



NEWSLETTER #43, August 2010

AGM

The 2010 Annual General Meeting of the Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Inc will be held on Wednesday 15th September, at 7.30pm at the *Gathering Space*, Our Lady's Church, 4 Henry Street, Eltham.

The purpose of the meeting will be to receive the annual report from the President and the financial statement for 2009-10 from the Treasurer.

All Committee positions will be declared vacant and new office bearers will be elected. A nomination form is in this Newsletter; it can also be downloaded from the website, or they are available from the Secretary, Diana Warrell: 9439 8565. They must be returned by 5pm on Monday 13th September.

Following the AGM, at 8pm, Don Butcher will present "Stories from a Cultural Landscape": images and experiences gained over a 10-year period working both as a guide for private companies and for Kakadu National Park as a Seasonal Ranger.

NRG Art Exhibition

Eltham Library Community Gallery, 1 July to 29 August

The Meeting Place: Different Minds, Different Hands

Five Nillumbik Reconciliation Group Artists have been exhibiting work at the Eltham Library Community Gallery. Their work presents concepts of Indigenous Culture and Issues of Reconciliation, opening and celebrating NAIDOC Week (named after the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee). The artists have responded to their theme with both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works.



On entering the exhibition space one is immediately drawn to Don Brown's 'Shelter', which is a market umbrella painted in Koori colours; it gives a new take on the inadequate housing that the Aboriginal people in remote areas have to contend with. Don is presenting nine works which are remarkable for their sense of irony and whimsy which is always pointed at the differences between the Indigenous

and white strata of Australian society. Very beautiful is the piece titled 'Free from the Cage'. It is a delicately cut white paper cage enclosing two birds but significantly one black bird is flying away, free.

Janet Boddy's very sensitive portrayals of wire fencing in the open outback, done with Sennelier Crayon and pastel, have a nostalgic sadness and special beauty. In the very restrained, mainly horizontal formats we are able to see reference to neglect, rusting, rolls of new wire and a general sense that the land has been changed forever by enclosure. In a way it reminds one of the ragged sculptures formed by wind, drought and time of the detritus of settlement in the everlasting desert, painted by Russell Drysdale in the 1950's. If we look at the work entitled 'Water Hole and Remnant Wire' for instance, we see the dried up and useless water hole and remnants of broken wire (drawn in shorthand strokes) that litter the pure landscape.

An unbelievably poignant portrait of the suffering of Elizabeth Kooroonya Savage after the loss of her home, husband and past life in the bushfires is one of Diana Warrell's works. It is accompanied by a more sanguine portrait as Elizabeth tries to recover. Diana's work comes from the heart and echoes her religious belief in compassion and the equality of man.

The metaphors in the paintings and sculptures of Joan Pickard reveal her incisive sense of irony and sharp wit. For instance, 'Between the Flags', a dark skinned lifesaver observes a drowning white swimmer. 'Are We There Yet?', a wonderful take on a John Bracks painting shows an Aboriginal family on an outing in their car. Joan's other works vary from a cluster of 'modern' message sticks to a life-size Hessian figure and found object sculptures reminiscent of primitive forms.

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Three digital photographs by Ann Curry of Aboriginal Elders are accompanied by text portraits of these people. Each is colourfully framed in souvenir images reminiscent of their past life. For example 'Portrait of A Lady – Alice' has a background of an old hymn to bring to mind the singing that this nonagenarian still loves to do.

An enthusiastic crowd gathered at the opening on July 3. As people drank the good wine and enjoyed some delicious finger food they were greeted by President Jan Aitken and Nillumbik Mayor Ken King. Then Elizabeth Kooroonya Savage spoke in her uniquely heartfelt and down to earth manner.

Ann Curry

Launching the second edition of Mick Woiwod's book, by Andrew Lemon

The Christmas Hills Story: once around the Sugarloaf II

I count it a particular honour that Mick Woiwod has asked me to launch his new book. Mick is a good ecologist who believes in recycling, so he has already had a book launch last week for this book, and in any case the work had its first appearance back in 1992 – and are you shocked if I do the arithmetic for you and say that that was 18 years ago. He could have called it *Twice Around the Sugar Loaf*, but instead he has shifted the emphasis to the main topic – *The Christmas Hills Story, Once Around the Sugar Loaf II*. Like *Rocky II* it packs a few punches.

Mick likes to tell you he is not a real historian. Don't believe him. By industry and wisdom he has carved out a reputation for himself as the real historian of the Christmas Hills and Kangaroo Ground and district. Our finest historians are storytellers but also researchers, able to go to the detail and not lose sight of the bigger picture. The best historians are the ones who can identify with human experience in all its variety. Mick can do all of these things. He is a natural storyteller, a respecter of sources and accuracy, and a man of empathy. He also knows something about attention span.



Mick Woiwod & Andrew Lemon Photo: Don Brown

I first met Mick and Margaret maybe 20 years ago when he asked my inadequate advice on how to publish a local history. When I visited them at the Bend of Islands I got some small inkling of why he had been inspired to write about his own part of the world. When I read his manuscript I was immediately struck by two things which are the shining virtues of his work. First he wrote better, and I mean this, than any other local historian I had encountered about the Indigenous people who had lived on this land in the centuries, the millennia, before European settlers. He wrote better because he wrote honestly, with respect, admiration, compassion and yet with a lack of sentimentality. I will come back to this point.

Second, the landscape itself was his main character. He writes of it with love, knowledge, awe and affection. 'We are what we stand on' is the name of Mister Knox's book about his work in Eltham, but Mick's book really delivers this message. The creeks and gullies, escarpments and river flats, productive land and *nillum-bik* (which I understand means bad land) all have shaped the lives first of the Aborigines then of later settlers. And both groups, and in particular the latter in an extraordinarily short time, in ways that often horrify us, have left their mark on that landscape. In European terms that has meant farming and fencing, laying waste the land looking for gold, soil degradation and erosion, building roads and bridges and, most noticeable of all, flooding much of the territory for a reservoir. Mick writes very well too about the campaign spearheaded by Neil Douglas to prevent the whole Bend of Islands disappearing under a dam on the Yarra.

So what is it that makes Mick's writing about Aborigines in his local history so distinctive? It is that his awareness of their presence in this territory infuses the whole book. His second edition carries on its front and back covers paintings that are a really clever image: the bird's eye view, but not just any bird. The eaglehawk and the crow, whose significance Mick explains in the book. He shows the Indigenous people neither as masters of their universe nor passive objects in that universe. He points us to signs of their occupation, their tracks, their intelligent annual use of the wider landscape, their food sources, and he shows us the challenges that the landscape and climate created for them. They are there too as a point of contrast between then and what came later.

I understand that no descendants of the Wurundjeri can claim complete Aboriginal heritage though there are plenty who can proudly claim Wurundjeri ancestors. That used to be considered an excuse as to why Aboriginal claims to consideration for local land rights were null and void, but we are being taught not to see matters in such simplistic terms. All of us ought at some time to learn about and come to terms if necessary with all the elements in our ancestry and our upbringing.

Descendants of the Wurundjeri and descendants of other Aboriginal clans or nations have much to teach Australians about living in, surviving in and protecting our landscape.

Mick's book tells the story of the land and settlers, gold diggers and hotel keepers, schools and farmers, bushfires and floods, the building and sustaining of communities, about war and hard times, about notions of progress and of the price that is often paid for that progress. He tells us of effort and heartbreak, triumph and achievement. And his whole text is suffused with an awareness of the Aboriginal presence and of that landscape itself.

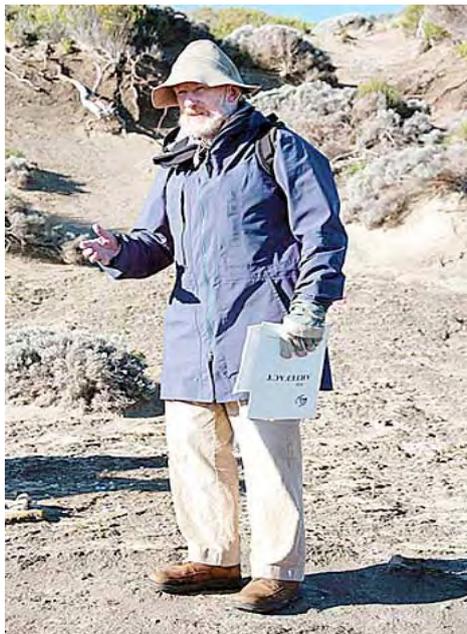
FIELD TRIP – ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA

On the weekend of 3 and 4 July this year I joined a fascinating 2 day field trip with other members to the coastline of south west Victoria mainly in Discovery Bay.

We met at Nelson driving over the border to SA to a beach west of Nelson. Here we were shown how to make aboriginal tools such as flints which were extremely sharp. This was an area that was accessed by local tribes over the last 12,000 years since the rise of sea levels. Earlier sites were now lost under the sea.

Indigenous bush food expert Beth Gott showed us around the Swan Lake area and described the wide diversity of bush foods available in the area. This is an area which well known for the abundance of muntries, which are now being commercially grown.

Our archaeological guide was Dr Michael Godfrey who had worked in the SW area of Victoria since the late 70's.



Dr Michael Godfrey. Picture: Josh Nash 100704jn06 Portland Observer

He took us to midden sites and oven sites which had been carbon dated to around 8000 – 9740 years ago. Because of the rising sea levels approximately 12,000 years ago, older sites have now vanished.

Michael commented that if climate change predictions were accurate the sites we were observing will be under the ocean in approximately 200 years. These sites are close to wind farm development which has the potential to disrupt significant sites. Michael made the point that this area in Discovery Bay is unique along the Victorian coast for the age of middens and that only in Queensland and WA will you find middens that are older and have not been destroyed by erosion. A reason for this is the closer proximity of the continental shelf to the coastline in parts of those two states

Kay Pitts

SECRET, SACRED AND SIMPLE

The exhibition of Jack Dale's paintings at Montsalvat: "Jack Dale – Painting for a Modern World."

Floor Talk by Neil McLeod

Neil McLeod talked to us, in the absence of Jack Dale Mengenen, about Jack's work. Neil has had a long association with Jack and the Kimberley area, Jack's country. Back in 1978 he supplied education materials to schools, he worked with Rover Thomas and other artists, then Jack Dale who is now in his mid to late eighties – his date and year of birth is an unrecorded mystery. His white father is referred to as a nasty Scot frontiersman, who aided the police in rounding up any blacks caught spearing and stealing cattle: they were chained together and taken on a ten day trek to Derby where they were shipped to Perth to be locked up. Two of Jack's paintings in a naive style express these tragic experiences of his forbears.

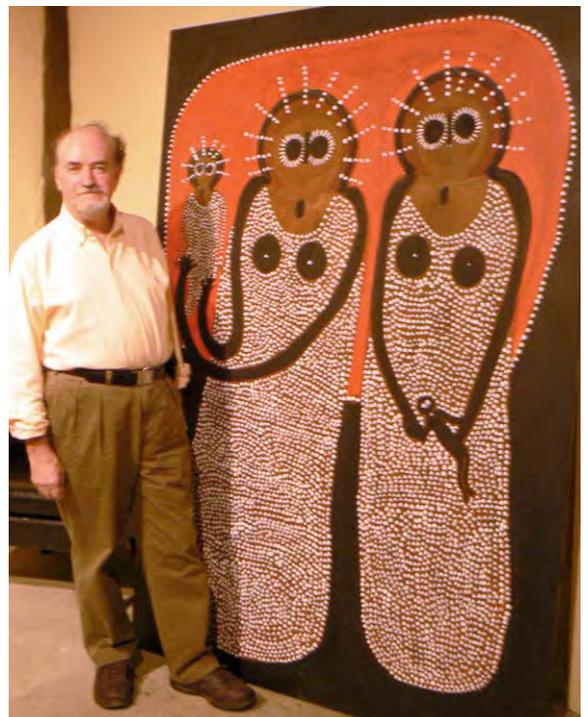
Happiness is seen, however, in the many large Wandjina paintings. These wonderful spirits of the rain clouds with their halos and dotted outfits come in many forms. Moon, rainbow, law, giving birth, holding a child, showing their food, are all boldly represented, and Jack has seen them all, having travelled and walked his Kimberley homelands. He says the Wandjinas are kept spruced up, particularly the white dots, to keep the spirits beautiful and happy. They don't smile – they have no mouths: they were great talkers but when they opened them they spilled out rain or hail, so in the distant past a serpent sealed their mouths. His Wandjina paintings are not considered sacred.

Paintings of his country are more potent as they represent secret places – a waterfall, a cave, a gorge where the bones of about 100 Aborigines killed around 1915 still lie bleached in the sun. Two joined circles invite us into caves where secret initiation ceremonies took place.

We are told of the main colours used and generally what they represent. White, from pipe clay found in river banks, for bones and also rain drops, charcoal from the fires represents their skin colour, ochres for the land, yellow for the spirit and internal organs. Jack considers red as his totem colour. His actual totem is the echidna. A predominance of pink in the painting "Map of Country – Our Family Land" happened because he had run out of ochres and a local storekeeper gave him a tin of pink paint.

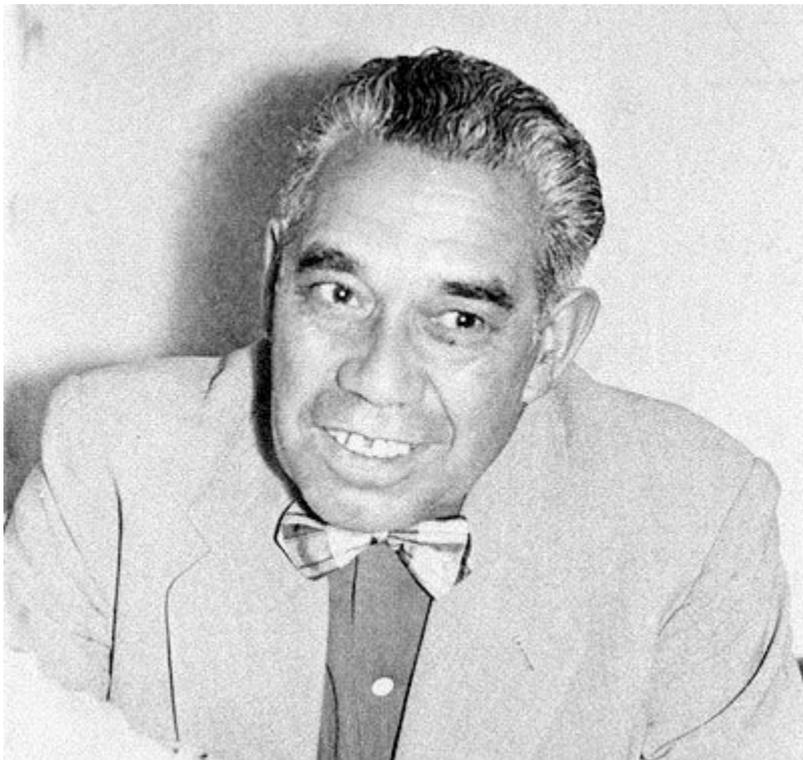
His grand children enjoy painting Wandjinas with him, saying they look like happy disco dancers – and they do!

Article & photo by Don Brown



(From *Great Moments in Blakistory* – celebrating Blak History Month: July 2010)

William Townsend Onus, (1906-1968), of the Wiradjuri people, was a political activist and entrepreneur. He was born on November 15, 1906, at Cumerogunga Aboriginal Reserve, New South Wales. He was a member of the Australian Workers' Union and was coached in public speaking by radical unionist Michael Olaf Satwell. In 1939 he joined the Aborigines Progressive Association, eventually becoming the association secretary and working full time for them.



Onus became an integral part of the Committee for Aboriginal Citizen Rights in the 1940s, influencing the restructure of the Board to include Aboriginal representation and the election of William Ferguson, an Aboriginal politician and trade unionist. He moved to Melbourne, reviving the Australian Aborigines League with his brother Eric and Sir Douglas Nicholls, and together they campaigned unsuccessfully against a proposed rocket testing range on Aboriginal land at Woomera, South Australia. Known as a formidable speaker, Onus appeared at many rallies and community meetings lobbying for Aboriginal civil rights.

Disillusioned with politics, he left to concentrate on his business interests, opening Aboriginal Enterprise Novelties in 1952 in a small factory and shop in the Dandenong Ranges. He also appeared in Australian movies *Uncivilised* (1936), *Lovers and Luggers* (1937), and *The Overlanders* (1946). He also appeared, with Nicholls, in *Forgotten People* (1967), a film which documented Aboriginal living conditions in the Goulburn and Murray valleys.

In 1967 Bill Onus became the first Aboriginal president of the Aborigines Advancement League (Victoria) and its representative on the Victorian

Aborigines Welfare Board. He served as Victorian director of the Aboriginal referendum movement, playing a leading role in the campaign for a 'Yes' vote at the 1967 referendum. He died on January 10th 1968.

He was the father of the great Australian artist, the late Lin Onus.

NOMINATION FORM FOR NRG COMMITTEE 2010-11

All positions on the Committee are declared vacant at the AGM, to be held on 15th September 2010.

Nominations for the following positions are called for: President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and two general committee members.

NOMINATED for the POSITION of:

PERSON NOMINATED:

I agree to stand for election for the position of:

Signed:

NOMINATED BY: Signed:

SECONDED BY: Signed:

Nominations close on Monday 13th September, 2010. They must be received by the Secretary, Diana Warrell, PO Box 1017, Research 3095 by 5 pm on that day.

If more than one person nominates for a position an election will be held at the AGM. If only one nomination is received that person will be declared elected.

If no one is nominated, nominations will be received from the floor at the AGM.