

Tom Trevorrow: A Ngarrindjeri Man of High Degree

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Tom Trevorrow and Family at Camp Coorong, June 2007

Left to Right: Tom and Ellen Trevorrow celebrate their grandson's first birthday. Will Trevorrow in arms of his Great Auntie Glenda Rigney; Great Auntie Noreen Kartinyeri (back row); his cousin, Dylan (front) and Will's parents Tamara Biddle and Luke Trevorrow (Tom and Ellen's son).

A proud Ngarrindjeri man of enormous stature – intellectual, ethical, moral, spiritual and political – Tom Trevorrow fought tirelessly for his country and his people. Respect was at the core of his cultural code: respect for stories, family, country and the Old People who had gone before.

As word of Tom Trevorrow's sudden death on 18 April 2013 swept through the networks of those who had had the privilege of knowing and working with him, grief and shock mingled with a simmering anger. He was not yet 59. How could this be? There was so much more to be done: so much yet to be said. Why could he not have enjoyed the life expectancy of his non-Indigenous counterparts? Lived to see his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren prosper? Why was he not to have the opportunity to sit on the verandah at his leisure and yarn with family and friends? Maybe even pen his memoir of the turbulent times through which he had lived, relish the changes he had helped shape, analyse the sticking points?

Tom Trevorrow's advocacy for Ngarrindjeri rights and those of Aboriginal people across Australia was grounded in his commitment to practical reconciliation, whereby there would be tangible outcomes rather than rhetorical posturing. With

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passion and compassion he provided inspired leadership, always ready with an appropriate story, always attentive to his audience, but driven by a vision of an Australia where we would acknowledge shameful past acts and ‘come to terms’ with our shared history.

I look forward to a time when the impact of Tom Trevorror’s leadership of his Ngarrindjeri nation will be fully apparent to all Australians. The recognition of his role as a ‘Man of High Degree’ will signal a maturing of the Australian nation. In the meantime, drawing on conversations with Tom Trevorror, I am setting down some of my reflections. Tom was fondly and respectfully known as ‘Uncle Tom’ and that is how my daughter addressed him. Tom and I called each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ and spoke as siblings. I cherish that embrace of Ngarrindjeri family.

Tom Trevorror was born on his country in Meningie SA on May 1, 1954. In terms of formal schooling, like many of his generation, he left before completing year six at the local Primary School. His education for life was in the Fringe Camps along the River Murray, Coorong and around the Lakes. Surrounded by kith and kin, in places like the Three Mile, One Mile and Seven Mile Camps and Bonney Reserve, he grew wise in the ways for his forebears. It was these hard workers who created homes from hessian sacks and discarded oil drums, who taught him the rhyme and rhythm of Ngarrindjeri lands. This was his university, one from which he graduated with honours. Tom recalled:

Back in the 40s, 50s and 60s, we weren't allowed in the towns and my family didn't believe in being herded up and put onto one place and plus it wasn't our traditional area of land. It was discussed. I clearly remember raising the matter with Mum and Dad. Why are we living here like this, in an old ramshackle rag hut, living on the land? The answer from Mum and Dad was that we can't live in the town because they don't want us there, and we're not going to live on the Mission under the government control. Mum and Dad made their decision and that was it. And all the other Ngarrindjeri living in the Fringe camps made the same decision; Ngarrindjeri people still hanging onto the land.

Tom Trevorror’s mother, Thora Lampard, was the daughter of Stephen Lampard and Rose Watson whose mother Ethel Whympie Watson was known as ‘Queen Ethel’, a respected Elder of the south east of Ngarrindjeri country. Tom’s father, Joseph Trevorror, was the son of Alice Walker and Cornish-born Jim Trevorror. Tom listened and learned from his ‘Old People’ whose stories sustained him; stories that reached from up River, to the Coorong, along Encounter Bay, across the Lakes, into the mallee and down to the southeast. Tom’s life was shaped by this cultural knowledge. His reading of the world was framed by their wisdom, experience, beliefs and practices. For Tom Trevorror keeping his cultural heritage alive was a sacred trust. He would say:

I tell them country is like a big book, and every page we turn as we're travelling along the road is part of the story, and the story unfolds. We can show them places as we drive to Kingston. Sometimes some of those pages are gone, sometimes whole chapters, but we don't stop relaying the stories for that

location. We used to go back to the Three Mile Camp when they were young and we'd barbeque, every Sunday, show where we'd gather water, where we'd play, what we'd do, keep the stories alive. It's built into the land. It is our school because the land and the waters is our place we learn. We go out to country we learn we get our food and places are given stories and names, and when you are out on country, that's when you get told the story.

The pelican, *Ngori*, was Tom Trevorror's *ngatji* (totem). It was his guide and closest friend. When *Ngori* was healthy, so was his country. But, he would explain:

If my ngatji is getting sick and dying, it means my country is getting sick and dying. That's connection to country. We're all punished because people won't change. Culturally and spiritually it's tearing us apart. In my younger days, the Coorong was alive, you could feel it, see it, catch fish, get eggs, get a feed, birds, all fruits and berries were plentiful. Cockles, you could have a good feed, hard to do now, everything's changing so much. That's how we feel about it at this time.

Throughout the long drought of the first decade of the 21st century, Tom Trevorror had cautioned: 'Don't be greedy.' He would rely on the story of *Thukeri* (Bony Bream), a cautionary tale of fishermen who took too many fish and would not share. This story provided the framework for discussing over-allocation of waters of the Murray-Darling River system. For decades Tom and his older brother George had been pointing to the ailing river and their ailing *ngatji* as signs that greed was killing the eco-system.

Tom Trevorror knew how to read the land, how to decode the signs. For him the land was full of signs of significance. He was an astute and avid reader; a spell-binding story teller. His presence continues to pervade Ngarrindjeri lands. At his funeral, a mass formation of pelican flew overhead. His *ngatji* (totem) was taking him home. When I see a sole pelican swoop low over the Coorong, I know he is close by.

With his wife Ellen, Tom worked for 30 years to develop programs such as the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association and Camp Coorong that fostered and supported Ngarrindjeri culture, arts and traditions. A visit with Auntie Ellen and Uncle Tom at Camp Coorong and its Museum was a fine opportunity for those wanting to learn more of Ngarrindjeri history and culture. In workshops conducted by Ellen Trevorror participants are introduced to traditional weaving and learn of her early life on the River Murray. The camp was and continues to be the centre of family activity and to host visits from educational group locally, nationally and internationally.

Tom and Ellen were childhood sweethearts who had been together since 1970. Their marriage in 1981 was a union of a Ngarrindjeri woman of the river and a Ngarrindjeri man of the Coorong. Their love and respect for each other was palpable, their dedication to family deep. Their children, Thomas, Frank (dec.), Bruce, Tanya, Joe, Luke and, Hank; their grandchildren Corina, Thomas, Frank, Jordan, Naomi, Frank, Ellie, Bronwyn, Montana, Dylan, Tessa-Tamara, Wil, Keira, Mia and great-grandchildren Curtis and Blake were a constant source of joy and concern: that we must leave something strong for the next generations was at the core of their

philosophy. Ellen is determined that Camp Coorong will continue to keep the stories alive for future generations. 'It is what he would want,' she says.

Tom and Ellen always made room and time in their busy lives for those in need; for those working on collaborative projects; and for those who wanted to understand a better Australia. Their home was a refuge for brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grannies, nannas and poppas and the stray anthropologist. Many a night I have stayed at Camp Coorong, in the cabins or the dormitory and, after a solid day's work and an evening around the fire chatting, have snuggled down, listened to the howling wind, scanned the night sky for a glimpse of familiar stars and fallen asleep with a sense that a future Australia guided by Ngarrindjeri wisdom would be a more equitable, fairer place.

As part of the Ngarrindjeri leadership, Tom Trevororrow sought the repatriation of his Old People from Museums around the world (Wilson 2005). The bland narrative that his 'Old People' were simply 'skeletal remains' that had been held in the name of science was deeply offensive. These were Ngarrindjeri family members who had been forcefully taken – including grave robbing – from their lands. The Ngarrindjeri wanted their Old People to come home to rest in peace, just like soldiers who had fought in world wars. As Tom would say they needed, 'to have proper, respectful, full honours funerals, because they were disturbed.'

Tom Trevororrow took his responsibility for his nation seriously. After the death of his older brother, George in 2011, and then his Ngarrindjeri brother, Matthew Rigney in 2011, he became the Chair of the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA). He said. 'In this position I must act in the best interest of the Ngarrindjeri Nation in relation to our Culture, Heritage and Beliefs, in connection with our Lands and Waters and all living things and the mental and physical wellbeing of my People in all aspects of the past, present and to the future life.'

The depth of Tom Trevororrow's fidelity to his country, his Old People and their stories was writ large during the shameful attack on Ngarrindjeri religious beliefs and practices that culminated in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission of 1995 (Stevens 1995). The accusation that a group of Ngarrindjeri Elders had fabricated beliefs regarding the sacred nature of *Kumarangk* (Hindmarsh Islands) to thwart the building of a bridge from Goolwa to the island tore into the fabric of Ngarrindjeri society. Everyone it seemed had an opinion: media, politicians, local business people, lawyers, academics. Few had deep knowledge of Ngarrindjeri society. The richness of Ngarrindjeri contemporary knowledge was dismissed and disregarded by those who found the journals of early missionaries to be definitive; the designation of 'memory culture' by reclamation linguists and anthropologists of the assimilation era to be comforting and; the voyeuristic taunts regarding the contested 'secret women's business' titillating (Bell 1998, 2008; Berndt *et al* 1993; Hemming 1996; Meyer 1846/1963; Taplin 1873; Tindale 1930-52).

Few of the 'instant experts' of the 1990s had bothered to engage in contextual readings of the sources: to whom did the researcher speak, when, what questions, with what agenda. Few had spent time with Ngarrindjeri families, communities and gatherings. The South Australia Museum held the papers of Norman Tindale from the 1930s and 40s in a vice like grip. When I was finally able to access the Tindale archive, I found it contained data that validated the claims of Ngarrindjeri believers that the creative hero *Ngurunderi* had been at Goolwa, that the Seven Sisters story

was a Ngarrindjeri story. It was clear to me that the fragments of information in the archive supported the stories of contemporary Ngarrindjeri who had not had access to those written records but whose forebears had been the sources of the notes, maps and stories (Bell 1998, 2008; Brodie 2002; Kartinyeri 2006; Kartinyeri and Anderson 2008; Ngarrindjeri Tendi *et al* 2006).

I had known a number of the Ngarrindjeri women, including Doreen Kartinyeri, one of the custodians of sacred knowledge regarding *Kumarangk*, since the 1980s but it was not until 1996 that I met the Trevorrow, Tom, Ellen, their children and grannies (grandchildren). They were generous, reflective, and balanced in their analyses of the situation created by the Royal Commission that had found them to have deliberately fabricated stories to thwart development – a bridge that would facilitate development of Hindmarsh Island. The marina planned for the island could be accessed much quicker by bridge than the existing ferry, a feature of the region much loved by many a visitor and in keeping with the scale of the country.

In the years following the 1995 Royal Commission, I worked intensively with Ngarrindjeri at Camp Coorong, along the Coorong, at Murray Bridge, Tailem Bend, Adelaide, Raukkan, Goolwa and Victor Harbor on their Heritage application of 1996. I researched and wrote *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A world that is, was and will be* (1998), and returned to their stories in *Kungun Ngarrindjeri Mimini Yunnan (Listen to Ngarrindjeri Women Speaking)* (2008). Both books entailed a collaborative style of storytelling. I listened. They read what I wrote. More stories and photographs emerged. I shared items from archives. They provided details on likely sources. More stories and photographs emerged.

The twists and turns of matters Hindmarsh are labyrinthine: cases bounced back and forth from state to federal jurisdictions, to the High Court (Bell 1998, 2008). Throughout these traumatic times, Tom Trevorrow worked to create a dignified world for future generations. The deep rifts in Ngarrindjeri families engendered by the findings of the Royal Commission began to heal. Then, in a case seeking compensation brought by the developers whose plans had been delayed though not thwarted – the bridge was built – Mr. Justice von Doussa (2001) heard from all parties: believers, non-believers, anthropologists, Museum employees, developers. He found that Ngarrindjeri knowledge was not fabricated.

With the registration of the ‘Meeting of the Waters’ site (the waters contested in the Royal Commission) by the State Government in May 2004, Ngarrindjeri cultural beliefs regarding the complex intertwining of localised stories with macro-narratives from the *Kaldowinyeri* (Creative Era) and the cultural knowledge that knowledgeable Ngarrindjeri had fought so hard to protect, have been acknowledged by the State.

The Apology to the Ngarrindjeri Nation by Paul Caica, then Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation, Minister for Water and the River Murray, and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and Reconciliation, on 6 July 2010 at Jekejere Park, Goolwa, SA, was an acknowledgement by the state of South Australia of the Ngarrindjeri Nation and a step towards healing the wounds for the people and their country.

These were small steps but Tom Trevorrow could not come to terms with the building of the bridge. Nonetheless he was determined to find ways to move forward, to stay connected. Through the *Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan* Agreements (Listen to

Ngarrindjeri Speaking: KNYA) as part of the Ngarrindjeri leadership team, Tom Trevorror helped create and implement a framework for respectful negotiations for the conditions under which certain actions will be undertaken on Ngarrindjeri land and waters. These innovative agreements negotiated with the State begin with an acknowledgement of the Ngarrindjeri as the Traditional Owners of the Land and that, according to their traditions, customs, and spiritual beliefs, the Land remains their traditional country. The KNYA also acknowledge the rights of the Ngarrindjeri to speak for their traditional country in accordance with their laws, customs and traditions (Ngarrindjeri Tendi *et al* 2006; SA Government 2012).

Tom Trevorror believed a treaty between Indigenous and non-indigenous people would be a powerful healer of the pain felt by Aboriginal People, past, present and future. He looked to the original promises of a just settlement as contained in the 1836 Letters Patent for South Australia as a foundational document in his quest for justice and healing (Berg 2010). This remains as unfinished business.

The pace of my first interactions with Tom Trevorror and his family was frenetic, the context fraught. Tom was fighting to protect Ngarrindjeri places and stories and Old People. I was writing ethnography in the eye of a storm. Tom Trevorror often said to me if we were working on a document and up against a deadline, 'Keep going. It needs to be done.' He never flagged, even after a full day's work he would be prepared to continue late into the night to complete a task. He knew time was precious.

Tom Trevorror was intellectually curious. He engaged with politics at local, national and international levels. He revelled in serious conversations about social issues. He had a keenly honed sense of justice, for his people and for others. Whenever I wrote about Ngarrindjeri matters, I would try out new ideas and analyses with him. Sometimes he would quiz me regarding the who, where and what of an idea. Sometimes he'd just listen and then some time later would offer an insight that took my thinking to another level, 'Di, you know when you were talking about that story, well the Old People used to say ...'

Tom Trevorror was a colleague in the full sense of the word. I miss his generosity and his incisive thinking. I grieve that he died before his Native Title could be granted. Working with him on the Ngarrindjeri Native Title claim was a rare honour. Tom was meticulous regarding what he knew and how he knew it and always cited his sources. He had an excellent memory for sources if not a precise filing system. Tom was also an excellent proof-reader and could spot a mis-citation at 100 paces. Tom had a sharp wry sense of humour and although he had every reason to have been embittered by the abuses he had suffered and witnessed, he looked forward. His political style was deliberate and consistent. Whenever he spoke, he provided wise guidance. To be in his presence was to know generosity and care, to be offered a rare opportunity to share, learn and grow. Tom Trevorror was a friend and colleague: the world is a poorer place for his passing.

Tom Trevorror was a fine orator. This tall man, dressed in black, kept his audience entranced. His public speaking was always on point. The speech he delivered in 1999 on 26 January (known as 'Invasion Day') at Currency Creek, at the ceremony held to mourn the desecration of the Ngarrindjeri canoe tree is often cited by Ngarrindjeri as capturing the mood of the Nation.

We are gathered here today, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people standing together on an issue that has affected us all.

I myself and my people are not at all happy with what has happened to this old *wuri* (red gum tree) and we know that many, many people are also not happy with what has happened.

This old *wuri* was born upon this ground and has stood here for many, many years, tall and proud.

If it could speak it would have so many stories to tell us, stories like:

My roots grow deep in the earth.

My heritage goes back a long, long time.

Over the years I have provided shelter for mother earth.

Over the years I have provided food and shelter for all creatures who wish to live under me or upon me.

I have provided shelter and my branches for fire, for the people who camped alongside of me.

I have provided my skin for the people to make their canoe.

I have shared myself with all living things.

Maybe through what has happened and what is happening today this old *wuri* is speaking to us. Maybe it's telling us to come together and respect each other and respect and acknowledge each others' cultural and spiritual beliefs.

Maybe we could also call this old *wuri* a reconciliation tree because it has called us here today to show respect and share with each other.

I closing I say to this old *wuri*: "if you choose for your spirit to leave this earth so be it: if you choose to live on so be it and through this attempt on your life may you create further respect and reconciliation in this land.

Tom Trevorrow dreamed of a future where we could all walk together, a future built on mutual respect, where reconciliation was a reality. This is now our task, our work. He has provided the map. This is his legacy for all of us – Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

References

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