



**ABORIGINAL  
ADELAIDE**

**JOURNAL OF THE  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY OF  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

***SPECIAL ISSUE***

**VOLUME 28 NUMBERS 1 & 2  
DECEMBER 1990**

Registered by Australian Post - Publication No SBH0764



**J**OURNAL OF THE  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



VOLUME 28  
NUMBERS 1 & 2  
DECEMBER 1990



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ISSN 1034-4438

# MY EDUCATION

Lewis O'Brien

*The following paper is an edited and abridged transcript of a talk given by Lewis O'Brien to the Anthropological Society of South Australia on 23 July, 1990. Lewis is the Coordinator of the Aboriginal Education Resource Centre at the University of South Australia. He was born at Point Pearce Mission on Yorke Peninsula of Kurna descent.*

I was born at Point Pearce in 1930 and I grew up as an Aboriginal boy, belying my parents, as my father was Irish; he was born in County Cork. But I lived on the mission and I think I was privileged because I knew when I was a boy and growing up that I was with highly intelligent people. I was influenced by Lewis and May Adams (see Figures 1 & 2). I called them my uncle and aunt but Lewis was really my grandmother's brother and Aunty May was his wife - she was an Edwards. In modern terms, I think that you would call them 'super parents'. They had more skills than anyone else I have ever met in my life and they complemented each other. She had the talking skills that all women have and our people accept. He had the non-verbal teaching skills, with no words, that our people also accept, and so we had the complementary world of talking and not talking and I grew up amongst that and feel that I was rather privileged because they were two extremely intelligent and knowledgeable people. I know she was a psychologist and a philosopher; she had spirituality beyond belief and a purity that is only brought about by chance in life and he was the same.

I often wonder why I went with him, out in the bush, picking up stones for building the houses, because he didn't say anything to me all day or any day and I'd talk to him but he wouldn't answer. But I knew, in the end, what he had taught me to do because he gave me immense skills, skills that the Kurna people had too, because they were master psychologists. I think that people are only waking up to that now, in modern times, that Aboriginal society was an educated society.

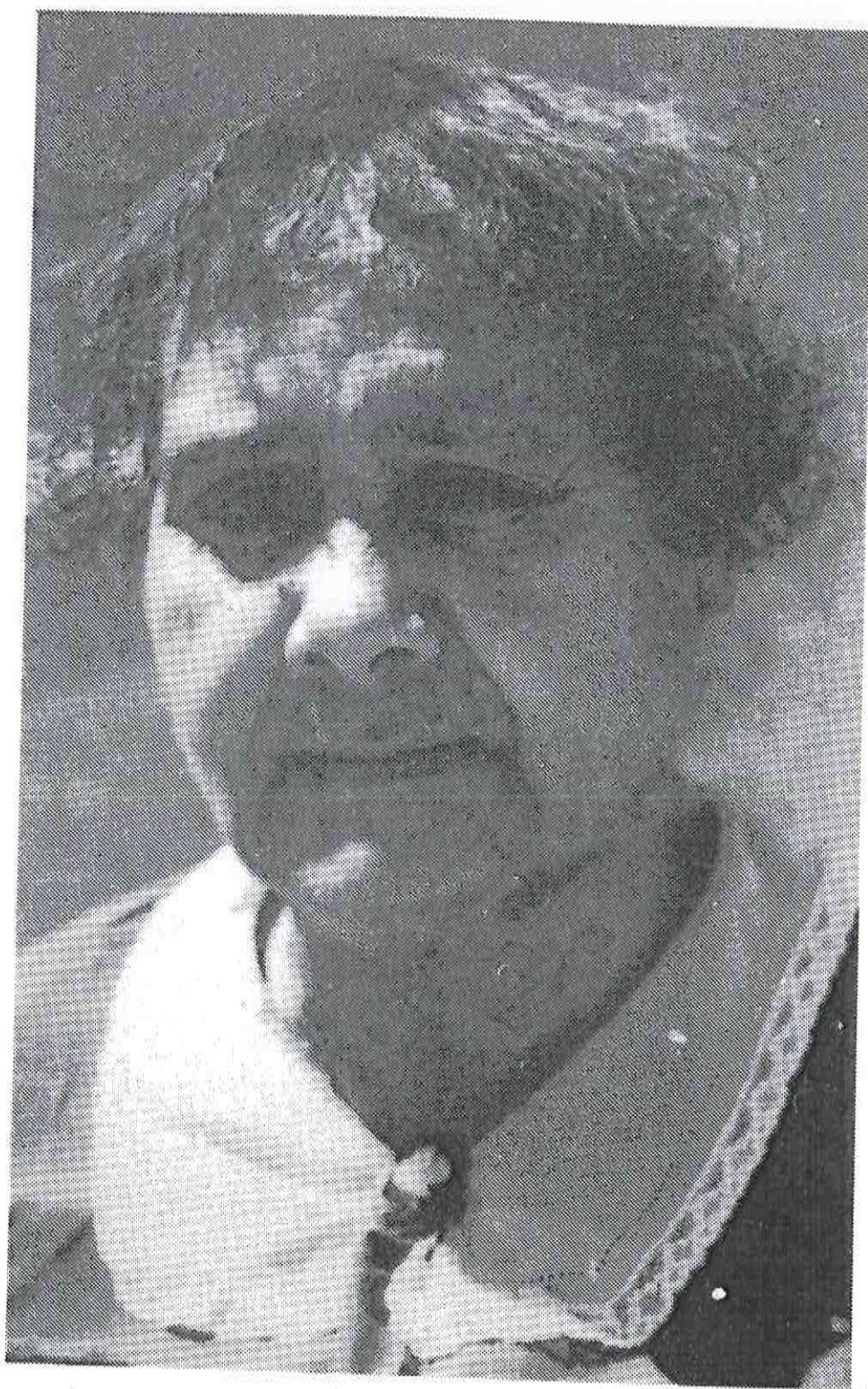
When I came to the city I went to the local school, where I lived at Ethelton, and I can tell you now that I was not impressed by what I saw in schools, because I



could look from my own background and what I had been taught and I felt that I had more skills than the kids around me. I could look objectively at how kids were taught in school and I was not impressed with the 'Question/Answer' system because you could do very little for yourself and it was made for idiots - and that was just an objective view. Not meaning that of everyone going through the system because people who have brains don't have to deal with teachers anyway. They can educate themselves. I only feel sorry for the poor kids that don't have the skills and they're left behind and you see that today. As an Eskimo teacher aide once commented when a teacher said she had 25 children in the class and she had taught 23 to read and write: "I'm glad you are not teaching them to swim". This shows the different application of education that different groups have. What Aboriginal people say is that all kids have to learn their language, they all have to do all the things that they need to learn, but here it doesn't matter because you have everything provided and, as I say, it allows for idiocy. I am not meaning that the children are unintelligent, it is just that the teachers don't know the methods to teach. They go off on tangents and worry about the top 25% and the rest of the 75%, I think, go unattended. I think this is a sad thing. I saw this very early and I sat at school and just watched things go by for a while because I thought, "This is crazy" and I didn't have any problems at school because I come from a group that didn't learn maths and yet I didn't have any problems with mathematics. I even said to the teacher once, when I ran out of cards, "You can get the cards from the next room, can't you?" and she said "He's right, you know," and I thought they don't even know their own system and I thought they were very limited in their viewpoint. I think what she was worried about is that I was going too far ahead of the class and yet kids are not allowed to reach their own level; they must stay within the group, which is another thing that I saw that I wasn't impressed with. I could have an objective view of the schooling because I think I come from a far better system, which was holistic education, and people are only talking about these things today which is rather interesting. People are taught to investigate for themselves and they learn interaction and they learn to do things for themselves rather than being taught everything, which I think is a silly method. I think you have to teach people to learn for themselves and that's what Aboriginal people did and that's why I think that they are expert educationalists.

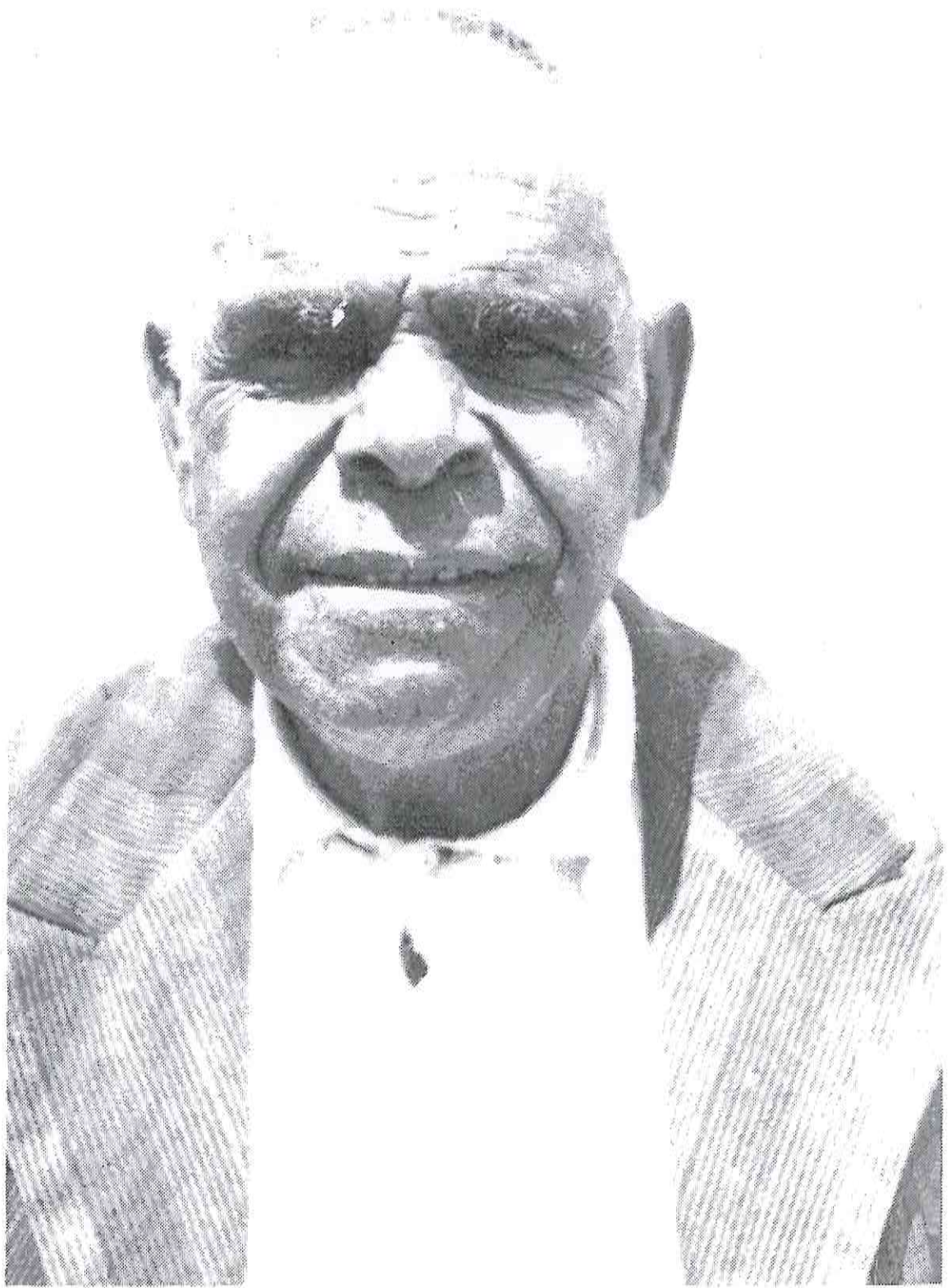
I could philosophise about those things but people say, "Don't give me the philosophy, give me something practical that I can handle". I can do that with you





*Figure 1*  
Mrs May Adams, aged 61 years. Photograph taken at Point Pearce in 1939 by N.B. Tindale.  
Courtesy of S.A. Museum Anthropology Archives.





*Figure 2*

Louis Adams. Photographed at Point Pearce in 1939 by N. B. Tindale. Courtesy of the S. A. Museum Anthropology Archives.



if I can find the piece of string here. I'll show you with this string how you learn and how I learnt of the different applications, showing you it is not what you use but how you use it. I get amazed at the comments when people see me play with the string at schools. They say "You play games, do you?" and I thought that's an interesting comment from the schools where they are supposed to learn through play, because the comment tells me something about how little they know about learning through play. But, anyway, this is the difference as I saw it. When you go to school they teach by instructions, they say "Put the right in front of the left" (demonstrating string game) - put it in your mouth, left over right, go between your fingers. When I went to school, as it were, with my uncle, aunt, and all that, they went like this (demonstrates) said nothing and said "You do this". And then you say "So what?" I knew that I increased my observation powers by doing it, I increased my memory and I had to do sequencing which helps you with your maths - they're writing articles about that now saying that if you learn sequencing you can solve the problem, you can do mathematics. Not only that, later on I was an apprentice and the master apprentices showed me how to screw cut on the lathe and when he had finished, I did exactly as he did and he was shocked and he said, "I wanted you to practise" and I thought "Well, I had practised with the string".

There's another thing that goes on in society that amazes me. Europeans say "If you play with string, that's all you can do and you cannot transpose from the string to anything else". I know that to be not so; I know that you can transpose if you know what you are on about; so I know an extra step that people are battling with today because I understood about the string. I knew that if you did all the steps, and did them correctly, and learnt for yourself, you gain all those other skills of memory and observation, and you learn dexterity and all the other things that go with it because there are a lot of steps involved and there is a lot of thinking and a lot more in the string than just playing a game. I think it is not what you use but how you use it. But I still know those tricks today because I learnt them for myself and I knew what they were worth. Kids, when they see me in school, they test me out, they say "Can you do this?" And they show me all sorts of things and when I do it after them I think they are quite pleased that I do what I say I can do. I can watch what you do and then do it after because it is no good spouting on that you can do these things if you can't do them. So I have learnt a number of tricks over the years and I understood the lesson of the string. That's what our people were, a fibre culture, and they played with string and they knew



what they were on about.

So I went through school with no problems; I think they had more problems with me than I had with them - or I had more problems with them than they had with me because they used to throw the book at me wondering how I could do the things I could do so quickly if I wanted to because they knew that they were held up teaching the other kids, and I knew that. They were there for two weeks and I'd miss a few days and I could learn for myself how to do it. The teachers would get annoyed because they couldn't say "You've missed the lessons, I haven't taught you how to do that". I did the lessons myself so that made them feel that they were poor teachers because they couldn't teach the other kids. I was a bit of a problem for them because I'd learnt, as I say, how to learn.

From a young age I found Aboriginal culture very interesting. I thought that the old people had an immense amount of knowledge, so much so that they even stopped me from learning. I used to try to speak the language; I'd say "*Mai yungainja udjega*" ("Come and have something to eat, my friend") and they'd say "Stop that, stop that, speak English" and I used to get rather annoyed as to why they would do that. Then I realized years later why they did that. They knew that if I learnt all the things that they knew that anthropologists would be able to ask me and quickly get the answers to the questions they were seeking. The old people said "We'll not teach the children either, so they will have to spend 40,000 years learning what we have learnt, rather than learning it in two minutes". They teach you about that; they give you a problem - I have had problems given to me and have spent six hours in the paddock and someone says, "What's the answer?" and you are rather reluctant to give it because you know what the answer cost you to learn and you say "You find out if you want to know the answer to that". It's not that you are being nasty, it is just that you know the value of it - six hours of sitting in the cold to observe something to get the answer to a problem. So they teach you the value of the knowledge and what it's worth and they do that all your life. I was fascinated by the knowledge they had of teaching, especially the teaching of mathematical concepts. They seem to have known numbers and when they find you are interested they play extra games on you and make it harder, if they know you are observing, They used to play a lot of funny games with me with numbers. They'd say "You go and see Charlie, he counts the sheep". So I'd go and watch him counting the sheep. He'd say "Another one, another one,



another one, another one" and I'd say "How many sheep now, Charlie?" and he'd reply "428". They would then ask me how Charlie would arrive at 428? All I could do was shrug my shoulders and walk off. That's what they would do, they play extra games and you know that when people are doing that they know about education.

I went to the archives, when I was 17, to research my family history. I used to hear one of my uncles, old Charlie Adams, he used to always talk about Block 346. Old Charlie, was a highly intelligent man - the teachers told him to leave school when he got to Grade 4 because they couldn't teach him any more. I listened to all those stories about Block 346, and about my great-great-grandmother, called Kudnarto, and all these other things and I went to the archives with that knowledge.<sup>1</sup> When I went there I was lucky because other people were researching Adams' families so it made it quicker for me, but I got a surprise because when I went there the archivist said, "Which Tom Adams?" and I thought "What, which Tom Adams?", I thought that there would only be one. So I said "The one that came out on the Buffalo , and they said that there were three - even today there's only one man named Adams recorded on the Buffalo and that is not our "Tom Adams" because I saw the error in the passenger lists; I saw that his name was not on the departure list but it was on the embarkation list. So they had two lists, and I said "How did that happen?". The archivist said "Some of the passengers were rowed out to the ship afterwards". They sent me off to get a Birth Certificate or a Marriage Certificate to find out which one it was. So I went off to try and find out which one. But I know today that all the records only show one and that is not our "Tom Adams" (I don't know what happened to the other). I think it is sad that they lose some records, and so there is no record of that now, the three "Tom Adams" on the Buffalo .

I did go off and chase up records of my great-great-grandmother and I found that we were lucky because there was some information written about her. They know that she did her hair well, and dressed well and was a "woman of bearing" and "manners". She was the first Aboriginal woman to legally marry a white man in this state (and that's the only reason we have got the records); she married Tom Adams in 1848 and she had to get permission from Governor Robe, because she was a minor, and always with the first to marry the white people all seem to want to make special rules. They told her, "You'd better go to school and learn the



manners and the bearing of the people of your day" and do all those little requisites that they require - and she did that. But I think that she surprised them for she learned to read and write English in three months and they couldn't stop writing about that. This only reinforced my own beliefs that they were intelligent people, and a lot of the kids could learn English very quickly and they used to learn in their own language, plus they used to learn in English at Teichelmann and Schurmann's school here in Adelaide.

When I was working in the Education Department, I helped to produce a book to try and dispel the myths that had been talked about Aborigines, how they were "primitive" and "backward". That sort of nonsense really upset me when I was growing up because I knew that that wasn't so. I think that the white people have, over the years, changed their thought on that - just because they lived primitively, they were certainly not primitive people; they were highly intelligent, had a wonderful system of education and they all taught us well. It was only through the interruption of Europeans that they stopped teaching us. In the book I helped with there's a copy of the marriage certificate and the story of Kudnarto learning to read and write, and all about Block 346.<sup>2</sup> Tom Adams (Jr.) wrote about 100 letters to the government to try and get that block back, but he didn't get it back. That always upset me because I thought we were the original owners of this country - the Adelaide area, and from Crystal Brook right down to Cape Jervis but the little 80 acre section that we applied for, for the second time, we don't even own that today. I think that says something about the people who live in this country because they are not willing to give any back - they take all and give nothing back. I think that is a sadness. We don't ask for much. We have been criticised for being too friendly and the thing is when we ask for a little we are told "You cannot have it".

I think there is a certain sadness in that because I think we were willing to share and I think all we wanted was certain pieces and I think that people have got to come to terms with that - we all have a right to live in this country. White people came here and got all of the country for nothing and I get annoyed with absentee landlords, and things like that. They lease land for \$820 and get 20,000 square miles and no one bats an eyelid. But as soon as an Aboriginal puts up his hands and says "Can I own 80 acres?", they don't give him anything. I think that's wrong. We are the original owners and I think that we have the right to own some



of this country, freehold. It's not right, what people are doing, because there's a certain philosophy there which is unsound - take all, give nothing - and I think if people are going to continue thinking and acting like that our people say that that they will only destroy themselves. The old people knew what the white people were on about and they said "We'll teach them nothing" and they will destroy themselves. And that's the sadness because we all believe that this is a spiritual land; the land affects you, and everyone should come to terms with that. I think that everyone now are crying out for the spiritual side of life and yet people are finding it hard to come to terms with the land and yet it's here, it's under your feet, you're on the Red Kangaroo Dreaming here, its Tandanya. White people say it's a nice philosophy, but they don't come to terms with it. You know you've come from the earth, and you know that if you look after it, it will look after you. I think our people have a wonderful philosophy about that - they took what they needed, they shared with people. That greeting I learnt, as a kid, says it all; *Mai yungainja udjega*, - "Come and have something to eat, my friend". You can say "Hello" or some little fanciful saying that doesn't mean anything - it was a proper giving and sharing and I think a far greater philosophy.

Aboriginal people still living traditionally retain a lot of their knowledge but we have only a little. The intellectualism that was in this country when Europeans first arrived is diminished. You can see that by counting up the number of people who have succeeded in European society coming straight from the bush. Bennelong came straight out of the bush and did Latin and won prizes at a Sydney college, my great-great-grandmother, Kudnarto, learnt English in three months. If you know your own culture you can readily change across. I think when you understand fully your own language, and your own thinking, you can change across. That's what I did. I knew how I thought, I knew how the other person thought, so I could change across and I think it is a lot easier to do that. But I think what you find is that it is a lot harder as you go on, in that as the culture diminishes it is a lot harder to cross the gaps because you don't know your own base, you don't know all the intricacies of your own language, you don't know all the interaction, and you don't know lots of things because you have to have a lot of people doing it and you have to have a lot of interchanges to help with that sort of mechanism. A lot of our older people have the knowledge but sadly they didn't pass it on because, as I said, they said "Why should we be ridiculed, condemned, persecuted and be killed when all that people want from us is our knowledge. It is



better for us to die with it, and the persecutors will gain nothing from it. They can kill us but all our knowledge will die with us, and so you can spend 40,000 years learning it".

Some white people are starting to say that Aboriginal society may have been the greatest society that this world has seen. Five million Aborigines have lived in this country in harmony, without wars over boundaries because they knew their own stories and people knew where they lived and where they belonged, and you could only visit other areas on traditional treks and religious walks and all those sorts of things and you weren't allowed to stay too long and you weren't allowed to take up abode in other people's country. As I said, they covered all the realms, they covered land tenure, they covered all the sort of methods people talk about and they did it in a holistic sort of way. You look at life today: people go to work, they go home, and then they rush out and exercise. Whereas, when the Aborigines went from one place to another, they walked, they exercised. If you see all the old photographs (when the Europeans first came in), the Aborigines were thin and athletic because they moved around the country and walked for miles to keep themselves fit. They ate proper food, they balanced their diet, they looked after the country, they ensured that it was replenished, because it is a fragile country. They moved around to let it recuperate, they did all the things that were sensible for living in this country. When you think of all the things they did and put them all together you see it involved a tremendous amount of thought to solve all these problems. It is obvious that the men and women sat down and said "Who will lead?", and they all agreed the men should lead and they all understood that women should do the teaching and they didn't have any arguments about any of the issues of sharing of the sexes, they knew it all and balanced it all off. They didn't have any arguments about that because they knew where it fitted because they had sat down, in the beginning, and discussed all the issues.

Even the language, I find, is very interesting. I didn't learn my own because, as I said, they didn't want to teach me but I did a couple of weeks of Pitjantjatjara and it fitted in with some of the knowledge I had of the structure of languages that I had picked up on the side. I was amazed that there were only three errors in Pitjantjatjara and that the structure is so sound and even in the things people say it fits in with what you need to know in life. I once read that the most important need for humans is food and as soon as I read that I knew that that was incorrect -



I knew the most important thing for human beings is to be hugged. It is very interesting if you listen to a Pitjantjatjara person talk about a child, they say "Hug the child", not "Pick up the child" or "Hold the child" - it's "Hug the child". - it's in the language. That's how I knew it as a child. You don't have to worry about food because there was many a day when I went without food, I learnt to live without food, it wasn't essential (you need food, I don't disagree with that, you'll die in the end without it) but you can go a lot of days without food (and I actually did that, not that I wanted to, but if you think about the time I was born, and you lived through the Depression, there was not a lot of food around and not a lot of wages and not a lot of work, so the people had to go without food - not only our group, but every group) so you learn food is not essential if you are hugged every day because you felt better in yourself and you would survive the day. That's why I found it interesting to learn that in Pitjantjatjara, the words they use about children is "Hug the child".

When I was in the Education Department they'd say "What do you think about this?" and I'd tell them and they'd say "That's interesting, Jones said that" or "Brown said that" and I thought "I didn't learn that from Jones or Brown, I learnt that from my people". The old people seemed to be well up with all these educational theories and that's what, as I said, made me think, as a seven year old, about these issues because I thought they were highly intelligent and very knowledgeable, because they knew everything - they knew the country and they told stories about their country that made sense. They knew about spiritual things and I learnt a bit of ESP, I learnt to understand the animals and all those sorts of things. I had difficulty with these things when I was growing up because I thought when you go into society people would say "What? What garbage are you talking there?" so I kept quiet about ESP. But you found that you did these things naturally and it all just fitted in, it was instinctive, and it was just a different way of thinking. People have the words for it, I think it's all the same for most people in the world. I think that we all have thoughts of these things, that's why we have got the words for them because I think it's at the back of the mind, I think everyone did it in the beginning because I don't think that we have a copyright on this sort of thing - it's just that ours is the longest surviving culture. I think everyone started from where we did; it's just that our culture is continuous, that's all it is. I think everyone looks at it because it is their basic need too because I think that that is where they come from. It's like anthropologists say; agriculture



taught people to be commanded and take orders and break away from that natural system that people had, to try to get them to work as groups; and our people believed in zero population growth and all the other things they talk about today. That's what I get astounded at. All the things I knew as a kid, that's what they talk about today and I think "Our people did it, they thought about all these things," and solved these sort of problems but it's only being come to terms with now.

I think that what a lot of people have missed and didn't realise was that the Aborigines were on about excellence. The old people lived in humility, meaning that you couldn't skite or brag or tell anyone about your knowledge, you couldn't even get up and say "I'll lead you in singing.". You had to wait to be asked, because you couldn't be brash and forthright and come out and say these things because you had to just do things for yourself and keep this humility factor because they said that that was better for you to do and you would be asked like anyone else - no one should be any better than the other Aborigine. They would know and respect you, and they were aware of all the levels, because even some of the words tell you that; in Pitjandjatjara the word *ulpuru* means 'above the rest', showing that they were aware of people who had more knowledge than others. I say that Uncle Lewis and Aunty May were *ulpuru*, 'above the rest'.

I started out as a mission boy and yet I did an apprenticeship, then I won a scholarship as an engineer and went overseas for a couple of years. I had a part in that book 'Survival in our own Land' and I said that we should put something in that book about our attempts to do things the Goonya way, that's the European method of getting awards and all sorts of accolades.<sup>3</sup> The reason that I did that was that when I used to go around to schools, they said "You've got about six teachers, haven't you", and I thought "Six?" - I could count about 40, so that's when I started to write all these things down. My Aunty Glad [Gladys Elphick] and her son, Tim [Hughes], both got MBE's and they both lived in that house of Aunty May and Uncle Lewis.<sup>4</sup>

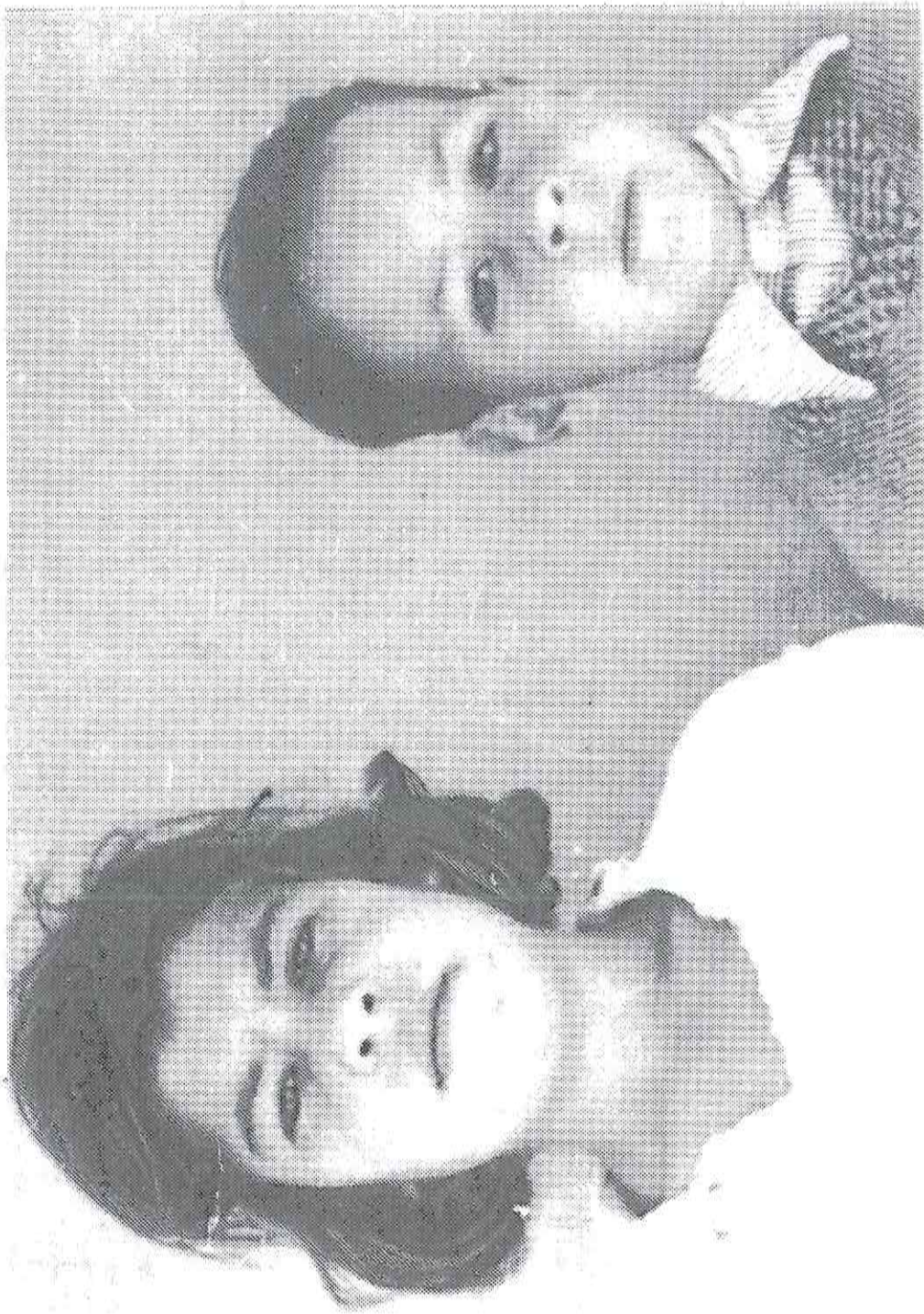
The other son, Alfred, went to Korea as a soldier so the three boys who lived in that house all went overseas. That was just a small cottage at Point Pearce and yet two MBE's came out of that cottage. That happened, I think, because Aunty May and Uncle Lewis were exceptional people with exceptional philosophy. It was incredible how they would get you to fix your own problems. I'll give you an



example. When I was younger I used to get fascinated, sitting in the kitchen of my aunt because it was such a pleasant place to be and the table top was scrubbed white, it was clean, and the stove was blackened, and she used to have an enamel dish on the stove that had cream in it, simmering away, and there was just such a pleasant smell there. When we had bread and jam and cream it was incredible; we used to have the cream thick. Anyway I would sit there and be fascinated by this lady and she would see me, and I would be apt to dream a bit and one day she went past me and she said (she used to call me 'Lew Billy' because I was named after Uncle Lewis, and she needed to differentiate between us) "Lew Billy, I've got this bad habit". She said "I roll my false teeth. Every time you see me do that, will you let me know?" Anyway, one day she went through and must have rolled her teeth, because it was hurting her gums, and I didn't take any notice, so she gave me a whack and said "I thought I told you to watch if I ever do that so that you can stop me from this habit?" That's what she was on about, correcting you. But, I don't know, she was just an amazing lady - everything she did was so unbelievable. She'd go out the back door and throw some water and scraps out and one day 5,000 seagulls assembled and I stood there bewildered, "Where do all these seagulls come from?" There were people, over the fence, taking photographs of these 5,000 seagulls. When she came back, she could see that I was bewildered and she said "That's my totem" and her totem was the seagull so she made a point of feeding the seagulls every day.

Out the side of the house it was like a Garden of Eden, that's what they had in the old days, wire baskets that they used to put the flowers in and all these pots around the side or baskets with flowers and at the back door there were two birds who used to sit there, a magpie and a crow, and when you would walk in they'd say "Good day" and you'd get bewildered with this - 5,000 seagulls, a magpie and a crow talking to you, and you would think "What sort of world are we living in here, so close to the animals and nature" and everything she did was bewilderment for a small child, such as I was, because I thought "How does she gain all this knowledge and skill, what goes on here?" because I was so fascinated with that every time I visited her there because I lived most of my life in the city but I used to go back and visit, and I have always been doing that, I've never stopped going to Point Pearce because I have always liked the place. I thought, for a long time, that I was a Narrunga person but then I found out, through tracing history, that there were some survivors of the Kaurna - including myself - and





*Figure 3*

Jean Smith and Lewis O'Brien. Photographed at Point Pearce in 1939 by N.B. Tindale. Courtesy of the S. A. Museum Anthropology Archives.



now there's probably a thousand of us Kaurna descendants who can trace their ancestry back to a number of Aboriginal women who had children. It pleased me to think that we were survivors and that we are still here and still doing things.

I used to travel around the city with my mother, and even my mother seemed to be a fairly knowledgeable person, and I used to wonder when I lived at Ethelton why all the women of the district used to come and visit her. So, as an inquisitive lad, I used to listen at the window and I found out that they talked about all the problems that women had and she would give them all the answers and they would go away satisfied because people couldn't afford to go to the doctor and she gave them the solutions that they needed to know because she would have had a lot of knowledge about different sort of ailments. I even see that my sister does that today because when I told her the story she said "Well, I do that, a lot of people ring me up about that," and I said "Well, there you are, it's in the family".

Today I still look, and see, and read, because that's always been in the family, this ability to read (we've all been avid readers). I know that if it wasn't for reading I would have had to give up my apprenticeship because when I got apprenticed I got 27 shillings a day and I lived in a hostel and it cost 25 shillings for board - it's like working for 2 shillings a week. To go to the pictures you needed 4 shillings so I couldn't do anything so I asked my mates, who were apprentices as well, "What could you do? I can't continually work and just get this 2 shillings a week" and they said "Have you ever tried the library?", and I said "How much does that cost?" and they said, "It's free". I lived at North Adelaide, and I ran all the way to the library and I used to take out three books a night, so I covered the whole library and I think I read every section - I read philosophy and psychology - Jung and other German authors, Thomas Mann, I know the French authors, Andre Malraux, I know the Greeks, Plato and Socrates. I covered the field that I was interested in. So I found a little place that I could go to without money and that helped me immensely because I see that apprenticeships were really made for children in a family and so, of course, not being in the family, it was too hard to survive under that system. So I was lucky that I could read, lucky it was in the family, this ability to read, because even my great grandfather, old Tim Adams and his brother Tom could read. This ability to read helped me to finish my apprenticeship because I could entertain myself and 'travel', by reading travel



books, and reading all the fascinating things about engineering and mathematics which I was interested in. I think if you start on a sound premise I think the premise helps you in life, that you must read, you must educate and you must learn.

That's what I have tried to do with the others, I have tried to pass this on by going to schools because I was working as a fitter and machinist for 30 years and then one day a bloke came to me and he said, "Lew, your children do all right at school, what about you helping the other kids?", so I said "All right, I'll take that on," so I used to go around the schools and counsel the kids and try to help them with their school work and get them tutors. I had to change people's opinions of Aborigines by giving them all sorts of insights into how we thought, the difficulties that children had, because they are coming from an awkward situation and so I could see the difficulties in being fostered.

That's another thing that happened to me, the whole family was taken away from our mother, in about 1944. There were seven of us and we split up and sent all over, and it was only about six years ago that I met one of my brothers for the first time in 40 years and he was rather annoyed because he thought "Why did we wait 40 years?" I think we felt that we weren't a family because we all split up and were leading different lives and were never together for very long. It was only by accident that my youngest sister said to me one day that when she was in Spain (we're the only two in the family who have been overseas) a gypsy said to her, "You're the seventh child" and she said "Of course, I knew I wasn't". Then I looked at her and said, "But, yes, you are". She looked at me, quite surprised, and said "What? You're the eldest, so there's Lewis, Doug, Rose, Pam, Peter and myself". I said, "Yes, that's fine but we had an older sister who died, when she was young, called Patricia". She said, "How do you know that?" I said, "I'm the oldest, I remember it". Then I said, "While we're on it, you have got a younger brother". She said "What? How do you know that". I said, "I just told you, I remember. When we were taken away he was six months old and all I can remember is that he was taken to Seacliff". So, with that knowledge, she went to Jigsaw trying to find out about him but they were a bit slow so she decided to search for herself. She went to the Department of Community Welfare to find out if he was adopted or fostered. Once she found out he was fostered, she knew that she could find him, which she eventually did.



She rang him and she said that it was up to him if he wanted to meet the family or not, and we found out later that he was quite annoyed and he talked to his two mates and they said, "Well, you've got to". So it turned out that it altered his life - this other brother and sister that he had grown up with left home and his mother had died, and he was pretty much on his own, and he had a girlfriend that he was splitting up with so when we came along they decided to get married, and they met us all, for she encouraged him to. When they got married he talked about his 'old' family and his 'new' family, so he had three brothers and three sisters that he didn't know about. We were reunited about five years ago. Of course, we were a split family: three of us O'Brien's and four that were Italians. So I had experienced all that business of being fostered a number of times into different families, I had grown up with that sort of experience. I know what some foster parents are like; I could also understand how some of the kids felt, because I had experienced a lot of those things myself. I experienced growing up as an Aboriginal boy, been fostered, I'd gone through all the different things that people have gone through and so it made it a bit easier for me to talk to the kids.

I once had to visit a family because the lad had been playing up and was in trouble with the police. The mother said that the police brought him home and when they were talking to him, he was picking his nails, and the policeman said "See that, he's not even concerned about all this". And she said to me, "I know that wasn't so, I know that when you get put into institutions you lose your emotionalism". And when she said that I suddenly realised that I had gone through life without coming to terms with that issue. I thought straight back to when I went out with one of my first girl friends to the picture theatre. A rather frightening scene came on the screen and she jumped, and I just sat there, without moving, and she looked at me quickly and I knew that she must have thought that there was something wrong with me. When that woman said that, I suddenly knew what she meant - you do not show your emotions when you are a fostered kid because it is knocked out of you. I remember that when I was in the home once and I had sewed a button on a shirt to go to church one day. I saw that this other kid had taken my shirt so I had him on the floor, hitting into him, like all kids do, and saying "You've pinched my shirt". Then when the matron came in she slapped me and said, "You nasty little boy, you shouldn't be doing that". There's no justice, you can't fight for what's yours - he had the right to that shirt



because he stole it, and I think that is unjust. That's another thing that we were taught when we are young; the instigator is the one who should be punished. That's what Aboriginal philosophy says; if you think the thoughts of killing someone, you are the killer, not the person who does the killing. He who has the first thoughts and encourages the other to do it, he is the one who must be punished.

That's what happens in institutions to make you lose your emotions; you get criticised for trying to protect what you feel is right. That shirt is yours, you did the sewing, yet that kid can stand on the sidelines and he is allowed to take it and he gets away with it so you learn to accept what comes, you don't get emotional and that is one of the sad things about being fostered - you learn to suppress your feelings and take what comes. It is not a natural way to live because you can't stand up for your rights in a real emotional way. That's why you have to act stupid, doing things like picking your nails, and showing that you are unconcerned, because you don't know how to handle the situation. You don't know what you can do because no matter what, you seem to get jumped on. You can't be emotional and fight for your rights because you soon get slapped in the face, or put down, and told "Behave yourself". So that's why I found I could talk to a lot of the kids about these things, and they knew what I was talking about. I knew the games they could play with people they lived with and they knew that I knew.

That's what some of the teachers have said to me, "You talk to the kids at school about some of these issues and dreaming stories, and I tell them the same things and yet they will sit and listen to you even through the lunch hour - they don't do that with me, why is that?" I said, "Well, they know I give them the answers they seek when they ask a question because I understand what they are on about". It's all about communication; I speak to the kids from personal experience and knowledge whereas other teachers are only doing it second hand which I think is a lot harder. I feel that I have helped a lot of kids in my time in the education system because, as the person who asked me to do that job said, "You understand it all because you come from that background, you were fostered, and your kids have done all right and that's what we believe in - a person who has succeeded is the one that should teach the others, not those who have not succeeded". That's why in schools, our people say, "We are not interested in what subjects you teach,



it's what's the teacher is like. If the teacher is a good person and has got good principles, we don't really care what he teaches, we know that he will pass on philosophies to the child that are sound for living rather than just teaching them a subject". But in white society, education is generally subject-oriented and it doesn't matter what sort of person the teacher is, as long as he is teaching the subject. We think that that is not quite right. We like to see that the teacher is sound and has a good philosophy and we don't care what he does to the kid; he can punish the child, or do what he likes, because we know that he will be just and that is what we are interested in. A lot of parents will say that to them, "We like that person, we like his principles, they can do what they like".

I was working with my nephew, Paul Hughes, who is a Co-ordinator of Aboriginal Education in Adelaide. We are still trying to do things in the community. I was involved in 1960, when we first started, and I saw the beginning of Aboriginal people developing. I know that it started from the Advancement League. I remember meeting up with Girlie Kessell, Edith Wilson (as she was called in her younger days) and she was the first person to speak out at an Advancement Meeting asking for a home at Millswood. So we got that home at Millswood and then, in later years, I was involved with that Millswood Home when it became known as "Wiltja". Then the Education Department bought it and turned it into a school and so all traditional people can go to Wiltja, so I thought that was an interesting connection. So she was the first one that I had seen, as a young boy, who did things in the city. I got involved in the early 60s when we went to Advancement League meetings and I think the first thing we branched out into was the Activities Committee and I think that, by chance, one day a meeting was arranged with Mr Miller, of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. When the person who had arranged the meeting didn't turn up we decided to go on and see him ourselves. After we had spoken to him for an hour he said, "Why didn't you people ever speak to us like that before. I didn't know that you could speak like that". We said, "We have never thought of doing it before".

From then on we ran dances down at Hindmarsh, and we used to run a Christmas Tree and we started to get involved because people in the Aboriginal Advancement League asked us all the time whether we should take care of our own affairs. Then because that person saw that we were branching out on our own he formed another committee and people from that objected, and from that



committee, I think it was the Progress Association, all the women got together and formed a Women's Council so that's the beginning of the fully government Aboriginal Council and I am in that today and we run a bus that goes to funerals. People still borrow that bus to go to funerals; that is a tradition that we have kept on since the early 60s. In about 1972 they changed the name from the Women's Council to the Aboriginal Council and permitted men to join too.

I have been involved in a lot of committees in the town. I was in the Community Centre for awhile, I'm still on the Aboriginal College (I've been there since 1978). I'm the Chairman of the Kura Yerlo Council down at Largs. "Kura Yerlo" means 'near the sea' in the Kaurna language; we have got a Child Care, Old Age Programme, Women's Fitness, and a doctor who calls there, so we have a place down at the Port for our own people.

So I have been involved in the community like my aunt before me, who was involved in the Women's Council; Tim Hughes got his MBE for his work as Chairman of the Lands Trust, so we have been actively involved in our own country for all those years and so we have put back a lot that we have gained from it as well. We were fortunate enough to get an education and we have given back as much as we could to other people because we knew that we had certain privileges that other families did not have. Like most of my family I have been active in Aboriginal affairs for many years. We had to wait until 1967 to be classed as citizens of this country. That is a fair wait but I would say that the happiest day for me would be if we ever got the land back at Watervale, which I think is rightfully ours.



### *Endnotes*

1. Thomas Adams, a white shepherd from the Crystal Brook area, applied in 1847 for permission to marry Kudnarto, a Kaurna woman aged 16. Kudnarto enrolled at the Native School in Adelaide where she learnt to read and write and was taught domestic skills. She was then permitted to marry Tom Adams; the couple's marriage in the following year was the first legal marriage between an Aborigine and a European in the colony. Soon afterwards, Tom, on behalf of his wife, applied for the license to an Aboriginal Reserve near Watervale, south of Clare, on Section 346, Hundred of Upper Wakefield. The application was granted several months later. However, when Kudnarto died in 1855, the land was reclaimed by the Government. Tom had no means of supporting their two boys and was forced to place them at Poonindie Training Institution near Port Lincoln. The two boys, Tom (Jr) and Tim were raised at Poonindie and married Aboriginal women there. During the 1870s and 1880s Tom (Jr) made numerous unsuccessful applications to regain the title to the Watervale reserve. In 1888 the two brothers moved with their families to Point Pearce Mission where they died in the early years of this century. Several of their children, including Charlie Adams, one of Tom's nine children, continued, unsuccessfully, to attempt to regain the lease to the block at Watervale.

A detailed account of the story of the Adams family is provided in *The Kaurna people. Aboriginal people of the Adelaide Plains*, published by the Education Department of South Australia in 1989.

2. See above.
3. Mattingley, C. & Hampton, K., *Survival in our own land* (Adelaide, 1988).
4. Gladys Elphick, who died in 1988, was awarded the MBE in 1971 for services to the Aboriginal community. Tim Hughes received his MBE in 1970.