



## NEWSLETTER #46, June 2011

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### Highlights from *The Past Matters* 2011

The premium historic Eltham location, Montsalvat, was the venue for this year's Past Matters. Once the heating was turned on it was quite cosy, with its rustic décor. Phillip John Morrissey was again the Chair of the festival, and his perceptive and knowledgeable commentary bound the festival together.

Jan Aitken, NRG President, made the acknowledgement to the Wurundjeri and paid respects to their Elders. After an address to recognise Reconciliation Week with its theme Let's Talk Recognition she welcomed Lois Peeler, Executive Director of Worawa Aboriginal College in Healesville.

Lois began with her own story of living on 'The Flat' as described in *RiverConnect*, a book in which she wrote up the stories of a number of elders from the Shepparton/Mooroopna area. They had grown up at Cummeragunga and had been in the walk-off, and then lived on 'The Flat' near Shepparton. She described how they had had many happy times and made a lot of fun together with performances and concerts, etc. They had all been outspoken on behalf of their people and fought and worked for better conditions, respect, and the right to be counted as Australian citizens. Lois spoke of the importance of Education as the most significant contribution to the welfare and status of Aboriginal women; education which binds together Aboriginal culture with the skills needed for survival in the world today.

Camilla Chance spoke about her relationship with *Wisdom Man*, Banjo Clarke of Framlingham. Her biography of him is in its second printing. It gives an affecting account of his wonderful capacity for relating to all people and his work with disaffected youths in the Warrnambool area, and about her connection with the Gunditjmarra people of that region.

Saturday opened with a welcome by Helen Coleman, Nillumbik Shire Council Mayor, and an address by Phillip John

Morrissey, *Connecting Both Ways*. Then Paul Carter and Morag Fraser discussed the book *Ground Truthing*, an engaging and poetic account of the 'social traces' that underwrite the Mallee region of Victoria and the lives of poet John Shaw Neilson, Wotjoboluk Aboriginal man Jowley, and pastoralist William Stanbridge.

The delightful Anita Heiss talked about her feminist Aboriginal heroines, young women in the world of love, travel and work. These are definitely 'must-reads'.

Our friend and patron of NRG, Mick Woiod with his usual relaxed style, launched his book *Forgotten Country* about the Yarra Valley in the early years of the 19th century when squatters were the law. He also returned to a favourite subject of his, Coranderrk.

The marvellously successful Petrol Sniffing Program at Mt Theo, in Central Australia, is an inspiration to all in Andrew Stojanovski's book, *Dog Ear Café*.

To finish the evening were the poets Ali Cobby Eckermann and Lionel Fogarty. I think the substantial audience, like me, fell in love with these two. Their words, and the way they delivered them, struck at everybody's hearts. They expressed so clearly what it is like to be Aboriginal in Australia in the 21st Century.

Maitreyi Ray, Art Coordinator at Worawa

Aboriginal College, supplied an exhibition of very accomplished paintings by her students which added to the Aboriginal theme of the festival.

Past Matters is an annual festival which is organised by Eltham Bookshop in partnership with Nillumbik Reconciliation Group, and supported by a grant from the Shire of Nillumbik. It celebrates Aboriginal writers, and publications which feature Aboriginal history, people and issues.

Ann Curry



Matreyi Ray, Lois Peeler & Jan Aitken at Past Matters 2011

# Reconciliation Week Address by NRG President Jan Aitken

at the Nillumbik Shire offices on 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2011

## LET'S TALK RECOGNITION

Recognition is essential to the happiness and health of human beings and nations. We have all had the experience of being ignored, unappreciated, found constant fault with. We rapidly become depressed and hurt, and know that we need some recognition to survive the assault.

Aboriginal people have suffered from the absence of recognition for at least two centuries. When the first British flag was raised at circular quay, no one noticed the Aborigines who were there amongst the trees, invisible because they were not recognised.

When the settlers moved across the land, they felt free to bring in their flocks and cattle because they did not recognise the Aboriginal people.

When the new settlements made laws they did not include the Aboriginal people because they did not recognise them as people; cattle were counted, not Aborigines.

Very recently Nala Mansell McKenna, an elder in Tasmania, objected to a statement by an author in which he stated that genocide had been the fate of Tasmanian Aborigines. "Europeans certainly had the intention of genocide, but because of our resistance we have survived and that intention was not successful. You would think that after 200 years we would be making a treaty with the government, not still arguing with them as to whether we exist."



Nillumbik Mayor Helen Coleman  
with Wurundjeri Elder Colin Hunter



Cr Chris Chapple, Cr Helen Coleman, Colin Hunter, Graham Pritchard (NRG Vice-President)  
Jan Aitken (NRG President), Glynn Pritchard and Diana Warrell (NRG Secretary)

Recognition of Aboriginal people has been a struggle – they have had to ask for recognition, plead for it and fight for it.

We recognise Aboriginal people in many ways now: Land Rights, the Koorie Courts, Reconciliation Plans, the truth of our history together, the Stolen Generations, the difficulties faced by communities under the Intervention, Aboriginal health problems and the need for services which are culturally appropriate, and the outstanding contributions to music, drama, art and dance.

Today, here in Nillumbik, we have this flag raising ceremony: our act of recognition. Feel it, live it. But there is still a lack of recognition to be addressed.

In a couple of years from now you will be asked to vote in a referendum on the inclusion of Aboriginal people in our constitution. When it was written, there was no recognition of Aboriginal people and they were omitted.

A group of 20 Aboriginal Elders and other Australian citizens are meeting together to work out a proposal for the constitution: the words, their placing, the changes necessary to include Aboriginal Australians as fully recognised members of our nation, Australia's First Nation Peoples, with recognition of history and their unique ancient cultures; recognition of the value we place upon them.

Recognise that you have a weighty responsibility as you cast that vote. Be prepared to raise the issues with others as we move towards the referendum. Ensure that no one votes against it because they have not thought it through or have misunderstood its significance.

Let's talk Recognition.

## NAIDOC WEEK 2011: 3<sup>rd</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> July

On Australia Day, 1938, protestors marched through the streets of Sydney, followed by a congress attended by over a thousand people. One of the first major civil rights gatherings in the world, it was known as the Day of Mourning.

After the Day of Mourning, there was a growing feeling that it should be a regular event.

Major Aboriginal organisations, state and federal governments, and a number of church groups, all supported the formation of the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee; 'Islander' was added to the title in 1991 and the celebrations extended to a week.

Today it is simply called NAIDOC. In NAIDOC Week there are many celebrations of the accomplishments and contributions made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. It is also a time to remember that our heritage is populated with Aboriginal history, land and outstanding Aboriginal Australians.

In Nillumbik, there will be displays at the Shire Offices, the Eltham Library and Mill Park Library featuring local Aboriginal heritage, reminding us that our enjoyment of our bushy ambience has its very roots in the Aboriginal heritage and in leaders such as William Barak, Joy Wandin Murphy and Doreen Garvey Wandin and their families, Bill Nicholson, Ian and Gary Hunter, Colin Hunter and Aunty Dot Peters.

The displays will be assembled by Diana Warrell and Ann Curry (NRG), and Melanie Holt (Nillumbik Shire Council).

<http://www.naidoc.org.au/local-naidoc-events-calendar/>

## PLAYGROUND, compiled by Nadia Wheatley

At Past Matters 2011 Nadia gave a very polished presentation of her work, assisted by Ken Searle who painted and drew the magnificent illustrations. The book is not written by Nadia but compiled. What is gathered into this charming and attractive book are many revelations and remembrances from 111 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributors from across the continent – from rural, urban and outback communities and many language groups. She acknowledges Jackie Huggins as her Indigenous consultant and 'critical friend'.

Over eighty Elders and thirty current students tell of some aspect of their 'growing up': their experiences as children, the education given to them, the games played, their relationships with family and the close and complex inter-relationships in community, the love of land and the intrinsic belonging to all of it – animals, insects, plants, earth and rocks, landforms, wind and rain and sunshine. The book does not have to be read from beginning to end. No matter how you come at it, 'everything connects'.

While Nadia explains that she has only just scratched the surface of the wealth of knowledge held in this oral generosity, this book challenges our misperceptions and prejudices, and gives valuable lessons from the elders themselves. Diane de Vere, a resident of Research and a member of NRG was Principal at Papunya school in the nineties. Nadia pays tribute to her inspiration, which led to 'Playground'.

Jan Aitken

## Yarra Glen Primary School Tour 15<sup>th</sup> June – Moor-rul Platform, Grasslands and Gawa Trail



## Gawa Trail

To the background noise of cockatoos nesting in the hollows of the trees above us on the Gawa Trail, the grades five and six children of Yarra Glen Primary school imagined how the Wurundjeri (the traditional owners of this tract of land) would have lived – what plants they would have used as food sources, or to weave their baskets, or to make rope out of bark, or to build their homes (willams). They learnt what a great food source the Watson’s Creek would have been with its blackfish, yabbies, eels, ducks, water ribbon lilies and many other edible treats. They were made aware of how the Wurundjeri, over thousands of years, would have learnt how to prepare the plants for safe eating, when the eels would be plentiful and how to make fire. This knowledge gave the Wurundjeri a special connection to this part of Australia that also held their spiritual totems. We imagined what a terrible sense of dislocation it would have been for them when they were driven off their land.

The need to preserve areas which are the natural habitat of native animals was also discussed: we talked about the endangered Brush-tailed Phascogale usually found in this area, and which has suffered the loss of habitat through the recent bushfires and encroaching settlement.

To help with their experience the children and teachers each received an indigenous plant donated by Edendale’s indigenous plant nursery. These were specially chosen to match the ones they would see on the trail. NRG would like to thank Edendale for their generosity.

Diana Warrell

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Morning mist and chilly air, but we were not daunted. Jan and Diana led the groups, with Ann assisting and photographing. Teachers Michael and Helen were in attendance. The students were keen to be where Wurundjeri people had camped and lived. They were very well prepared and knew many facts, able to answer many of the questions asked, but to see it, walk it and feel it is a different dimension. Each student took home a plant, with provenance from the Gawa Trail provided by the Education Unit of Edendale. A very successful partnership.

There was another school tour the following week with students from Hurstbridge Learning Co-op. Edendale again provided plants, but this time they have provenance for the Hurstbridge area where the students’ plants will be growing.

Jan Aitken

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## Moor-rul Platform & Grasslands

At 10:00am that same morning the first thirty Yarra Glen Primary School students had been bussed up to the Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Reserve, where Jann Darvill & Jane Trikojus (Reconciliation Grassland), Mick Woiwod (*Moor-rul* Viewing Platform) & Harry Gilham (Tower) each gave them a talk concerning the relevance of their particular precinct – a procedure that was repeated some two hours later when a further thirty students arrived from the Gawa Trail for similar talks.

Very much in evidence on the day was the enthusiasm of this second batch of Yarra Glen students, fresh from their Gawa Trail Talk and Walk, in that when the call was made to them for questions, they had at least thirty remarkably astute ones to put to me.

In another way, too, the morning proved most productive in that a note had been handed to me during proceedings to chase up authorities with an expertise on butterflies in the light of these beautiful creatures having such a close affinity to grasslands. In following this up later in the day, I was delighted to learn that butterflies also have a close affinity to hill-tops and that in the breeding season they indulge in a performance known as ‘hill-topping’.

This saw a meeting convened a couple of days later and a decision made to devote the *Moor-rul*’s two square metre display panel closest to the Reconciliation Grassland to a colourful display highlighting the lifestyle of local butterflies. This opens up an opportunity for a NRG artist to design suitable signage for the Reconciliation Grassland connecting the two precincts – or perhaps thought might be given to renaming our butterfly grassland as a ‘Conciliation Ground’ in the light of that term having been successfully assigned these past 175 years to sacred land outside Portland with a comparable message to tell.

Mick Woiwod

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After Mick addressed the children in the viewing platform they moved onto the grass where Jann Darvill spoke to them about the nature of the soil on this hill (black volcanic) and the fact that a small patch of native grasses survived the grazing and farming that has occurred since European settlement.

A rabbit-proof fence has been erected around a section of this grassland and volunteers work there fortnightly removing weeds. Some native flowers have been propagated at Edendale from seed collected in the Kangaroo Ground Cemetery and planted among the grasses.

There were abundant examples of introduced weeds for the children to compare to the predominant Wallaby grasses.

Jane Trikojus

