

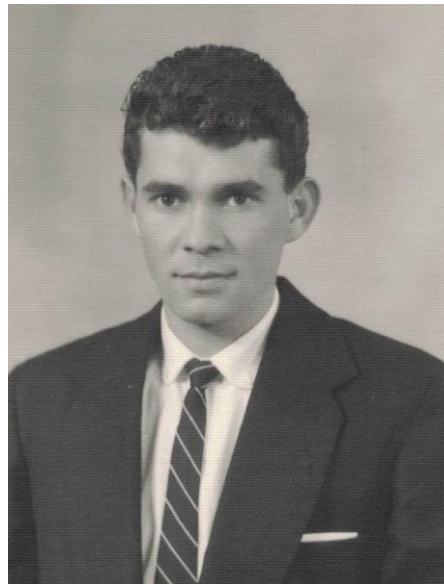
THE FIRST ABORIGINAL DOCTOR

Gordon Briscoe



19 April 2019

Born in Alice Springs in 1938 Gordon Briscoe was a talented soccer player and became the first Indigenous person to gain a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) from an Australian University in 1997.



Gordon Briscoe in the 1960s.

Doctor Briscoe's journey is remarkable. Since the 1950s he has been a prominent Indigenous activist, leader, researcher, writer, teacher and public commentator. After a challenging institutional upbringing which saw him criss-cross the nation, initially struggling at school with limited support, he managed to gain the highest qualification an Australian University can offer. Along the way he was the first Indigenous person to stand for Federal Parliament in 1972 and worked with legendary eye surgeon Fred Hollows to establish the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program. Today he is one of the leading academics specialising in Indigenous history and his

research has helped him to reclaim his traditional family and sense of cultural identity.

Descended from the Marduntjara and Pitjantjatjara peoples of Central Australia Briscoe's maternal grandmother, Kanaki, was born west of Kulkara. She travelled around the Mardu lands to forage and participate in ceremonies. Kanaki's traditional husband was Wati Kunmanara, but she conceived Briscoe's mother Eileen with a white man named Billy Briscoe.

Briscoe lived at "The Bungalow" in Alice Springs until he was four. After the bombing of Darwin in February 1942, the residents of the Aboriginal institutions were evacuated from the Northern Territory. Briscoe and his mother were initially evacuated to Mulgoa in the Blue Mountains of NSW, but after the birth of his brother they were sent to the South Australian town of Balaklava for the remainder of the war. Millie Glenn, Briscoe's aunt, also lived at "The Bungalow" and with her friend Nora was cared for by Eileen Briscoe. In turn, Millie took responsibility for young Gordon when his mother left to work at Granite Downs Station. He still refers to Millie as his mother today.

In 1945 Briscoe's mother left him in the care of Father Percy Smith at St Francis House in Adelaide where he reconnected with Millie Glenn. She recalled,

"I returned to Alice Springs for a short time then went to work at St Francis' House at Semaphore South started by Father Smith and worked as a cook and met up with Gordon Briscoe again. I helped care for the boys there and knew them all."

Other boys from Mulgoa were also there including John Moriarty, Ken Hampton, Wilfred Huddleston, Wally McArthur and Jim Foster. Briscoe struggled with institutional life, even more so after Father Smith returned to Alice Springs in 1949. He identified with Charlie Perkins and John Moriarty, as all three were adept soccer players.

Briscoe was inspired by Perkins' soccer career and later followed his footsteps to play in England. In Peter Read's biography of Perkins' he

noted that Briscoe attended his games, which provided all the highs and lows of Adelaide working class life, and in the course of a single Saturday, he would watch Perkins progressively classified from one category to another. Early on Saturday morning Perkins was an unwanted Aborigine, but by lunch time he was a soccer star. In the evening he was a party-goer and a dancer even if it was in some dingy little hotel down Rundle Street. By bedtime he was just another blackfeller who could be stopped by a policeman, liable to be asked for his pass. Monday brought the mundane parochialism of Australian society, an absolute contradiction in his life. Briscoe says,

“I saw these things and it really got to him.”



Soccer stars. 1960 - Charlie Perkins, President of Croatia SC, John Moriarty and Gordon Briscoe.

When Perkins returned from England in the late 1950s he was the captain of Adelaide’s Croatia Club and signed Briscoe to play for the team. On his path to becoming the first Indigenous Department Secretary in 1984 Perkins was the Assistant Secretary in the

Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the early 1970s. In 1972, he announced that he would be running in the federal seat of the Northern Territory for the Australia Party. Perkins was later forced to withdraw because of chronic kidney problems and asked Briscoe to run in his place. Briscoe was the first Aboriginal person to stand for Federal Parliament. Briscoe accepted the nomination and resigned from the Aboriginal Legal Service, moved back to Alice Springs, and campaigned across the Territory. He didn't win, but was glad that the Labor Party came to power, and that he received enough votes to get his deposit back.

After the election he stayed in Alice Springs and worked as a researcher for the National Population Enquiry for the next year, before returning to Canberra in 1974 to work as a Senior Liaison officer in the Department of Health.

Let's turn back the clock a few years. The criss-crossing of the country, which impacted Briscoe's early life was a pattern similar in his working life. After he left St Francis' House he worked loading and driving trucks at the Port Adelaide harbour. In 1957, he passed the entry exams to work as a fireman on suburban and country trains out of Adelaide. Soon he was transferred to Murray Bridge then moved to Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula in 1958, and continued to work on the railways and play for the local rugby league team.

Later in 1958, Briscoe resigned from the railways and started playing for the Exeter Aussie Rules Football Club in Adelaide alongside friends from St Francis' House. The club also found him a labouring job at a government foundry on the Port River.

In 1959 he was also selected to play for South Australia in the National Amateur Australian Rules Carnival in Perth. At the end of the season he left Exeter and focussed on soccer. He joined the Beograd soccer club along with John Moriarty. While at school, he and other boys from St Francis' House had played for the Port Adelaide Thistle team.

Briscoe transferred to Polonia Club in 1961. He moved to England in October of that year, and began playing for the Hemel Hempstead Club, but found his game was hampered by the British weather.

Briscoe transferred from Hemel Hempstead to Preston North End in 1962. He played for the third division team, and also worked in a factory near the training grounds. Briscoe was forced to give up soccer when his wife became pregnant, and worked in a steel fabrication factory in Hemel. Reflecting on this period in his life Briscoe said in 1997,

“I followed Perkins to England to play football (soccer) and cricket, but I made my success in Aboriginal politics and in gaining academic degrees.”

When he returned to Australia, he lived in Gladesville NSW and worked for the Canterbury Council in Campsie.

Briscoe still wanted to improve conditions and rights for Aboriginal people. He was involved in the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) while living in Sydney. FCAATSI was a mouthful so Briscoe put up a motion to change the name and suggested National Aboriginal and Islander Movement, NAILM.

Briscoe punned, “We’re gonna nail ‘em after this.’

He was part of the group of activists who split from the FCAATSI, to form the National Tribal Council. He was the Tribal Council’s inaugural Minister for Health in 1971.

Briscoe continued in his role at the National Tribal Council, and also began volunteering for the Aboriginal Legal Service Committee who then offered him a paid position as a Liaison Officer.

While working for the Legal Service Gordon helped start the first Aboriginal Medical Service. The AMS not only provided tailored

medical services, it also raised funds for people to participate in protests such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.



1976 - Gordon Briscoe, Vincent Copley and John Moriarty. Taken in Adelaide.

In 1975 ophthalmologist Fred Hollows established the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program, and asked Briscoe to be the Assistant Director. In this role, he oversaw extensive field surveys. His evidence qualified the high incidence of Trachoma among Aboriginal people due to poor living conditions. This program highlighted the poverty and disease underlying the social problems of Indigenous Australians. Gordon became Fred's close friend. He was best man when he married Gabi Hollows, and godfather to their daughter Rosa.

In the early 1980s Briscoe applied for a secondment to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, where he worked on another inquiry into Aboriginal health. When he returned to the Department of Health, he decided that he had limited scope for influence in his current position, and that his lack of tertiary qualifications was preventing his promotion.

It is worth tracing his education journey from his formative years in the 1940s to achieving a PhD in 1997. One might expect that education would come naturally for anyone capable of achieving a PhD. For Briscoe it was an exercise in persistence and hard work, which is of great personal credit to him and will forever remain of immeasurable inspiration to others.

His early education was unsettled. Before living at Mulgoa, he attended the Kirribilli Primary briefly while staying with his mother in Sydney. Later he attended a one-teacher school at Mulgoa, but did not learn to read. He attended kindergarten and then primary school at Marryatville Primary in Adelaide. By this stage he could speak and draw well, but still had difficulty reading. He continued to struggle in school, and repeated Grade Three in 1949. When he left school at eighteen he was barely able to read and write. He took it upon himself to improve his education. In 1965 he took correspondence courses in history, English, geography and science, and obtained his fourth form certificate on his second attempt. In the following year, he passed fifth form by attending night classes at the Bankstown Technical College.

In 1968 Briscoe was approached by the NSW Aboriginal Education Council who offered him a scholarship to attend Sydney Technical College on a full-time basis. He matriculated at the end of the year, and with the help of Gloria Brennan, secured a scholarship to finish his liberal arts degree at the Australian National University (ANU).

At Honours level he completed a history thesis about the effects of capitalism on Central Australia. He hoped to study a Master of Arts in the History Program when he finished Honours, but didn't obtain a high enough grade and was told he needed a Masters qualifying degree.

Once he had completed the qualifying degree, he began a Masters thesis looking at the transformations of post-war Aboriginal society in the area north of Port Augusta. After submitting his Masters Thesis, Gordon returned to the public service working at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

He returned to the ANU as a doctoral candidate in 1992. In 1996, Briscoe finished his PhD thesis about the impact of disease patterns on Aboriginal population. He was the first Indigenous person to gain a PhD, conferred in 1997.



1997 - Gordon Briscoe (2nd from left) receives PhD in History from the Australian National University in Canberra. Ros and John Moriarty (5th and 4th from right). Gordon's brother Sam Wickman is on the far left.

He stayed at the ANU's Department of History, working on a post-doctoral project about Aboriginal historical demography. In 2002 the Centre for Indigenous History was established and Briscoe was appointed as a Research Fellow. In this role he worked on a "Frontiers Histories" project with American historians. They took a strong interest in his personal history, which inspired him to write a memoir, entitled *Racial Folly*. His subsequent position as the Visiting Fellow in the Department of History gave him an opportunity to research his family's past and the institutionalisation of Aboriginal children.

One of his early duties as a newly minted PhD was to deliver a keynote speech to launch the "Strangers in a strange land" exhibition detailing the history of the Anglican Church and Aboriginal people from 1847-1997 at Tandanya in Adelaide, he said,

"The church's work is not widely recognised by Australian historians. The churches were expected to deal with the Aboriginal problem, which was seen by the state (Commonwealth and State

Governments) as the job of Christian charity, rather than a responsible modern state.”

“I can say now that much of the success of St Francis’ House and Father Percy Smith’s dream was because he allowed and encouraged us to be Aborigines and made every effort to keep our ties with our families.”

He was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 2004 for his work on the Aboriginal Medical Service, Aboriginal Legal Services, the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program and his academic achievements. He invited Millie Glenn to his investiture in Canberra to stand in as his mother as his mother Eileen had passed away.

He was a key academic contributor and commentator in the landmark series *The First Australians* which was produced over a course of six years by Rachel Perkins and first aired in October 2008 on the SBS. The documentary formed part of a greater project that included a book entitled, *The untold story of Australia*, a community outreach program and a substantial website featuring over 200 mini-documentaries.

Now aged 81 Dr Gordon Briscoe AO is retired and lives in NSW.

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. Mark holds an honours degree in history and politics from the University of Adelaide.

Comments

Phil Walcott - Posted April 20, 2019 at 3:46 pm

A terrific read ... great acknowledgement of a man who looks like having significantly contributed to many generations of Aboriginal people, both locally and around the country. Always good to learn of such accomplishments from those of us who had a difficult beginning.

Happily shared on some social media. Thanks for being, Gordon.

James - Posted April 19, 2019 at 7:53 pm

The service rendered by Father Percy Smith to Aboriginal children is truly profound. He obviously dedicated himself to serve some of the most destitute children in Australia at a time when very little was being done to give them a chance in life to which they as Australians had a right.

Such a kind and humble man stands as an example to us all as to what is really of value in life.

Like the Aboriginal children he served, who have achieved so remarkably well, Father Smith will be long remembered, admired and hopefully emulated.

John Bell - Posted April 19, 2019 at 3:37 pm

Gordon is a goodhearted bloke for whom I have a fond regard.

In 1967 when I first lobbed in the Alice as a naive city boy I lived at Stott House. I was homesick.

A motherly lady who worked as a cleaner there befriended me. Every Sunday morning we would have a cup of coffee across the road at El Rancho and she would tell me the stories of the Aboriginal community in the Alice. She was very kind to me. It helped me get over my homesickness.

Thirty years later in 1997 I bumped into Gordon at the TAB in Jamison in Canberra. One Saturday arvo.

Gordon suggested a book be written about a High Court case I had been in and for the next year or so I went to his home in the suburb of O'Connor where we would sit and yarn. One day while Gordon was making a cup of tea out in the kitchen I idly looked at a framed photo on his lounge room mantelpiece.

When he came back in I mentioned that the lady in the pic looked like the lovely old cleaning lady who befriended me at Stott House.

He asked me what her name was and I said "Euleen". Gordon smiled and said: "That was my mum".

Good memories of a good bloke and his beautiful old mum.

Meg - Posted April 19, 2019 at 3:03 pm

The churches' work IS being well recognised, especially through taxpayer funded Royal Commissions into Child Abuse and the acknowledgement of stolen generations including but not limited to the British migrant children.

Veronica - Posted April 19, 2019 at 1:06 pm

This comment is spot on. He said: "The church's work is not widely recognised by Australian historians. The churches were expected to deal with the Aboriginal problem, which was seen by the state (Commonwealth and State Governments) as the job of Christian charity, rather than a responsible modern state."

Governments did not take responsibility.

Simon - Posted April 19, 2019 at 11:55 am

Incredible persistence over many decades to go all the way with his education. Amazing after his early challenges at school. Thanks for this story.

Peter J - Posted April 19, 2019 at 10:26 am

What a remarkable man and an outstanding Australian. I enjoyed his analysis in the First Australian series on the ABC some years ago.