
THE OODGEROO NOONUCCAL PAPERS AT THE FRYER (UQFL84) INCLUDE A LARGE AMOUNT OF MATERIAL RELATED TO THE MOONGALBA/STRADBROKE PERIOD: THE ‘MOONGALBA DIARIES’ (A KIND OF VISITOR’S BOOK THAT ALSO RECORDS CASH AND IN-KIND DONATIONS TO THE PROJECT BY SUPPORTERS, INCLUDING CULTURAL LUMINARIES SUCH AS JUDITH WRIGHT, NANCY CATO AND IAN FAIRWEATHER); MANUSCRIPTS OF POEMS AND STORIES (GENERALLY WRITTEN IN SCHOOL EXERCISE BOOKS), AND ARTICLES, SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE FROM THIS PERIOD; ARCHITECTURAL PLANS AND FUNDING SUBMISSIONS THAT DOCUMENT OODGEROO’S (SADLY UNREALISED) VISION FOR MOONGALBA; CURIOSITIES SUCH AS A ‘RHYMES’ BOOK (BOX 38) APPARENTLY USED AS A KIND OF RHYMING THESAURUS; AND VOLUMINOUS MATERIAL RELATING TO OODGEROO’S EXTENSIVE POLITICAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES ON STRADBROKE AND BEYOND, INCLUDING CAMPAIGNS AGAINST NEW MINING LEASES AND THE BUILDING OF A BRIDGE FROM THE MAINLAND.

BY THE 1970S MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIAN CULTURE HAD READILY EMBRACED OODGEROO AS AUSTRALIA’S SEMI-OFFICIAL ‘ABORIGINAL POET’ AND SPOKESWOMAN FOR HER PEOPLE. HER LIFE AT MOONGALBA WAS REGULARLY PROFILED IN ANODYNE ‘LIFESTYLE’ PIECES IN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES, INCLUDING A ‘MY DAY’ PIECE IN WOMAN’S DAY IN JULY 1976. MORE RIGOROUS ANALYSIS OF OODGEROO’S UNIQUE ACHIEVEMENTS AND HER RELATIONSHIP WITH STRADBROKE CAME THROUGH FRANK HEIMAN’S FILM SHADOW SISTER (1978), THE ABC TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY STRADBROKE DREAMTIME (1977), AND A SCHOLARLY ARTICLE BY VISITING AMERICAN ACADEMIC MARGARET READ LAUER (PUBLISHED IN 1978), BASED ON AN EXTENDED VISIT TO MOONGALBA. ALL THESE PROJECTS ARE EXTENSIVELY DOCUMENTED IN THE FRYER PAPERS.

AT TIMES, OODGEROO IMPLIES THAT HER STRADBROKE PERIOD INVOLVED A WITHDRAWAL FROM THE HEADY

WILLIAM HATHERELL DISCUSSES OODGEROO NOONUCCAL’S LIFE AND WORK AT MOONGALBA.
literary and political engagement of the 60s. As she puts it in the Woman’s Day piece:

So far about 8000 children have visited me here. They seem to be my whole life now. Of course, the future is with them. When I do get time for writing it’s rarely lengthy stuff. Mostly I’ve been doing short stories for children. (Box 2b(iii))

Certainly Oodgeroo took her responsibilities as an educator remarkably seriously (as discussed below), and her major publication of the Moongalba period was Stradbroke dreamtime (1972; new editions with different illustrators 1982 and 1993; publisher’s proof is in Box 1(ii)), a collection of stories about her own island childhood as well as dreamtime stories, clearly written with quite a different purpose and audience in mind than the highly politicised poems and speeches of the 60s. As she puts it in some manuscript notes: ‘I’m out of the civil rights movement. I’m back to nature’ (Box 3(i)).

Yet the Fryer papers also reveal the extent and intensity of Oodgeroo’s commitments, not just to her island home and the continuing struggle of her people, but also to many of the causes that defined the period, including the emerging conservation movement, opposition to uranium mining and resistance to various actions of the Bjelke-Petersen government. They also show Oodgeroo starting to explore new creative outlets. Catalogues for her exhibitions of paintings in Brisbane and Noosa in 1981 (Box 52) show the beginnings of an interest that would culminate in Quandamooka: the art of Kath Walker (1985). Numerous manuscripts, poems and stories show that Oodgeroo also continued to explore new directions in creative writing.

Oodgeroo spent much of her time during her Stradbroke period on the lecture circuit. She spoke at most Australian universities and colleges of advanced education on topics including Australian literature, Aboriginal culture and conservation. A 1978 itinerary shows her travelling to Western Australia, Sydney, New Guinea, Wollongong, Melbourne and Tasmania between April and July (Box 38). Yet the island, and Moongalba in particular, remained at the centre of her activities.

Detailed architectural drawings (Box 29/11) and various statements and submissions show the ambitious vision of the Moongalba project. ‘The Nuccle Nughie Cultural Centre’ (named after the two main tribal groups on the island, the latter displaced from neighbouring Moreton Island during the nineteenth century) was to have included a park, art gallery, museum, open-air theatre, and library (Box 2b(iii)). The centre was also envisaged as a repository of ‘all documents and writing about the Island … Any students, anthropologists, linguists who have visited the Island to study the people or the culture would be obliged to place copies of their works in the Cultural Centre’ (Box 52).

In fact, none of these plans, apart from the open-air theatre, were ever realised as sufficient state and federal funding was never forthcoming (the long history of Oodgeroo’s frustrations in her plans for Moongalba is documented by Kathie Cochrane in her biography). Oodgeroo lived simply in a caravan and schoolchildren and other visitors camped nearby. But Oodgeroo and her collaborators did succeed in developing a sophisticated program for thousands of visiting schoolchildren. A detailed schedule for a ‘Year 11 Guidance Camp’ in 1980, apparently aimed at Indigenous students, features sessions on college, career search, black literature, study skills, pottery/macramé, and assertiveness training (Box 52). Visitors to Moongalba also included students from elite private schools such as ‘Churchie’ and Ipswich Girls’ Grammar.

Apparently Oodgeroo herself at one stage contemplated writing a history of the island. A submission to Redland Shire Council in October 1971 refers to an intention ‘to apply for a Commonwealth Literary Fund grant to write the proposed book on the history of Stradbroke Island’, mentioning research already done by Nancy Cato that would contribute to the project (Box 29/4). The history of the island, and its interaction with Oodgeroo’s personal and family history, loom large in the Fryer material, as they do in Stradbroke dreamtime. Several manuscript notes refer to the traumatic post-colonial history of the island—Dunwich as Brisbane’s first port, sailors bringing venereal disease to Indigenous women, the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum for the indigent aged (which moved to its current location as ‘Eventide’, Sandgate in 1946 after eighty years) (Box 28/11). In the unpublished story ‘Old Mick’ (Box 27), a Benevolent Asylum resident thinks he is helping Oodgeroo’s family by bringing them leftover food from the home, but the family, dismissive of western food even at its best, discreetly throws it to the chooks.

Oodgeroo also refers disparagingly to the Christian missionaries who visited the island as early as the 1840s. In a sometimes amusing transcript of a hearing at the Mining Warden’s Court in 1984, Oodgeroo, who was opposing an application for a mining lease, told her counsel (the future Queensland Attorney-General Matt Foley) that the Noonuccal had gravitated to Moongalba ‘when the missionaries came in and told them they had to become Christians and they told them to select a place but they must sit down in one place and stop their pagan … ways’
In an article titled ‘Dunwich: Stradbroke Island: assimilation of Aborigines’, Oodgeroo uses the biography of her father to make a point about the complex history of race relations on the island. Her father’s grandfather was a Manila man of Spanish descent who married an Aboriginal woman on the island, and his mother, the outcome of this union, had married a German (Box 27).

The island also imposed its presence on Oodgeroo’s poetry. In her interview with Margaret Read Lauer included in the 1978 article, Oodgeroo articulates this influence as a new concern with nature:

I think my poetry, since I came here, has changed, is now more subtle. I now fight for butcher birds, for university students, for the rights of possums, for everything that is alive, not just the human race, but everything—be they plants, snakes or golden-orbed spiders—because man is lost without any of these. Man has the power to communicate and has fallen down on his job. (Box 38)

Manuscript poems from the Stradbroke period show a sensitivity to the natural beauties of the island as well as a more personal voice, addressing issues such as friendship and love, than is found in most of the published poetry of the 60s. Experimentation with the short line, and a form of free verse (perhaps reflecting the wider ‘New Poetry’ movement of the 1970s) also contrast with the sometimes awkward insistence on formal rhyme schemes in the earlier poetry. ‘Full moon’ (Box 27) is a particularly arresting example of this new mode:

The full moon
Bent over the tree-tops,
Bathing the island
With silver light.
The black pines
Shivered in the easterly breeze,
Possums played on tilted branch
As I stared in lonely awe
At the magic of the night,
Listening for your voice
No longer there.
Curlew cries
His mournful tune;
Black wattles groan
As easterly breeze brushes past
To caress my tear-stained cheeks.
I shiver and stumble
Towards the door
Shutting out the beauty of the night,
That my lonely aching body
Without you,
Cannot bear to endure.

Mainstream Australian literary culture has never quite known where to place the poetry of Walker/Oodgeroo, which in its frequent didacticism and use of traditional forms often defies the modernist principles that dominated the practice and criticism of poetry in post-war Australia (although there are some interesting attempts to engage with her as both poet and political activist in the 1994 ‘tribute’ issue of Australian Literary Studies). The Fryer collection not only documents the extent and intensity of Oodgeroo’s educational, political and ecological activities during her ‘semi-retirement’ on Stradbroke, but also—particularly in the unpublished manuscript poems and stories and in the material about her development as a visual artist—the development of a new, and arguably subtler, aesthetic.

REFERENCES

1. K Cochrane, Oodgeroo, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994, pp. 87-103.

WILLIAM HATHERELL is the author of The third metropolis: imagining Brisbane through art and literature 1940-1970 (UQP, 2007), which was based largely on research conducted in the Fryer Library between 2000 and 2003. His other publications include journal articles on Australian literature and cultural history and the Australian dictionary of biography entries for Laurence Collinson and John Manifold. He is currently a Senior Development Officer in QUT’s Alumni and Development Office.