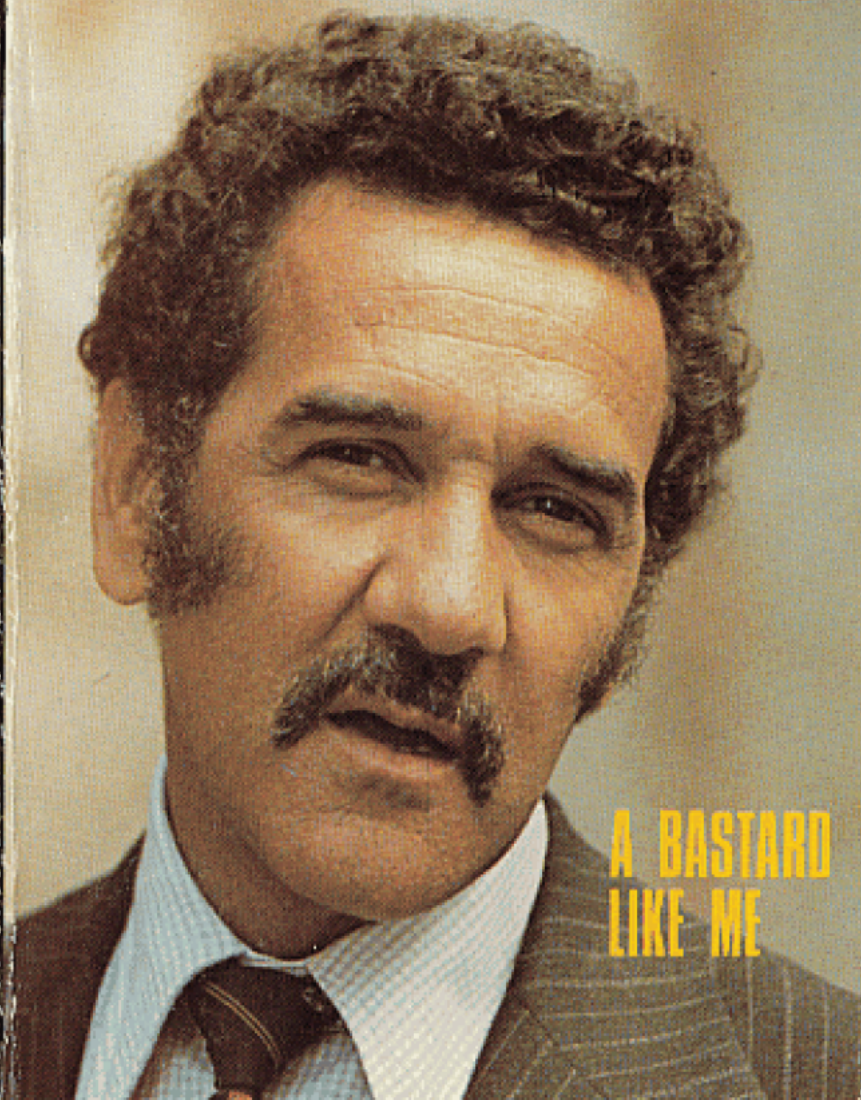


CHARLES PERKINS



A BASTARD
LIKE ME

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CHARLES PERKINS

URE SMITH • SYDNEY

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FOREWORD

It is impossible to understand what is happening in Aboriginal affairs today without understanding the personal development of those Aboriginal leaders who are fighting for justice among their own people.

Most social issues are focused in the personality of reformers. To understand the issue you must begin by understanding the person.

Charles Perkins is one of the best known but least understood public figures in Australia today. I first met Charles Perkins when he and his wife Eileen arrived in Sydney on their honeymoon in 1961. For the past thirteen years we have worked together on many projects. The creation of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, the Freedom Ride, aspects of national Aboriginal policy, the plight of individual Aboriginal people, were issues we shared closely.

When we were building the Wayside Chapel in 1964, Charles Perkins was to be found daily among the young people, cleaning bricks for re-use in the construction.

Indeed, it is this personal side—as opposed to the public side—of Charles Perkins that endears him so closely to his associates. Telling humorous stories, mostly against himself, enjoying dinner with friends after a rough public meeting, recounting anecdotes about his meeting with starchy political figures, talking with pride about his wife Eileen and children, Hetti, Adam and Rachel: these are the times when Charles Perkins is relaxed and happy.

I have frequently encouraged him to write the full story of his life because I believe that after reading it Australian people will be in a far better position to understand what motivates the radical black leaders in this country.

It is an inspiring story full of wit, humour and tragedy. It is not too much to say that Charles Perkins is to the Aboriginal population in Australia what Martin Luther King was to the black people in the United States. Charles Perkins's description of Australia's first Freedom Ride will become a classic, I believe, in Australian literature, descriptive of turning points in our cultural history.

The raising of the national consciousness on the Aboriginal question began with that event.

But to raise the consciousness of an individual or community frequently involves confrontation and provocation. Without a fearless advocate like Charles Perkins, there is little doubt that large numbers of Aboriginal people would have remained suppressed. A weaker personality would have been subdued by the powerful forces of the 'cult of mediocrity' that prevails in Australia.

Future historians will probably identify several areas of national, social concern—which have nothing to do with Aboriginal affairs—where Charles Perkins has given leadership. The issue of freedom of speech, particularly among Australia's public servants, is an outstanding example of one of his accomplishments.

So that what Charles Perkins has done on behalf of the 'least important individual' in Australia, he has really done on behalf of all Australians. Even though we may not be prepared to acknowledge it, we are all in debt to him.

This raises a further question. Diversity of ideas is a creative force in the building of a nation. What is it, therefore, in this country that makes it so difficult for a great section of our population to accept such pluralism? Is it political or social immaturity that makes some Australians desirous of silencing Charles Perkins?

One of the most important issues, for the moment in Australia, is Perkins. No Australian should be so carried away by injustices in other countries that he remains blind and silent to the plight of Charles Perkins and those whom he represents, in our own country.

TED NOFFS
WAYSIDE CHAPEL, 1975

CHAPTER 1

I suppose I could be classified as one of the original Bastards from the Bush. That would be absolutely true in the literal sense of course, and some of my friends and enemies would claim that it is so by my very nature. I don't wish to reflect badly on my family; nor however do I wish to detract from the facts of life. There are values more important to me. I love my mother and my family and the father I never knew.

There were a lot of people in our family. Some of us died at birth from one illness or another. There are no records in the bush. All of our family, with the exception of one, were born in bush circumstances. I was born on a table in the Northern Territory at the original Alice Springs, just by the side of the river. It was the old telegraph station from where they used to send messages. I was delivered from my mother on a table. Then they cleared up the table and carried on sending messages again. There was an old stone house which was part of an Aboriginal reserve. White people were allowed to go to the reserve but we Aborigines were not supposed to go off the reserve without special permission.

As an infant I used to sleep in the ladies' quarters. My mother was in charge of the men and women. She was a pretty tough character. She had high principles and was very strict with people. She was also a good fighter physically. My mother could belt up all the men with her fists and with a nulla nulla too. She could certainly do the same to all the women, so she was in charge.

It was a good little life in many ways. We swam in the waterhole the whole year round. Often we would go out into the desert and eat all the bush tucker that was available. The old Aborigines

would tell us where we could find the fruits that grow in the bush and where to find water when things were pretty dry. There were always plenty of wild donkeys to ride.

This was the original Alice Springs, previously known as Stuart. The new Alice Springs was just starting to develop a few miles away. It had mud streets at that time and big tree trunks for verandah poles, so it was pretty much like an American western movie type town, very rough. We were not allowed into the town except on a Saturday night to go to the pictures. If anybody was allowed into the new Alice Springs it was for work and they had to be out again before the sun set. Apart from Saturday night, Aboriginal children were not allowed within the vicinity of Alice Springs at all. It was out of bounds. We would creep across the desert-like country and look over the hills at Alice Springs, at the place where all the white people lived, but the police would round us up and bring us back.

The older Aborigines did not get much schooling then and things have not changed a lot since. They still get the type of schooling they did then, on many of the mission stations and government settlements. The education authorities never took things too seriously and the Aborigines ended up scarcely able to read and write.

My grandfather on my mother's side was a bloke from New South Wales called Harry Perkins. My mother was called Hetty Perkins. Perkins came from Broken Hill. He went up to the Territory around the turn of the century and established cattle stations there, one of these being Claraville. First he was in mining and then he got into two cattle stations. Grandfather Perkins was married in the bush way to my grandmother who was a full-blood Arunta. Nellie was her name. There was no civil ceremony or anything; they just came together. So my grandfather on my mother's side was white and his wife was black. My great-grandmother was a full member of the Pitjantjatjara tribe. My grandmother had five children: three were half-castes (one of whom was my mother) and two were full-blood. Three were by this white bloke Perkins and the other two were by tribal blokes from the Arunta tribe.

Harry Perkins went back to Broken Hill eventually and died. My grandmother was left in the Territory on the cattle station with her five children. It seemed my grandfather Perkins just drifted off and did not come back and my grandmother did not know what had happened to him. She presumed he was not coming back and after a while she left the cattle station. What actually happened was that he took his father back to Broken Hill and they both died around about the same time. Whether she lived on the cattle station or twenty miles away did not make any difference to my grandmother. It was her country all around there, so she just lived where she liked. If a bloke like Harry Perkins wanted to come and build a house he was welcome. A building did not make any difference to the Aborigines. The country or bush belonged to them.

My grandmother went off back to the bush and the cattle station was taken over by somebody else. They lost all the sheep and cattle they had and all the mineral interests that were associated with Harry Perkins. There were no legal agreements in those days in the Territory—people just took over cattle stations by the gun, more or less. They eliminated the blacks as much as possible from the best country and defined where their properties would be by the power of the gun—and of course the whites had the guns. My grandmother therefore took her children with her back into the tribe.

I was born around 1936-37; nobody really knows exactly because I was not born in a regular hospital, but at the Alice Springs telegraph station. My mother kept her maiden name because it always seems to happen that way with Aboriginal families. She did not marry my father according to Western law criteria. He was the father of a certain number of my brothers and sisters. We were, according to my mother, split up. One of my mother's children was by a fellow called Harry Lake. The eldest child was a Lake. Then there were the children by Jim Turner.

My father's name was Connelly. My mother always kept her maiden name of Perkins in her associations with these men. I only saw my father once, so I know little about him. He came from Mt Isa and his family is well known around there. He was an Aboriginal bloke too and a descendant of the warlike group called

the Kalkadoon tribe. His mother was a full-blood tribal Kalkadoon woman and his father was Irish. He would fight all comers if forced and beat the best of them in bare knuckle fights. He drank very little and was a man of great humour. He had six brothers and sisters all told, and one sister had seventeen children. Many of my relatives on my father's side are spread throughout Queensland. I missed my father and am only now beginning to find out what a great loss this has been to me. My family and relations mean everything to me and my father is so much a part of this. I hope my children love me as much as I love my father.

My skin grouping with the Arunta tribe is Purula and my totem is the Caterpillar. My markings are well known to me and my country is the whole of Central Australia but more specifically the Alice Springs region centred around the telegraph station and the Macdonnell Ranges and the east and north-east of Alice Springs. My grandmother and mother belong more to the eastern Arunta people of this area. All of this is my inheritance. This is my ancestry.

My mother was also married in the bush sense to a man named Turner who became a wealthy station owner and they had quite a few children. When the time came for things to get a bit more settled in the Territory, white station owners, unlike Turner, would not associate with coloured women any more. This is part of the history of the Territory and Australia. Black women were popular when there were no white women up there but when it came to things getting more civilized, if someone said, 'Who's the coloured lady?' and you had to turn around and say, 'That's my wife,' people did not like that very much. The pioneer men decided to get rid of all the dark women they were having relationships with, women who had helped them build their cattle stations up to what they were. My mother, at fourteen, was riding horses and branding cattle and working in the gold mines at Arltunga.

My people of the Arunta tribe are very easy-going and the best type of people in this way. They do not disown part-Aboriginal people, especially if they are of their group. They can even accept white people into the tribe. They are very flexible about these things. It does not cause any grief or disruption. Some tribes are very sold on the point of exclusiveness. The northern, more

isolated, tribes are in many cases still exclusive, but this will not last for long. They will undergo the trauma of intermarriage with whites and they will then be in the same situation as the more earlier settled areas. I hope that more dignity will be given in their relationships than was with my people. I hope also that the offspring will respect their black mother or father and cultivate pride in their Aboriginal ancestry. Unfortunately some part-Aborigines resent and even hate the fact of their existence. I know of many in Alice Springs alone who are ashamed of their ancestry and condemn at every opportunity tribal relatives or people. I feel sorry for them. They are lost people.

The Aruntas take pity on people in distress. People could come and live in the tribe as if they had always belonged. In fact, some white people have been initiated into the Arunta tribe. People could come and live in the tribe as if they had always belonged—with the Arunta it did not make any difference. Part-Aboriginal people of the tribe are always welcome and not rejected—it is usually not like this with other tribes. Of course the person must want to abide by the laws of the tribe. That is of great importance.

In the early days, my mother and aunts and uncles travelled with my grandmother wherever she went. Then came the time that she became involved with the owner of a station and helped him build up his cattle business and now he and his brothers are well off.

In those early times things were pretty tough. Often there were droughts. There was a great deal of illness because of the isolation and the heat. To get cattle stations going at that time was a pretty difficult proposition. I really think those people could have done something for my mother. As far as I am concerned, I do not want a penny out of them and I am not entitled to any, but I think they might have done something for my mother because she helped them set up the cattle stations. They would not even have the stations if it had not been for my mother and black women like her.

Including all the children, past and present, there were eleven of us in the family. I have one sister down in Melbourne who is a matron of a hospital. I have never met her but I believe her name is Nita. She does not want to come back to the family. Another sister

was killed when she was sixteen in an accident between her bike and a car. There are many tragic circumstances in my family. One of my brothers committed suicide. He had a lot of personal family problems. I was only young and had met him about four or five times. He was very well known in Alice Springs; he worked on the cattle stations and was manager of Singleton Cattle Station. He just shot himself.

Another brother died similarly just over seven years ago. I was closer to this brother than any of them. I think it was part and parcel of the problem of prejudice against Aborigines that caused him to do this. He was a private contractor, putting down mills, dams and all that sort of thing. In the Territory, to get contracts and maintain a business was very difficult and I do not think he had the education and business experience to know how to negotiate and be able to work things out for his benefit. He was good at the practical work but I think the business pressures were too much for him. He needed a break and did not get it. He just went out in the bush to do a contract and was sitting beside the fire when he got a gun and shot himself. I think he must have thought about it for a while before he died, and of course, that has had repercussions in the family.

Things like that happen in the Territory quite often among Aborigines and others who are confused. With him, the pressures of his new life and his Aboriginal background brought conflict. I just do not know how much, but I have the feeling that this was tied up with his death. Some other Aborigines have the same problem, but they work it out differently. Many today turn to drink. Many just drop out of society.

Then we lost another brother, the youngest. We lost him only a couple of years ago, in the desert. He was working about sixty miles south of Alice Springs. He, like me and many Aborigines today, had an unhappy life. He was drinking one day and carried on drinking into the night. In the middle of the night he walked off. He must have thought of walking back to Alice Springs, and he set out for the main road. Everyone presumed he would find a truck or something going along the dirt highway to Alice Springs and went back to sleep—no one really cared. He was 'just another

bloody Abo'. In the darkness he must have crossed the road and kept walking. By the next day he was walking around in circles. He died in the desert, lost for five days. It is a pretty rotten way to die.

What sort of gets me is this: if you die, that's it, you cannot change it. But his white workmates in the camp did not even check on his whereabouts or report him missing until three days later. Usually when someone is missing from the camp in the semi-desert, the first thing they do is go and look for him. After a day in the heat when you have lost your mind a little, you start wandering around in a circle, ripping your clothes off. You do not realize what you are doing from then on. It is just a matter of time before you die. They did not bother to go looking for him and he perished. The search did not begin until four days after he set out.

My mother takes these things very hard. She has tried to slash herself with a knife. Aboriginal mothers suffer very much on the death of a child. It is accepted that they must suffer great emotional strain and also physical injury inflicted by themselves by their own hand.

At the time I was born, it was the practice in the Northern Territory to take all part-Aboriginal children away from tribal people and keep them separate by force. The police would pull them away from their mother at about two or three years of age, on the instructions of the Department responsible for Aboriginal Welfare. When they had removed them by force from the tribal mothers, they took them away and put them on reserves. I was born on one of the reserves. All the tribal people were outside the reserve and all the part-Aboriginal people were inside. The reverse is more the case these days.

We have much the same tragic situation today, only in a different context where whites—politicians and bureaucrats—still try to separate tribal and non-tribal Aborigines. They still will not learn that our people need each other. Life is an empty shell if we reject our own and live for ourselves as many whites do. They still try to keep us apart to serve their own ends—political or public service.

The part-Aboriginal people were nobodies, nothing. They did not belong to anyone. Their tribal connections were still there as far

as they were concerned—with their mothers and their country, I mean. But they were on the other side of the fence. The white people in charge of Welfare tried to bring a division between the tribal people and the mixed-bloods. This has had a tremendous effect on the people. It has caused splits in families and a great deal of unnecessary sorrow. It still exists today where a lot of part-Aboriginal people are split up from the tribal people. It is ironical today that many part-Aborigines, for example in Alice Springs, are very vocal in condemning tribal or other Aborigines. They relish the thought of someone under them in status—between them and the gutter, so to speak. Even though their mothers are in the tribe they will not recognize their mothers when they are doing well. This is just one result of this policy.

Welfare officers took the child away by force from the tribal mother and put the child in Welfare or Church homes, in dormitories and on reserves. That is where I was brought up, in a dormitory. There was a dormitory for all the young blokes. These were the dormitories where they brought children up. This was to keep them away from the tribal people. It was cruel and unnatural. Bobby Randall, Bill Ryan and thousands of others throughout Australia are living examples of this practice. We always tried to cling together anyhow, in some way or another, despite these things. If we were caught together, then the police would intervene and beat us up.

My mother was brought into this sort of situation. She was living at the telegraph station reserve and was in charge of looking after everybody. We were all related anyhow, so it was just like a big family in that sense. She was under the same restrictions.

If tribal people were living around towns, on cattle stations or near settled places, permanently resident there, the police would just whip them off, no trouble. Children were the main victims of this division of families. The troopers would ride up and say, 'All right, get all the half-caste kids!' Like rounding up the lambs from the rest of the sheep, they would separate them, put them in a truck and off they would go. These kids were brought up in institutions across the Territory. That is why a lot of us have hang-ups. How else could it be? You miss the love of a mother and all the other

things that go with it, the family circle. As a young kid, four or five years old, dumped with a lot of strangers, you can be emotionally scarred for life.

The people in charge were not very kind. They had all kinds of cranks in charge of Aboriginal affairs. They were people who had peculiar problems. Missionary types of the kind who are going to 'save the world' were the worst. Their attitude seemed to be: 'This heathen is going to become a Christian whether he likes it or not.' Many things used to happen. Floggings were not unusual. You can see the results of this cruelty in the name of religion, with lots of Aboriginal people who lived through this in the Territory and other places.

My case was slightly different in the sense that I was eventually taken down to Adelaide. I was put in an institution too, though. I am now an institutional type of bloke. On that reserve where I was born and while my grandmother was hanging around in the bush, I was encouraged to think that there was something inferior about tribal people. My mother got into that way of thinking too. It was not so much that she agreed with it, but that she went along with it in the sense that 'this is the way it has to be because it is what the government-boss wants'. She thought, 'If the government-boss wants it, we are to do it. It must be right.' The police were always there to back Welfare and religion up. They always had a policeman standing behind them, so we just had to fit in with the system.

We were not, as children, allowed to meet any of the tribal people. I only met my grandmother once in my life, and that was through the fence of the reserve. I was then told I could not talk to her. That was the only time I ever saw her, for a few minutes. Then she died, and that was the end of my hope of knowing her. It was a really peculiar set-up all through the Northern Territory. The programme was handled by people who really did not have any idea of what they were doing. They were all motivated by the wrong ideas as far as I was concerned. I do not think they had much humanity really.

I was cut right off from the tribal life, and this was always done

deliberately by the Administration: 'You are no longer an Aborigine. You are now a white person. You're always going to be that way.' The system had the effect of dividing families all the time. It cut the part-Aboriginal off from his culture and traditions too. We were placed in no man's land.

The only way we have been able to learn anything of our background and ancestry, once we have wakened up to what has happened, has been by going back into the tribal situation. Only in the last ten years have I begun to dig into the traditions and culture of my grandmother and my Arunta brothers and sisters. Naturally I can accept my inheritance as an Arunta anytime I want to. It is up to me entirely. However, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge by now and the difficulties would be great.