

NATIONAL WINNER

YEAR 11/12



JOSEPH SABBAGH

PERTH MODERN SCHOOL

HARRY JAMES PENRITH: IDENTITY,
INJUSTICE AND BECOMING BURNUM
BURNUM - A WARRIOR FOR PEACE

Harry James Penrith:
Identity, Injustice, and Becoming Burnum Burnum -
A Warrior for Peace

*"I, Burnum Burnum, being a nobleman of ancient Australia, do hereby take possession of England on behalf of the Aboriginal People...we are here to bring you good manners, refinement, and an opportunity to make a Kompartoo – a fresh start."*¹

-Burnum Burnum, 26th January 1988

Burnum Burnum spent much of his life as a dreamer. This was largely a consequence of his upbringing. As an Aboriginal Australian, from an ancient and ongoing culture, he suffered in the Stolen Generation, and was thrust into the assimilationist Australia of the Menzies period. In his struggle to discover the meaning of his existence he was often sustained by a great and powerful vision which he harboured; justice for his Aboriginal brothers and sisters and equality and understanding for and from non-Indigenous Australians. His journey toward the development and fulfilment of this vision was a journey of historical significance and consequence. This sometimes painful journey saw the personage of Harry Penrith free himself from the carefully constructed image of a government child of the Stolen Generation, and through an understanding seemingly beyond someone who had suffered to his degree, he became Burnum Burnum, an inspirational figure within the Aboriginal protest movement of the period. Burnum inspired many Australians through his ability to communicate the Aboriginal Australian cause in terms understandable to non-Indigenous Australians, and for Indigenous Australians he acted as an impressive and empowering cultural role model to those who had also suffered. Thus, Burnum Burnum pioneered a great vision for social justice that inspired many of those who came into contact with it, earning him the noble epithet: "Warrior for Peace".

"I first drew breath under our sacred gumtree at Mosquito Point on Wallaga Lake Reserve on the beautiful south coast of eastern Australia on the tenth day of January 1936."² The stories Burnum Burnum told would always begin with an account of his birth. He would impart upon his listeners a sense of spirituality and continuity that inspired many who heard it. Burnum Burnum was born Harry James Penrith on the 10th of January 1936, a child innocent of the tragedy which would consequentially define him as an adult; that of the Stolen Generation. Penrith's mother, Lily Penrith, suffered from Pulmonary Tuberculosis, a highly contagious disease, and, in the interests of the safety of the four Penrith children, Clem, Irene, Phyllis, and Harry, they were sent to the care of their Aunt, Ruby Penrith, then aged only 19. Phyllis passed away soon after, and by January 1937, Harry Penrith had lost his mother and sister. In February of that same tragic year, the three remaining children were taken forcibly by the government of New South Wales and placed in the United Aborigines Mission Home at Bomaderry, New South Wales, to await transfer into appropriate institutions for their upbringing. The legal pretext for this act was found under the Aborigines Protection Amending Act of 1915 which stated that the "Board may assume full

¹ Burnum, Burnum. (2009). *The Burnum Burnum Declaration*. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Burnum_burnum_declaration. Last accessed 28th August 2012.

² Norst, Marlene J. (1990). *Warrior for Peace - Burnum Burnum*. Australia: Kangaroo Press.

control and custody of the child of any Aborigine, if after due inquiry, it is satisfied that such a course is in the interest of the moral or physical welfare of the child.”³ However, the intentions of the Act were masked, as the burden of proof became very subjective. As historian Peter Read wrote in the groundbreaking report “Stolen Generations”, “[t]he racial intention was obvious enough for all prepared to see, and some managers cut a long story short when they came to that part of the committal notice, ‘Reasons for Board taking control of the child’. They simply wrote, ‘for being Aboriginal.’”⁴ Thus, within a year of his birth, Harry Penrith was to experience traumatic loss - that of his mother, his family, and his Aboriginal identity. Eventually, he was transferred to the Kinchela Boys Home, which he later described as a place for “prisoners and early convicts.”⁵ Penrith was made a captive of this policy and not an orphan, he was completely removed from the cultural traditions that his people, the Nyui, who could trace 20,000 years of history on the land Penrith was born. As he spent more and more time at Kinchela, the policy of assimilation confused young Penrith even further.

Harry Penrith initially acted as the perfect assimulant, although his image, constructed and propagated by the government system, slowly broke down. The policy of assimilation demanded that every immigrant and Aboriginal adopted the culture of the dominant, Anglo-Saxon race. Officially, places such as Kinchela were designed to teach the Aboriginal people to adopt Anglo-Saxon values and practices. In this way, Harry was uniquely successful, in that his talent as a sportsman meant that he was able to attend the high school in nearby Kempsey, allowing him to sit for a Leaving Certificate in 1954, among the first Aboriginals to do so.⁶ Wishing to extol the virtues of the Aboriginal assimilation policy, the magazine *Dawn*, the official publication of the Aboriginal Protection Board, published several photographs of Harry in the early 1950’s, one with the subtitle “Harry Penrith, one of the most outstanding athletes Kinchela has ever produced!”⁷ Penrith was constantly receiving conflicting messages. On one hand, he was extolled for his sporting and academic talent, and on the other hand he was only allowed to swim at the white pool from 1:30 to 3:00PM on Thursdays. As biographer Marlene Norst suggests, Penrith in particular had “successfully been made to believe that black was white, thrust defenceless into the ‘real’ white world where their assimilation proved to be an illusion and they were despised for being black.”⁸ Thus, 18 years of age, Penrith was free to leave Kinchela, and was thrust into the conservative Menzies-era ‘White Australia’ with deeply conflicting ideas about his identity as an Aboriginal Australian. He was a hard worker, and he used his education to his advantage and for the next 13 years, he worked as an Aboriginal pioneer at the New South Wales Department of Agriculture. He continued in his sporting vein, playing Rugby Union for

³ NSW Parliamentary Counsel's Office. (2003). *Aborigines Protection Amendment Act*. Available: <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/sessionalview/sessional/act/1915-2.pdf>. Last accessed 28th August 2012.

⁴ Read, Peter. (1981). *The Stolen Generations - The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. Available: <http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au/publications/StolenGenerations.pdf>. Last accessed 28th August 2012.

⁵ Norst, Marlene J. (199). *Burnum Burnum*. Australia: Kangaroo Press. p19.

⁶ Burnum, Burnum (1988). *Burnum Burnum's Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd. p13-15.

⁷ Dawn Publishing Board. (2005). *Assimilation in NSW 1952 - 1975 Items of Interest from NSW Aborigines Welfare Board's Magazine "Dawn"*. Available: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1960s/dawn/dawn34.html>. Last accessed 28th August 2012.

⁸ Norst, op. cit. p36

the respected Sydney Parramatta team, as well as participating in Rugby League, Cricket and Swimming. In 1960, Penrith became the Assistant-Registrar at the Wagga Wagga Agricultural College and in that same year married Carmel Nelson. For a time, things seemed to be working well for Penrith in the so-called 'white world', however he still faced rising confusion about his identity, which had pervaded his thought for more than a decade.

In 1964, Penrith applied to the Royal Australian Navy alongside a white friend. They both professed to be looking for adventure and the local recruitment office had sent out flyers stressing the need for new recruitments. Three weeks later his friend was accepted by the Navy, and Penrith was not, purely on the grounds of his race. This came as a huge blow to Penrith, who had been bred to believe that if he acted 'white' he would be accepted. Throughout the 1960's, Penrith grappled with personal problems, struggling to overcome racial rejection and his addiction to the vice of gambling. However, with the advent of the Civil Rights movement, the national Referendum of 1967 in favour of Aboriginals, and the end of the 23 year Liberal-Country Party coalition dominated by Prime Minister Menzies and conservatism, Penrith began to see other ways of going about rediscovering his identity. As a consequence of this he spent almost another decade trying to discover who he was. He worked harder, attended a Baptist Church, and for a time spoke for Aboriginal rights, but none seemed effective enough to him, or truly reflective of who he was. It was obvious that White assimilation had failed for him, and so, in 1976 he finally reached his final incarnation, changing his name by deed poll to that of his great grandfather, "Burnum Burnum", which means "Great Warrior", and growing a flowing white beard, becoming Burnum Burnum as a direct consequence of the destruction of his identity by the machinations of the Stolen Generation and assimilation policies, a move to a persona which would have far reaching consequences to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike.

The transition to Burnum Burnum consequentially inspired and educated many through his ability to communicate the Aboriginal Australian cause in terms understandable to non-Indigenous Australians. Burnum has been described by his biographer Norst as a "cultural mediator,"⁹ because of his use of predominately Western mediums to bring attention to his aims. Burnum's work in film began in 1983 and by 1986 he had roles in three feature films, a television series and two documentaries. His roles often described the plight of the Aboriginal people, his most famous film, "Ground Zero", depicting the Maralinga nuclear tests. Burnum also used his powers as an orator and a storyteller to communicate his cause, and he travelled far and wide across Australia, and even to the United States of America, Britain, and other countries to spread the story of his life and transformation, as well as some of the traditional stories of his rediscovered culture. This drive and charisma, and a sense of single-mindedness and mission unified his life, and by the good humour and lightness of his oratory and his personality, he was accessible to all. As inspired audience member Charlie Perkins, soon to be famous in his own right for his defining role in the Aboriginal rights movement, put it, "his (Burnum's) fiery eyes and his utmost sincerity in every word made him and his words impossible to doubt."¹⁰ Burnum also authored two books, "Burnum Burnum's Wild Things" published in 1989, and "Burnum Burnum's

⁹ Ibid. p157

¹⁰ Chippenfield, Mark. (1989). Burnum Burnum: The Dream Times of an Aboriginal Activist. *The Australian Magazine*. p12

Aboriginal Australia”, published in 1988. “Burnum Burnum’s Aboriginal Australia” filled part of Burnum’s life dream of recording an Aboriginal perspective on the great monuments and attractions of Australia. He set out the desires he hoped would be fulfilled within the preface of his book, poignantly stating that he hoped that “[a]bove all, we (the reader) see the great features of this Australian landscape through Aboriginal eyes, and understand, perhaps for the first time, the significance that they held, and still hold, for the Aboriginal people.”¹¹ As a consequence of using these mediums to his advantage, Burnum effectively presented his case to the non-Indigenous Australian population in terms that helped them to understand the aims of this activist. Because of his gentle touch and his humour, they saw a man who had suffered the loss of his mother, his family, and his culture – speak of healing and love. As well as alerting the general Australian population to the Aboriginal cause, Burnum was an extremely effective campaigner.

Burnum and his strategy of “direct campaigning” for reconciliation stood out from the Aboriginal Australian negotiation establishment from his earliest days. While attending the University of Tasmania in the 1960’s on an Indigenous scholarship he lead a student movement to reclaim the remains of one of the last full blooded Tasmanian Aboriginals, ‘Queen’ Truganini, from the Royal Society of Tasmania, to fulfil her dying wishes and cremate her body. This was finally attained in April 1976. Furthermore, his involvement in the setting up of the famous and significant Canberra “Tent Embassy” in 1972, selecting the NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) designed flag to fly over the Tent Embassy provided a powerful symbol for the Aboriginal protest movement for the first time. Consequentially, Burnum developed into a role model for Aboriginal people of the Stolen Generation, who could relate to Burnum’s struggle and pain and look up to his achievements. Non-Indigenous people could also appreciate his resolve and his struggle for identity as well as his living proof of the success of a child of the Stolen Generation could attain. This notion of communicating the injustice of Aboriginal heritage and acting as a role model to all Australians was best exemplified in what is probably Burnum’s most famous public performance, the “Invasion of Britain”. This ironic rewriting of history began with the advent of the bicentenary of British settlement in Australia, seen by some Aboriginal Australians as an “invasion.”¹² Upon arrival in Britain, Burnum stressed that “We should move into the next double century arm-in-arm,”¹³ before travelling to the White Cliffs of Dover, planting the Aboriginal Flag at its peak, and reading out his declaration of conquest, stating in part that, “as a nobleman of ancient Australia [I] do hereby take possession of England on behalf of the Aboriginal people,”¹⁴ but adding, in a piece of true Burnum style larrikin humour, that “we are here to bring you good manners [and] refinement...We do not intend to souvenir, pickle and preserve the head of two-thousand of your people, nor to publically display the skeletal remains of your Royal Highness.”¹⁵ This “invasion” of Britain was Burnum’s way of grieving the past of his people, but at the same time furthered the

¹¹ Burnum, Burnum (1988). *Burnum Burnum’s Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd.

¹² Korff, Jens . (2009). *Australia Day - Invasion Day*. Available: <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-day-invasion-day.html>. Last accessed 29th August 2012.

¹³ Author and Title Unknown, *Centralian Advocate*, 1988

¹⁴ Burnum, Burnum. (2009). *The Burnum Burnum Declaration*. Available:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Burnum_burnum_declaration. Last accessed 28th August 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.

case for reconciliation. “It takes a whole lot more strength to draw compassion from anger that it does to just be angry,”¹⁶ as Burnum said in a 1989 interview. As Burnum settled into his new role as both a role model and an effective communicator of the reconciliation cause, he developed a great vision for Australia, the consequences of which have yet to be measured by history.

Burnum Burnum ultimately developed a great vision for social justice and reconciliation which truly earned him the title “Burnum Burnum – Warrior for Peace”. As a consequence of having spent much of his life struggling to understand his own identity in White Australia, Burnum became a unique product of his time, and was able to develop his central ideal, dreaming of an Australia beyond black and white. The Aboriginal people themselves also have varying interpretations of Burnum’s vision. Ossie Cruse, the former head of the New South Wales Land Council, sees the greatest facet of Burnum’s vision and contribution as his thinking and dreaming. “He would not accept racism,” Cruse says, “He was ahead of his time and had ideas that were outside the scope of others. That made him a loner.”¹⁷ Indeed, Burnum was alone somewhat in his far reaching ideas and vision. Altogether, whether Burnum will truly be remembered in a wider context and whether his personage and consequences will be seen as representing a valuable contribution to Australia as a whole will depend on many factors. As biographer Norst says, “These are early days, too early for assigning Burnum Burnum his proper place in the history of Australia. As yet, too many trees obscure our view of the whole wood that we cannot judge his lasting impact.”¹⁸ What is heartening is that the most important factor, acknowledging Aboriginal heritage as an integral part of our history in Australia, has progressed in leaps and bounds in our modern era. Burnum died on the 18th of August 1997, but his larger than life personality born as a consequence of Menzies-era white society, and his consequences as a whole to Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people alike, ought not be forgotten.

¹⁶ Chippenfield, Mark. (1989). Burnum Burnum: The Dream Times of an Aboriginal Activist. *The Australian Magazine*.

¹⁷ Norst, op. cit. p180

¹⁸ Norst, op. cit. p3