Two last words about my friend. Her brother, Esmond Higgins, once said to me: "Melbourne is bad for Nettie," having in mind, I suppose, the inveterate provincialism of our native town. But however that may have been, Nettie has been mighty good not only for Melbourne, but all Australia. In "Fourteen Years" she has written: "I have a feeling that Ruth Pitter's most revealing phrases are instinctive, and that she herself might take them out afterwards with surprise at their meaning:

Grief for the quick, love for the dead . . .
Daring, a paradox and true."

For her friends who survive, true, too, in the case of Nettie.

Our Freedom Ride

Beth Hauser

By 7 a.m. on Tuesday 16 February the bus had already been on the road for nearly an hour. Inside were thirty university students in varying states of awakeness. Some of us dazedly recalling the events of the last 72 hours or so and trying to attach some meaning to them.

On midnight Friday we'd set out from Sydney, talking, joking and singing—thirty individuals brought together as members of Student Action for Aborigines (S.A.F.A.). It would be almost impossible to discover all the motives behind each decision to come on the bus trip—some studeck were regular "good cause" joiners; for others this was their first experience of any organisation; a few had some idea of what to expect of the conditions Aboriginal people were living in; but most had never even seen a shanty town where the fringe-dwellers live and their interest had come mostly from books and conversations; all were keen to find out "What was really going on."

Our aims weren't so diffuse. They were to conduct a survey of Aboriginal problems in health, housing and education and to demonstrate where we found cases of racial discrimination.

Now we were wondering what we had let ourselves in for. Last night we could have been killed! An open truck had, on its third attempt, succeeded in forcing us off the asphalt and over the steep shoulder of the road. We hardly dared think what could have happened without a quick-thinking driver.

Jarred by this thought the previous day's events became clearer. We'd carried out our survey work in the morning—dutifully noting down answers to questions on everything from the number of people living in a shanty dwelling to the comments of town council officials on integration suggestions.

By lunch-time some of our group had found a place where discrimination against Aboriginals existed. For six hot, dry hours of that day we stood there holding signs, discussing and arguing with local residents. As the sun sank lower it shone directly in our eyes so that we had to hold the posters higher to protect our faces from the burning heat. With sunset came a welcome rest—mostly put together with just plain sheets of galvanized iron. (One exception was the "church".) A barbed-wire fence ran round some benches under an open-sided wooden shelter. In a prominent position was the sign: "Christ died for our sins."

This was a drought-stricken area. There was hardly a blade of grass and what vegetation there was went almost unnoticed because of the dust. The houses were usually in groups of three or more. Four houses nearby had the makings of small gardens, but nothing was growing there.

Several houses had a shade shelter constructed outside the door—something like a car-port but with dead leaves and branches for the roof. Others had nothing but a roof, four walls and one or two doorways. In one such house, about 10 by 20 feet, we talked to the mother of five children. A family of four shared the house with them. The only furniture in the room we saw was a table and two beds. Another stretcher was placed outside the house. Just as well it was the dry season!

Despite the dust, despite the heavy atmosphere of depression and hopelessness, this woman had everything set neatly in its place. I wondered how many people would bother to clean up under the same circumstances. She may have had visions of better things to come for her children—perhaps even a "town-house" one day.

Another woman, who hoped for better opportunities for her children, lived on a "mission..."
the previous settlement except that they were of
by the world 26 years ago. Here was the anomaly
26 years ago. It looked as
ground was dried out and cracked. I did see one tap outside hls land and that was in the school-

hadn't reached the concrete-floor stage!
crete floor had been laid down but the job had
manager's house, while, outside
an exception to the general rule—most houses
money ran out before thk reserve was reached..

the houses we had to
within the town area.
The good townspeople had held protest meetings
about 200 was becoming increasingly heated. Oubide a hastily constructed barrier a cmwd of
-tn the gutter.

in that we've-seen-it-all-before voice, it
called us-although by this time we were qutk
had to discuss the issue of the partltion. Silenced at least momentarily until one womm rotested
sonal histories, we couldn't identify them all.

At the entrance to the municipal baths were
six Aboriginal children and the thirty students Outside a hastily constructed barrier a crowd of
about 200 was becoming increasingly heated.

Some were angry at missing their swim; some
seemed concerned at our anti-discriminatory
actions and voiced their feelings loudly; others
were there just for some Saturday afternoon
entertainment and showed their sporting interest
by tossing eggs and tomatoes—not even rotten.

I noticed one supporter after he'd been dumped
in the gutter.

Accustomed to hearing city police say: "Get a
move on" in that we've-seen-it-all-before voice, it
was a refreshing change to find ourselves being
really protected by the law enforcers. The police
actually came out on our side and were more con-
cerned with "moving on" the direction.

Despite that action, as we stood at the pool
entrance, we felt more than a little apprehensive
—just how far would the crowd go? None of us
had ever before been in the unenviable position of
facing a predominantly hostile crowd. Though we
hoped the man who yelled "String 'em up" had
been joking, it conjured up ideas of lynchings.

These feelings were reinforced when we heard
the experiences of two of our group who were
cought up in the crowd. One had an egg smashed
on the back of his head and some cigarette burns
on his arms where someone had "accidentally"
brushed against him; the other was rubbing a
bruised chin and holding broken glasses after
being knocked to the ground.

This opposition consolidated our members. We
felt we had to see it through whatever the con-
sequences.

We felt deeply about people so concerned to
maintain their precious few privileges, that they
would rouse themselves from their usual apathy
to actively oppose anyone else gaining the simple
right to use a public facility. We had constantly
to remind ourselves of our pledge to remain pas-
sive in our demonstration so there was a very
restraint of violence.

In the midst of all this the town clerk arrived
with a pile of official books—presumably to find
legal means of ridding the town of such nuisances.
However, the police appeared most unwilling to
arrest us—although by this time we were quite
prepared to become "martyrs to the cause"

*

One outcome of this incident was that several
Aboriginal mothers were prepared to take their
children to the pool the next day . . . and the
next . . . until they were let in. After years of
knockbacks they were willing to try once more.
This same determination showed through in an
attractive sixteen-year-old girl as she waited out-
side a small town picture theatre. Inside the
building was a four-foot-high partition to separate
Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal people.

Some of us had suntans darker than the skins
of those forced to sit in the front stalls, but they
had somehow been "made dirty" because of their
membership of a particular race.

Outside the theatre were three groups—the
students, about a hundred local whites and the
local Aboriginals. We couldn't estimate how many
of these last were there as, without knowing per-
sonal histories, we couldn't identify them all.

While we held up our usual picket signs the
white crowd gathered closer. At first they laughed
derisively at us, but were silenced when chal-
enged to discuss the issue of the partition. Silenced
at least momentarily while one woman protested
"Anyhow, what's wring with our town? The
darkies have been allowed to go to the white
school for ages."

We explained we weren't complaining about
the school and were about to bring back the con-
versation to the partition when we were dramati-
cally interrupted by a young Aboriginal girl. She
stepped forward into the light and walked
directly up to the woman who had spoken. There
was a hush as everyone strained to hear her soft
voice explaining how just a few years ago her
aunt had tried to enrol her cousin at the school
and had been refused. (This surprised even us
as we usually pointed to the Education Depart-
ment as the most progressive in its policy of in-
tegration.)

Just one quietly-spoken girl had broken through
the hidden intensity of feelings. It was so much
more effective that someone from the same town
—an Aboriginal girl—had done this. This imme-
diately opened the way for discussion which
could only lead to improvement of racial rela-
tions.

"What do you think you can do in two weeks?
You're just here to make trouble, that's all!"
“I've lived here for thirty years and what do you city fellas know about anything out here?"

“University students! They're a pack of rat-bags! Why don't you go out and do a decent day’s work?”

That's who we were—idealistic, trouble-making university students from the big city! We could understand criticisms of our youth (average age was only 19), inexperience in debating, ungenerousness and occasional lack of manners, as these were basically true. We did become tired of the endless comments on our clothing, about us "making trouble," being "self-seeking publicity hunters" or just plain "tourists". If only our impecable critics would come down to real questions concerning Aboriginal health, housing and education.

Why weren't Aboriginals allowed freely into public facilities? The most common rationalisations used were based on health. Well, if there is a health problem why does a healthy town tolerate this situation?

However, the children are allowed to swim in the public pool during school hours. It is hard to understand how they suddenly become dirty and unhealthy after half past three! Special exemptions from the Council's law may be granted after written application. In an analogous situation "innocent until proved guilty" becomes "dirty until proved clean" (for Aboriginals), when the town council takes over.

What is the government doing about the reserves, with their temporary dwellings expected to stand up without repair work for 25 years?

And how are children to do homework when they live in overcrowded, falling-down homes, often with no electric light. What incentive is there to go on with their education when they are treated as second-rate citizens?

There is more than a lazy, apathetic acceptance of these deplorable conditions. When deep-down emotions were forced to the surface the "typical" happy-go-lucky Australian becomes surprisingly vociferous, expressing suppressive or, at best, paternalistic attitudes to Aboriginals.

* Members of Aboriginal welfare committees were often among those most strongly opposed to us. They seemed to prefer order and the maintenance of the status quo, and were frightened of the inevitable changes after we left. There were signs that Aboriginals were impatient of whites who thought they could control the timetable of progress for another people. With just that small amount of support that we could give, Aboriginals—especially the younger ones—were coming forward to present their own cases.

The white moderates' usual comment was: "Things were all right till you came here. Now look at all the prejudice!" This latter statement was quite true—there was a lot of prejudice—but they seemed to believe we had created the prejudice overnight! What we had done was to force it on to the surface, out in the open, where it could be dealt with honestly.

We created tension—constructive tension—which could no longer be ignored, and had to be resolved.

The events of the S.A.F.A. trip were reported to the world through the international press. It would be far better for Australia to solve her problem now than to find herself under pressure from international sources in the future.

Some towns have made noticeable progress. Committees with equal Aboriginal representation have been set up attempting to treat the cause of their problems instead of patching up the effects.

We are aware of the incredible complexity of this problem but Australians must accept this as a challenge and not use it as an excuse for inactivity.

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