

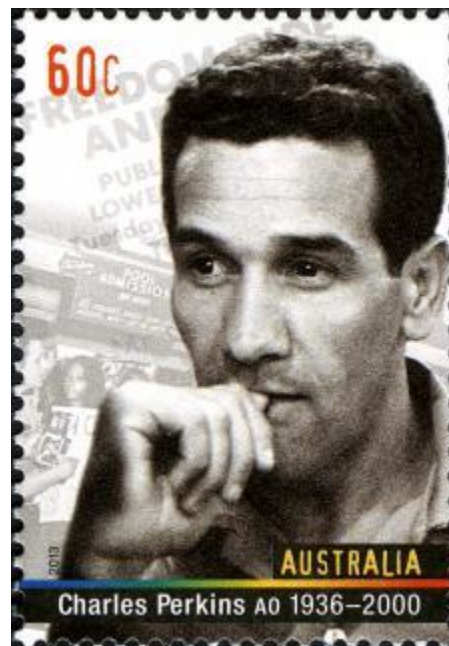
CHARLES PERKINS: AUSTRALIA'S NELSON MANDELA

Charles Nelson Perkins



17 March 2019

Arguably nobody had more positive impact on improving the lives of Aboriginal people in the twentieth century than Charles Nelson Perkins. Born in Alice Springs on a wooden table at "The Bungalow" in 1936 he was the first Indigenous person to become Secretary of a Commonwealth Government Department, feared by ministers and confidant to Prime Ministers, he was an unrelenting fighter for his people.



Charles Perkins postage stamp issued in 2013 by Australia Post.

It is difficult to cover the many achievements of Charles Perkins with sufficient depth in so few words. He excelled in sport, political activism and the public service.

Hetti Perkins, an Eastern Arrernte woman born at Arltunga, gave birth to Charles Perkins at "The Bungalow" in 1936. He lived in a mud hut with his mother until they were forced to relocate to Rainbow Town in Alice Springs.

Perkins enjoyed a lifelong connection with soccer. He played junior soccer in Adelaide and was selected for a South Australian under 18 representative team in 1951. He graduated to the senior ranks and trialled with English club Everton in the late 1950s. Perkins played for Croatia (SA) and Pan Hellenic (Sydney) before his appointment to the Australian Soccer Federation as Vice-President in 1987. He was later appointed president of Canberra City. Sport exposed him to new experiences. It was when he went to England as a young football hopeful that to his surprise he was treated as just another Australian,

"I realised that I was a human being. It was a point of liberation: not to be self-conscious about my own existence, not to apologise for my existence. I decided, 'This is the way it's going to be from now on. I'm not going to cop second-class status any longer.' And I thought, 'Why should other Aboriginal people suffer this?'" Perkins said.

Perkins decided that if he was going to be taken seriously as a public figure he must gain a university qualification. He put himself through matriculation and then a BA degree at Sydney University covering costs by playing soccer and eating precious little. It was before the Whitlam Government's free tertiary education reform.

In 1966 Perkins became the first Aboriginal man to graduate from a university in Australia, the University of Sydney. It was a very big deal. There was an extensive article published in Woman's Day magazine and the ABC made a feature documentary on his life, which was broadcast in 1967. Perkins was interviewed for part of the documentary at Glanville Hall, the site of St Francis' House, alongside Father Percy Smith who brought him to Adelaide in 1945. The footage is worth revisiting.

Interviewed in Alice Springs, Perkins recalled his early days,

“We were at various times living at St John’s Hostel here in Alice Springs and Father Smith consulted my mother as to the possibility of going down to Adelaide for further schooling.”



1947 Father Percy Smith assists Malcolm Cooper and Charles Perkins with their homework at St Francis’ House.

Father Smith had been the local Anglican priest in Alice Springs since 1933 and had got to know his mother Hetti while ministering to Aboriginal people at “The Bungalow.” Perkins was one of the children with little opportunity. When interviewed Father Smith said,

“I got the idea that I would like to try and see how, and experiment with these boys, in an ordinary average Australian school, without any of the handicaps such that we had at Alice Springs.”

It was with the sound of the Ghan’s horn in the distance that Hetti Perkins said,

"Father Smith asked me if he could take Charlie and Ernie away. Do you think it's a good idea? I said yes. You miss them? Of course I miss them. I said you might as well not mind about me. Give children a chance. I like Father Smith so I said you take them Father. Give them a chance. Give them chance. Never mind about me. I miss them."



Dreamtime 66.....
HETTIE OF
THE ALICE
SEES HER BOY
GRADUATE

By AILSA CRAIG

"I'm not flash," she said. "I reckon I mightn't like Sydney." A slow smile spread over her coppery, weather-beaten face and she pointed to the age-old hills, the hills Namatjira loved to paint. "I'm a bush woman. I belong out there."

Photographer Wal Easton and I had travelled some 2,000 miles from Sydney to Alice Springs to tell 70-year-old half-caste Aboriginal Mrs Hettie Perkins that "Woman's Day" would take her east to see her son Charles graduate B.A. from Sydney University. When we found her in the backyard of her house in Chewings Street, she had a shovel in her hands. She was digging away at a vegetable patch with all the energy of a 20-year-old.

The graduation of Charles Perkins makes history. He is the first coloured Australian to get a university degree—and to his mother who can't read or write it's all a bit unreal, like a tale from her ancestral dreamtime. The business of universities and degrees is beyond Hettie's simple experience, and no amount of explaining can make her understand it.

And when you talk to Hettie Perkins it isn't hard to see why. At 70 she looks back on a lifetime of backbreaking work, of poverty and hardship, a life spent close to the dry, sunbaked Northern Territory earth; crawling through dark mines searching for gold seams, mustering cattle in the dead heat of summer, living off wild birds, dampers, goannas and yams baked in the ashes of bush fires, sleeping under the stars or in rough wurlies.

Right from the start it was a fight for physical survival. It built strong muscles and a tough body, but it left no time for brooding over the injustice of her lot, no time for going to school and learning how to become a crusader.

Today Mrs Perkins lives with her daughter May in a House Commission house. May, now in her thirties, sometimes earns up to

1966 Woman's Day Article about Charles Perkins' university graduation entitled, "Hettie of the Alice sees her boy graduate."

Within earshot Perkins heard Father Smith explain,

“Charlie always had a little bit of an inclination of being discontent with things. He was always ambitious. He always liked nice things. I think were times when some of them thought Charlie’s ambitious nature was something they resented.”

There was no disagreement from Perkins.

As they sat side by side, Father Smith asked Perkins,

“Would you like me to tell you the reaction that happened when I took you on the very first day to Ethelton School?”

Perkins replied, “What happened then?”

Father Smith said,

“You wouldn’t remember this perhaps but, I took eleven of you to be registered, you see, and when we walked into the school yard on the first day of school there were a lot of boys there and one of them looked up and said – look at the mob of damn blacks. [Perkins laughs] You boys walked into school and kept your head held high with dignity and didn’t take any notice of them, and I let you go for about a fortnight and then I asked some of the boys, how are you getting on at school? Oh they said we are getting on alright. I said do the boys over there call you names? Oh no, not now. I said why is that? Oh they said, they are scared of us.”



Charles Perkins with Father Smith being interviewed by the ABC in 1967 at Glanville Hall.

After Perkins laughed again Father Smith went on,

“So what you did to alter that situation I don’t really know. I never inquired. Shortly all the boys were very popular because they were good at football and sport.”

Perkins replied,

“What we did really is we got stuck into a few of them on the first couple of days.”

“And slapped them?” Father Smith inquired in a jocular manner.

“Just around a little bit. The rest was good will. There was nothing to worry about from the rest of us. We were quite happy to go along with them,” said Perkins sheepishly.

Perkins remained a fighter for the rest of his life. Often it required bare knuckle determination.

The documentary then detailed Perkins’ central coordinating role in the Freedom Rides. Inspired by the American Civil Rights Freedom Ride campaign in 1961, Perkins’ Freedom Rides aimed to expose discrepancies in living, education and health conditions among the Aboriginal population with a bus tour through New South Wales by activists protesting about discrimination against Aboriginal people in country towns.

During these two weeks in early 1965 Perkins became nationally known. He recalled the bus trip in a 1989 interview with writer Blanche D’Alpuget,

“We were saying to Aboriginal people who were comfortable as second-class citizens, ‘Look at yourselves, and don’t accept it. Take some initiative, or the next generation will end up being like you: unskilled, uneducated, unemployed and unemployable.’ And to white people we were saying: ‘This treatment of Aboriginal people is

intolerable.' The Freedom ride was to embarrass all of us, as a nation of people."

Perkins also said,

"That's the beginning. The eyes. The meaning of the eyes. The relationship, the eye conversation between people. The incident outside the RSL club, that was the most dramatic part of everything. A lot of things fell in place after that. We knew what we had to do. It set the pattern, the template. The eye conversation I had with hundreds of Aboriginal people. In the semi darkness, the fading afternoon and in the heat of the day. Just looking. Just looking. At something. And I was looking back at them. We were wondering what it was all about. One day I'll be able to explain it all I suppose. That was the magic message I got from the Freedom Ride."

Perkins was seldom out of the media from then on. In August 1965 Perkins staged a fake "kidnapping" of five-year-old girl Nancy Prasad from under the nose of immigration officials at the Sydney airport to highlight the injustice of her deportation under the "White Australia" immigration policy. It was national news.

Naturally Perkins took a key role in the 1967 referendum to include Aboriginal people in the census. He was manager of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs at the time.

Reverend Ted Noffs of the Wayside Chapel, Kings Cross became a key personal supporter. Noffs nurtured Perkins' self-confidence and urged him to campaign for Aboriginal people.

Perkins fought on for decades despite being an increasingly unwell man. By his mid-30's his health was failing and an enormous sense of futility had overcome him. His life depended on a kidney machine.

"I almost died about three times," he recalled.



1979 Advertiser Photo - St Francis' House reunion. L-R - David Woodford, Vincent Copley, Charles Perkins, John Moriarty. Father Smith seated.

"My blood turned pink once: once it went spurting all over the ceiling. I was lying in my own blood on the bed, I was bleeding away and I thought, 'Oh I'll let it go.' Because it's hard. People don't realise how miserable you get on a kidney machine. So I was lying there in my own blood. Then I thought of my kids and I thought, 'Oh no - keep going. What's the good of giving up now?' And then I thought, 'If I ever get through this and get well, I'll give it all I've got.'" I yelled out for help. And a while later I was given my life back: a dying woman donated a kidney to me."

During the 1970s Perkins received a kidney transplant and at the time of his death was the longest post-transplant survivor in Australia.



1981 Charles Perkins and his wife Eileen meet Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and his wife Tamie.

In 1984 the Hawke Government appointed Perkins as the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Aboriginal Affairs. Later Bob Hawke said of Perkins that he,

"Sometimes found it difficult to observe the constraints usually imposed on permanent heads of departments because he had a burning passion for advancing the interests of his people".

He served the Hawke Government until 1988, almost twenty years since he moved to Canberra in 1969 to work in the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, set up by Prime Minister Harold Holt.

He was elected to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1993 and served as Deputy Chairman in 1994–95. He also served as a mentor to several Aboriginal athletes.

The Perkins legacy lives on. There are several books about him, films, and a portrait painted by the late Bill Leak. Perkins was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1987. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of Western Sydney. Then shortly before his death he was awarded an honorary doctorate of law by the University of Sydney.

In 2018 Paul Kelly wrote a song about Perkins for his 19th album 'Nature' entitled, 'A Bastard Like Me.'

"It's based on the life of Charles Perkins, a man of Arrernte, Kalkadoon and Irish heritage who was at the forefront of the struggle for justice for his people. The title of the song is taken from his autobiography and the film clip features footage from his rich and storied life," Kelly said.

The University of Sydney hosts an annual oration in his honour. Speakers have included Tom Calma, Marcia Langton, Gale Mabo, Linda Burney, Gordon Briscoe and Noel Pearson who delivered the first speech on 25 October 2001, precisely one year after his State Funeral at the Sydney Town Hall.

Images on postage stamps were traditionally reserved for royalty. In 2013 Australia Post issued a postage stamp featuring Perkins as part of a series honouring five eminent Indigenous rights campaigners alongside Shirley Smith, Neville Bonner, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Eddie Mabo.

2018 marked one-hundred years since the birth of another great human rights campaigner Nelson Mandela. From an early age both men had a burning desire to remain deeply committed to helping further the cause for their people. Both were relentless and fearless. Both overcame tremendous odds and hardship. Both exerted meaningful change as leaders at the highest level in their societies.

Journalist and broadcaster Ray Martin wrote an obituary for the Sydney Morning Herald when Perkins died in 2000 aged 64. Martin said that his mate Charlie was a man of vision,

“Charlie was a hero. An Australian hero.”

He is a definitive person in the Aboriginal rights movement.

After his funeral his family brought his ashes back to Central Australia to his hometown of Mparntwe. His ashes were scattered at a spot overlooking the waterhole at his birthplace, “The Bungalow.” He had returned home.

Mark J Smith

Mark J Smith is the grandson of Father Percy Smith (1903-82) who was the first resident Anglican priest based in Alice Springs from 1933 and with his wife Isabel founded St Francis' House, a home for Aboriginal children.

Comments

Ian Sharp - Posted March 27, 2019 at 5:40 pm

Great article. All Centralians should know the story.

Dennis - Posted March 20, 2019 at 8:27 pm

I would agree with your comment, Alex. It would be good to find a way to spread the story further.

Alex Hope - Posted March 20, 2019 at 11:06 am

It is very sad to note that his story seems not to be well known by young Aboriginal people in Central Australia.

It might be hoped that he would be held up as a hero and a role model to inspire children with the belief that determination and participation in education might create more meaning in their lives.

Dennis - Posted March 18, 2019 at 6:16 pm

I remember when he was head of the Department in Canberra. I think Gerry Hand was the Minister at the time. Thanks.

Noel J - Posted March 18, 2019 at 1:22 pm

I had not appreciated the severity of his kidney condition and for how long he suffered with this. He was a real fighter. He never gave up.

Psuedo Guru - Posted March 18, 2019 at 7:27 am

Charles Perkins said: "We were saying to Aboriginal people who were comfortable as second-class citizens, 'Look at yourselves, and don't accept it. Take some initiative, or the next generation will end up being like you: unskilled, uneducated, unemployed and unemployable.'" True words.

Jack - Posted March 17, 2019 at 5:27 pm

Excellent article. Proud family.