



AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

STUDY GUIDE

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BILL HARNEY

(1931-) Aboriginal Elder

SERIES 8

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 8) produced by the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories - of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Bill Harney was born in the Northern Territory in 1931 - a time when mixed race relationships were not accepted and many children were removed from Aboriginal families and communities through a government policy of enforced integration.

Bill was raised by his Aboriginal mother in the traditions of her Wardaman people. His father was white. From his early years, he showed that he could prosper

in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Lacking formal education but with determination, enthusiasm and hard work, Bill became a successful businessman. As a young teen, he practised reading English from the labels on canned foods and bottles. At 17, he was head stockman on a huge cattle station. Later, he established his own fencing and tourism businesses.

But it is Aboriginal culture that has been

From his early years, he showed that he could prosper in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities



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the defining influence in Bill's life. A fully initiated Wardaman man and respected elder, Bill is a custodian of his people's stories, including the remarkable Lightning Brothers paintings - some of the world's most famous rock art.

In this interview, Bill recalls the hard school that is bush life. He introduces us to Wardaman culture and talks of the problems facing Indigenous Australians and his hopes for the future. He also explains the importance of remaining connected to traditional ways and the land, and speaks with feeling and insight about surviving in two very different worlds - black and white.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Australian Biography: Bill Harney will have interest and relevance for students from middle to senior secondary levels studying English, Modern History, Citizenship and Society Life Skills, Society and Culture, Studies of Religion, Media Studies, Creative Arts Life Skills, Art, Legal Studies, Geography and Aboriginal Studies.

BEFORE WATCHING

Throughout history, people have wondered where they came from and what created the world around them - the landscape, the weather, the sun and stars and the animals.

Over 40,000 years of existence, Australian Aborigines found answers to these questions in Dreamtime Stories, which have been passed down through the centuries. These stories, passed on mainly by word of mouth, varied slightly from area to area, however Dreamtime lore gathered from all areas across Australia reveals a collective belief in an all-powerful Supreme Creator.

This Great Being is known by different names in different areas. Most, when translated, mean 'all-father' or 'father-of-all'. The name Baiame - pronounced *Byamee* - seems to have been the most widespread, particularly in New South Wales.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Compare Aboriginal creation stories

and beliefs with those of Western belief systems.

- 2 Discuss the importance of landscape and totems to Aboriginal people.
- 3 What are Aboriginal views of history and time?

HISTORICAL & LEGAL CONTEXT

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE STOLEN GENERATIONS AND THE ISSUE OF MIXED RACE

Bill Harney grew up in an era when Aboriginal children of mixed race were forcibly removed from their families in every state and territory of Australia.

The separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families began as early as 1885 in Victoria and New South Wales and continued in some states until the 1970s.

Children were taken under the government policies of protection and assimilation, which aimed to make Indigenous people adopt European culture and behaviour to the exclusion of their family and traditional customs. The assimilation policy presumed that, over time, Indigenous people would die out or be so mixed with the European population they would become indistinguishable.

These government practices separated thousands of Aboriginal children from their families. Many have never found each other again.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the findings of *The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families?* (aka the Stolen Generations Report)
- 2 Discuss the reasons for and the results of the organization "Link Up" which has been formed by Aboriginal Australians.
- 3 Discuss the reasons behind the Aboriginal people's request for an apology about the Stolen Generations issue from the Australian Government.

THE CONCEPT OF *TERRA NULLIUS*

Terra Nullius is a Latin term meaning 'land

belonging to no one', that is, land over which no previous sovereignty has been exercised. This centuries-old European legal principle was applied to the takeover of Australia and meant that Indigenous peoples rights were not recognized; whereas Europeans could be first owners of land merely by occupying it.

This doctrine of peaceful occupation or settlement, as distinct from the acquiescence or conquest of the prior occupants, was thought to have provided the basis in international law for the progressive appropriation of the Australian continent by the British government in the name of the Crown, commencing with James Cook's claim in April 1770 to eastern Australia... and completed by Charles Fremantle's annexation of western Australia at Bathurst Bay in 1829. Although Cook and Joseph Banks found the country inhabited, they formed the view that, as itinerant hunter-gatherers, the people had not advanced to that stage of civilization, in terms of fixed habitation and regulated laws and customs, which would endow them with rights of prior ownership and necessitate their consent to forgo such rights.¹

Aboriginal opinions and views about this and other issues are discussed on the web site of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC):

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and our lands is complex. The landscape determines lifestyle and culture and supplies the needs of our communities. Our people respond by caring for country.

In Australia, Indigenous people are required to apply under legal processes to prove ongoing cultural links before we can gain a formal right of access to our traditional lands to maintain culture and heritage.

In a number of states and territories, land rights legislation provides the means for establishing claims to traditional lands. The benefit varies widely.²

QUESTIONS

- 1 When and on what basis did Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people first mount a legal challenge to the concept of *Terra Nullius*?

- 2 What types of rights were established for Indigenous Australians by the outcomes of the successive legal challenges?
- 3 How do you think that the loss of ownership of land has affected Indigenous people's view of their own position and self-worth in society?

A SENSE OF PLACE – WARDAMAN COUNTRY

Bill Harney is a Wardaman of the Fitzmaurice Region in the Northern Territory. Wardaman country, on the upper Victoria River, contains an extensive body of rock art situated on Delamere and Willeroo stations.

*Engravings with abraded grooves may relate to rainmaking ceremonies. There are many engravings in the Panaramitee style, and there are engraved animal and human figures. Paintings include the famous Lightning Brothers, and many other human-like and animal motifs. A number of figures are both engraved and painted, a very unusual feature in Australian rock art.*³

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Watch the documentary film *The Land of the Lightning Brothers* in which Bill Harney also appears.
- 2 Outline the significance of Aboriginal art to religious and cultural beliefs. Discuss the importance of the

Lightning Brothers - Yagjadbula and Jabaringi - to the Wardaman peoples' living culture.

- 3 Discuss the difference between the Aboriginal art of the Fitzmaurice region and that of desert regions.
- 4 Discuss the responsibilities held by tribal elders for custodianship of significant cultural treasures.

THE PLACE OF THE BIOGRAPHY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Oral History is information about the past collected by interviewing people about their lives. It is an important source of information for family and personal history. Oral History interviews are pieces



of historical evidence of a person's past experience or of events in their lives. It can be used with other pieces of evidence such as photographs and entries from diaries.⁴

AFTER WATCHING

Bill Harney has faced adversity on many occasions during his life but has drawn strength from his culture and family.

- 1 Discuss Bill's responsibilities as a tribal elder.
- 2 Discuss the importance of initiation as a rite of passage.

MEDIA STUDIES

'History...is an inquiry which tries to narrate, reconstruct and interpret past human experiences.'⁵

Biography told through the method of oral history has certain narrative elements, revealing the motivation of characters and what they do with opportunity and time.

Certain stylistic elements are used by the filmmaker to enhance the narrative. They are: composition, framing, spatial relations, camera movement, lighting, editing techniques, narration, sound effects, music, archival photographs and film or tape.

- What role does the interviewer/narrator play in this program?
- What are the challenges of using narration in this manner?
- What do you understand about Bill Harney's current life by the visual background of the interview shot chosen by the director?
- Discuss the use of archival stills and footage.

A biography also reveals a sequence of events and should achieve narrative unity.

- Discuss the style and pace of the editing and whether it distracted from or enhanced the narrative unity.
- Is closure achieved at the end of the narrative?
- Are issues resolved?
- Are questions answered?
- Were you drawn into the story?

- Which part of the story resonated with you?

RESOURCES/FURTHER REFERENCE

Rhonda Craven (ed), *Teaching Aboriginal Studies*, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1999.

Invasion and resistance untold stories: Aboriginal voices in Australian history [kit], Board of Studies, North Sydney, 1995.

John Ritchie (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 14. 1940-1980, Melbourne University Press, 1993

David Roberts (director), *The Land of the Lightning Brothers*, a Film Australia Production for the Australian Heritage Commission, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Northern Territory Government, 1987, 26 mins

Rob Wellington and Trevor Graham (directors), *Mabo – The Native Title Revolution* CD-Rom, 1998; Web Site, 2000.

An extensive multimedia resource that explores a landmark in Australian history—the Mabo case—as well as related issues from colonization and Indigenous culture to land rights and native title.

www.MaboNativeTitle.com

The web site has been developed in collaboration with the Aboriginal Research Institute at the University of South Australia, and established as part of the Indigenous Online Network.

INDIGENOUS STUDIES WEB SITES

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS): www.aiatsis.gov.au

Macquarie University Library: Indigenous Studies: Electronic Databases: www2.lib.mq.edu.au/resources/subject/Indigenous/indatabases.html

The World-Wide Web Virtual Library: Intercultural Relationships: www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/AborigPages/Relationships.html

The World-Wide Web Virtual Library: Aboriginal General Online Resources: www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/

AborigPages/General.html

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David Horton (Ed), *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994, pp. 1063-1064
- ² Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) web site: <http://www.atsic.gov.au/issues/land/Default.asp>
- ³ *ibid*, D. Horton, p. 1151
- ⁴ Mark Anderson & Paul Ashton, *Focus on Australian History*, MacMillan Education Australia, 1994.
- ⁵ Mark Anderson & Paul Ashton, *Focus on Australian History*, MacMillan Education Australia, 1994, p. 2

Australian Biography: Bill Harney
A Film Australia National Interest Program
Director/Producer: Robin Hughes
Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn
Duration: 26 minutes
Year: 2001

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