps that encircled the mission enclosure. Hermannsburg was a sad and desolate place. The sense of loss, disappointment, hopelessness, futility was all-pervading... The days were long although the women, particularly the old women, were very friendly, drawing me into their shade and longing, it seemed to me, to involve me in conspiracy. Depicting the human face was a novelty to them and they sat very patiently for me, then laughed and hid their faces in their hands when I finished a sketch. They felt my clothes and examined the soles of my shoes and, when I took them off, my feet as well, noting every toe. They were much less sophisticated than the women on the stations in the Kimberlies.

The children were not so agreeable, being bold, excitable and rather rude for which default in behaviour to a visitor, the old women rebuked them. For the children drawing a person seemed to be associated with ridicule and mockery but when they observed how serious I was and the trouble I took to draw each feature with care and accuracy they quietened down and soon they were appointing this one and that for me to draw. They stood in a circle around me, shouting admonitions and information to my subject in Aranda and gasping as the face came to life with a last darkening of the pupils of the eye.

Even so, with long mornings spent in such diversion the days dragged until I met Albert who came up one afternoon to show me some of his water-colours and curious to see, "where you make'm picture that old woman and kid". His paintings were wrapped in clean calico and he untied them carefully. One sensed that they were precious to him but at the same time he was not lacking in a sense of self-criticism — surely extraordinary when his knowledge of one-dimensional representation must have been limited to a few meagre books in the old mission school room and to viewing Rex Battarbee's own paintings.

"This one, I make a mistake..." "This one, tree too big. Might I make'm again." "This one good one — Mount Sonda. I make this one three four times..."

From the first we spoke together as artist to artist. There were no barriers and curiously no time lag. He

looked with interest and discernment at my own drawings and identified, even from the roughest sketch, the particular person I had observed. My drawings of the camp dogs drew a smile from his grave face. "You got'm running one line," he said. "My son Enos, 'e make'm same way. Where I make'm puppy dog, he all day sit down."

Albert spoke good English and I was told, some German, but when speaking we fell by mutual agreement into bush talk (they call it "kriol" today). He sat quietly and willingly while I made a water-colour of him in profile. It apparently met with his approval for he asked me to do one of his old father Jonathan and his uncle Titus. Pastor Albrecht took me over to Jay Creek to meet these wonderful old personalities and I painted both of them there. Old Jonathan showed me some of the finely turned paper knives that he had made from mulga and when he spoke of his son his face lit with pride. "My son, Ali-bet," he said, "he can draw anything!"

So it was that nearly every afternoon while I was at the mission Albert came up for a talk. We exchanged pleasantries, comment on the weather, the coming season and the effect of recent rain on the stations around. With a stick drawing on the ground, he mapped out where he believed the best falls had occurred from his observations naming all the properties around for hundreds of miles.

And that was the beginning of a mutual admiration that sprang up between Albert and myself. Albert kept in touch with me through Douglas Lockwood and ever after I followed with particular interest the desert artist's career. No story about my work has ever pleased me more than one Doug Lockwood recounted. The latter had a big oil of mine of a woman and child in his house in Darwin. As soon as Albert (who visited Darwin in 1950) saw this picture he stood in front of it for a long time taking in every detail. Then, "That's got'm," he said. "That got'm blackfella all right. You tell that Missus 'Good day' from me. Might I go longa Ord river country one day..."

* * *

Turning up a file of ancient letters kept by my sister Mary — that indefatigable hoarder of family records — I find one from me to her headed "Hermannsburg Mission, March 4th 1943".

"Albert," I say, "is a pleasant portly old chap about forty — serious and quietly spoken. He wears an old battered hat, torn shirt and dungarees and shows no outward sign of his remarkable gift of translating the beauty of his country on to paper, nor is there anything much in his physical appearance to give credence to the old women's stories hereabouts that his natural father was an Afghan camel man..." It is only a passing observation amid bits and pieces of other comment and description yet, thinking now in the perspective of the intervening period, the remark takes on fresh significance.

* * *

By the end of the last century there were some hundreds of men from various states and provinces of northern India living in and around the Centre. With

their long teams of camels they controlled the transport of goods in areas too tough for mule or donkey. (From whatever parts of Asia they came once in Australia they were all designated "Afghan").

Not much is known and less can be assessed of the genetic effect that they have had upon the Aboriginal people throughout the desert areas. In contrast to the European cross that showed immediately in the lightening of the skin, the "Afghan" left no readily discernible sign. So evidence of the Afghan influence among Aborigines remains circumstantial and always conjectural. Yet having been given hint of it in the case of Albert Namatjira certain aspects of his story fall into place and even his art itself takes on fresh meaning.

* * *

When Pastor Carl Strehlow arrived at the mission in 1894 he found it on the verge of collapse. After two decades on the part of the founding missionaries no Christians were forthcoming. The Aranda regarded the mission as a place from which to scrounge and were systematically devouring the stock. With the mission houses and the little Church in a state of decay, abandonment seemed inevitable.

Invoking divine assistance Strehlow rose to the challenge and succeeded, during the twenty-eight years of his time at Hermannsburg, in placing the mission on a secure footing and before he left in 1922 he was able to observe a gradual increase in the number of Aranda residents and converts. This was owing to a combination of circumstances including the fact that the situation for the Aborigines became tougher with the increase of white settlement and as a result the people became more reliant upon the mission for sustenance and support. As well, the remarkable personal power that Strehlow exerted over the beleaguered people, his gift at mastering their languages, his genuine interest in their own way of life, all contributed to his success.

* * *

Among the first to be baptised as Christians under Strehlow's régime were Albert's tribal father and mother. Albert, born in 1902, three years before this turning point in his parents' lives, was then baptised also and he went on to be raised and educated under strict mission supervision with the full agreement of his parents. From the time he was a small lad he was housed in the newly erected boys' dormitory, attended school regularly and the camp, except for holidays and "walkabout", was out of bounds.

Albert was from the first "a smart kid". Responsive to discipline which was strict, and reward which was scanty, he was confident and something of a leader among his class mates. Leaving school at about fourteen years of age and showing already his independence and self-reliance, he went down to Oodnadatta. This town was the depot for the Afghan camel men contracting to carry stores to the out-lying stations. (Did the boy have particular links there that he was accepted so readily as an apprentice?) He did well and when hardly out of his teens he married. It was not, according to tribal law, a "straight" marriage and yet Albert was subjected to no punishment. He and his wife moved freely around the area and he took on

various station jobs. In his spare time he carved and decorated boomerangs which were sold in Alice Springs along with small rugs made from the winter skins of euros.

Albert had no difficulty in obtaining work, being moderately literate, as well as skilled as a carpenter, builder, fencer and at repairing saddles (the flaps of which he sometimes ornamented). He was also a good all-round stockman and especially accomplished in the handling of camels. Whoever employed Albert found him to be hard-working, industrious and ambitious (in the usual meaning of the words) at a time when "lazy", and "useless" were terms more often used to describe Aboriginal workers.

After the arrival of their third child Albert and his wife decided to return to the mission and settle down. There was always plenty of work at Hermannsburg for the willing hand and Pastor Albrecht who replaced Strehlow in 1922 welcomed him back to his old home. With the latter's consent Albert built a house for himself and his family. This was situated a short distance away from both the mission centre and the encircling wurlies. Albert preferred to live removed from close proximity to his kinsmen.

The missionaries did not question this expression of aloofness and independence. They went along with it, interpreting Albert's preferences and unusual behaviour as a manifestation of Jesus upon the mind of the primitive savage and seeing in it a vindication of their policies which aimed at bringing a "heathen" people along the pathway of civilised man.

(It was only the old women in their shade at the edge of the camp, the old women with their incredibly long memories and their encyclopaedic knowledge of genealogies who observed the shaping of events — but they kept their own counsel. Why they ever spoke so openly to a stranger such as myself I shall never know).

* * *

A place of his own became even more important to Albert as time went on. As his fame and his wealth grew so did his desire for independence. First he wanted to buy a block of land near Alice Springs and then to lease a station. Particularly a cattle property and the security, prestige and independence that would have come with the acquisition. He knew he had the skills and experience to manage it.

He was never to achieve this ambition, for as the law stood then the purchase of land or a grazing lease by an Aborigine was not permitted. Albert's was not a problem that arose every day. At the time it was, in fact, unique. (Land Rights, land claims lay twenty years further along and that thrust would come from outside Australia not from within).

Yet, had it been successfully argued that Albert was partly Indian, would this have solved a legal dilemma and have made him eligible to purchase a lease? As half Indian would he have had the right to buy alcoholic liquor as were men of Aboriginal and white parentage? And had he been able to do so would we ever have seen the emergence of his art?

Albert's case high-lighted the legal anomalies of the

day although every effort to bend and modify the law was made on his behalf. Bending the law enabled him to be granted full citizen rights in 1957 at the age of 55. It seemed the solution in view of his then wide-spread fame and reputation. As it worked out, however, citizenship proved a dubious advantage, linked as it became with his tribal obligations.

It was an ironic twist of Fate that Albert's downfall and demise should have been brought about by his own kith and kin — the very folk from whom all through his life he had endeavoured to distance, if not disassociate, himself. Once he possessed the right to purchase liquor he was besieged. A doomed man, he survived his newly conferred privilege by barely two years.

* * *

Who knows what the Albert Namatjira story might have been in the changed circumstances of later decades, in the radically changed conditions of today? The phenomenon is not repeatable. However, no matter what the rights and wrongs on both sides of the Albert Namatjira tragic drama, one thing is clear: circumstances favoured his development as an artist. For this, at least, we can be grateful.

As soon as his talent revealed itself — springing to light in the midst of woe and war — everything followed through in a sequence of providential coincidence: Battarbee's generous tuition and interest, Pastor Albrecht's co-operation and support, the emergence of agents prepared to assist with the logistics of transport, display, marketing and management of the work, introduction first to regal personalities and then to the Queen herself in Sydney in 1954 after being awarded her Coronation medal — all this as well as a responsive public that recognised this artist's talent and the eyes that he gave to their own visionless love of the landscape of Central Australia.

The only dissenting voices — of which Albert was probably unaware — were that of the Art savants who denigrated his talent. The Directors of the two dominant State galleries — New South Wales and Victoria — were both artists themselves and not, it seems, capable of dispassionate assessment. One of them was frequently heard to say, "I could paint a better picture than Albert with one hand tied behind my back." Distrusting public taste they shuddered at his work's tourist appeal. As a result of this squeamishness, few State galleries, accustomed as they were to taking their lead from New South Wales and Victoria, possess good examples of Albert's work. Denied official approval his paintings suffered from reduction in size, repetition and a tendency on the part of the artist to churn out "pot-boilers". The wonder is that, under the circumstances, his work retained the high standard that sets it apart from the work of ensuing artists.

The rationale for what now appears as an extraordinary lack of perception on the part of gallery directors seems to have been that the work was that of a slavish copyist and not sufficiently or befittingly "primitive" to have been done by an Aboriginal and so not worthy of their attention. When a flood of water-colours by other Aborigines appeared — the Desert School that sprang up

in the master's wake — the savants saw in *these* works, many of them lumpy and careless compared with Albert's, more of what they were looking for and bought accordingly.

(In fairness to the logic of the critics it should be noted that they have given unstinted and unanimous praise to the Papunya artists, a later desert florescence. But that is another story).

Had Albert's critics been less intent on seeking for the "primitive", "the aboriginal", had they linked his artistry, with all its precision of detail and vividness of colour, back to an ancestral and lineal germ in the jewelled bridles of the Pathan riding camels or even to Persian miniatures, they might have been less inclined to dismiss the work out of hand.

* * *

Time will further blur the Albert Namatjira story just as time is serving now to clarify his position as an artist, for in the end, the work is all that matters and this speaks for itself. But time does not blur my memory of our meeting all those years ago nor the last I saw of him. A figure on a camel, he retreated, grew smaller and disappeared into light and sky. Then, meeting the horizon, mirage flashed the figure back, life-size, into sharp focus. He raised an arm and waved.

I called the painting, "Albert Namatjira rides forth to claim his own."