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EDDIE KOIKI MABO

LECTURE SERIES

Indigenous Heroes and Heroines: The
Missing Profiles in Australian History
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Indigenous Heroes and Heroines – The missing profiles in Australian history

John Maynard

As a Worimi man from the mid north coast of NSW I begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional guardians of the land the Bindal and Wulgurukaba People and their elders both past and present. I am most privileged to be a visitor on country. I also respectfully acknowledge members of the Mabo family here today.

I take time to acknowledge the man who this lecture commemorates Koki Eddie Mabo who has left us all a legacy in courage, strength, and resilience. He was an inspiring leader whose ideals remain as a guide to direct us into the future. His story also reminds us of the importance of history and in remembering the past. Koki himself was a storyteller. He carried knowledge passed from generation to generation of his people. As such he was armed with historical knowledge, and with such knowledge, he was able to challenge and overthrow the fiction of terra nullius (land belonging to no one) with the landmark Mabo decision. I am honoured, as an Aboriginal historian, to deliver this talk today marking such a significant figure in Indigenous history.

I have spent the last twenty-seven years restoring into Australian history Indigenous stories to inspire our Aboriginal young and old with the understanding that they have heroes and heroines embedded in our past. I have described our history space like a giant jigsaw puzzle, with the majority of pieces missing - and I have been driven to find and put those missing pieces back into the puzzle. I came through a school system of the 1950s and 1960s when we were conveniently missing, overlooked, forgotten or dare I say erased from this nation's history except as a people that were described as belonging to the Stone Age and were a 'dying race'. But in my own family there were incredible histories of political struggle and triumph.

My grandfather Fred Maynard was the leader of the first united all Aboriginal political organisation to form in this country in 1924 the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). My grandfather's group are credited with first tabling a national land rights agenda, calling for genuine Aboriginal self-determination, demanding that Aboriginal family life be left sacred, defend a distinct Aboriginal cultural identity and that Aboriginal people be placed in charge of Aboriginal affairs. Eddie Koki Mabo and my grandfather are just two examples of the many inspiring heroes we have in our past. It is critically important to encourage young Indigenous people to take up history and recover more of our stories that have been made obscure. As Malcolm X once said, if you have no past, you have no future. It is important to recognise that while there are very few trained Indigenous historians in the country today, in every Indigenous community our people are putting back together their fractured family and community history at this very moment. In truth we all have heroes and heroines in our families' pasts, and it is imperative that these stories are revealed. Yet very few people realise that the archives are full of our voices. These voices from the past need to be released and their inspiration and impact realised for both our communities and the wider communities' benefit.

Despite the school texts and history books of the 1950s and 1960s telling me nothing of Aboriginal history and culture, I drew upon my own family for memory, records and inspiration. At a very early age I developed a passion for reading, writing and storytelling. I was following a long tradition as our culture had historians across thousands of years as storytellers. We had words to describe history. In the Awabakal language of the Newcastle area, it was Yuraki – long ago, since, past. The Worimi, my people, from Port Stephens, called it dangay for formerly or long time ago. Of course, even this history has its own history. Clearly these are Aboriginal words defining an understanding of a long past or history. As Billy Griffiths put it so succinctly:

Like all things cultural, the Dreaming must have a history; it must have arisen out of human practice sometime in the Deep past' (Griffiths, 2018: 196; David, 2002: I.).

So, history has a long tradition for us and is passed down to each succeeding generation.

Growing up, my greatest hero was my late father Mervyn Maynard. My father grew up in very hard times for our people and witnessed the realities of injustice and hardship firsthand. Because of my grandfather Fred Maynard being such an outspoken activist on Aboriginal rights nearly a hundred years ago, the family suffered continual police surveillance, harassment and intimidation. In a 1927 interview my grandfather said that, I quote, 'he had been warned on many occasions that the doors of Long Bay [Gaol] were opening for him. He would cheerfully go to gaol for the remainder of his life, he declared, if, by so doing, he could make the people of Australia realise the truly frightful administration of the Aborigines Act. He knew where children were torn from their mothers and sent into absolute slavery.'

When my grandfather died in 1946 my grandmother Minnie a white woman had to raise four Aboriginal children herself, on £2 a fortnight support from St Vincent's de Paul. My grandmother had suffered resentment and racism directed towards her family for daring to marry an Aboriginal man in 1928. Her own family had cut her off for marrying an Aboriginal man. It certainly was not the done thing in that time period especially him being such an outspoken opponent of the government policy and the actions of the police.

In this 21st century it is now critically important that the country moves towards a process of truth-telling and that we examine, discuss and then can deal with and heal from the past. We Aboriginal people suffer through inter-generational trauma as a direct result of the past history

and the whole Australian nation carries a sickness from not dealing with the past. A quote from African American scholar W.E.B DoBois in 1935 describes our dilemma:

Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable.

We know how difficult it is to get the facts or truth today. We are bombarded with fake news, the influence of social media, Rupert Murdoch and Fox Media, world leaders like Donald Trump and an avalanche of conspiracy theories. I feel we are now in a time period where not just Aboriginal history is devalued and dismissed but history as a profession or course to study is under threat. It is unquestionably a critical time globally for humanities and history across the university sector as governments worldwide are pushing universities to focus on the ‘Stem subjects [science, technology, engineering, mathematics, health and vocational training], whilst humanities courses including history are facing cuts and closure.’¹ I am not implying that these stem subjects are not important areas to study, they are. But, more than ever, it is critical as noted British historian Richard Evans said, for people to develop the skills [of a historian] ‘to look critically at the evidence and to distinguish fact from fiction’. History as a subject skills people up ‘from all backgrounds with the skills to navigate modern life’. It gives us all the tools to understand the present.

When I first started out, I was just undertaking a family history project focussed on my grandfather and his role as an early Aboriginal political activist. Initially I was just putting our family history together, but my work and findings has assisted Aboriginal people and communities across the country to undertake their own history projects. I did not direct my

¹ *The Age* Sat May 1, 2021

work towards the university. It was from the outset aimed towards Aboriginal people to read, enjoy and gain inspiration from. Additionally, I wanted to inform the wider non-Indigenous community of the history they did not know. As part of my journey, I realised over time of the relevance and importance of these untold stories to all.

And there are many of these stories. I now want to emphasise the importance of history by examining the lives of three lesser-known Indigenous heroes. Two males and a woman. One a sports star, a political activist and a war hero namely Dave Sands, Jane Duren and Douglas Grant. These are not the stories of kings, queens, discoverers, explorers or generals. But of ordinary people whose stories are embedded with courage, tragedy and inspiration.

I begin with **Dave Sands** a Dungutthi Aboriginal man originally from Burnt Bridge on the north coast of NSW close to the town of Kempsey. Dave Sands was a world class boxer and sadly he never won the World Title his talent so richly deserved. He was killed in a trucking accident in 1952 before he had the opportunity of challenging for the title. His funeral was one of the biggest ever witnessed in Newcastle with 15,000 people lining the streets in pouring rain to pay their respects. He was just twenty-six years old and left a young non-Indigenous widow and three young children with a fourth child another daughter on the way.

Sands had earned about £30,000, from his ring career but it was discovered on his death that his money had been consumed on manager's fees, travel costs, tax, family expenses and generosity to his kin. A public appeal raised more than £2500, sufficient to pay off his Stockton home and create a trust fund for his family.

Arguably the greatest Aboriginal boxer of all time, **Dave Sands** had at the age of fifteen followed his older brother Percy to Newcastle to pursue a boxing career and train out of Tom Maguire's backyard gym in Beaumont Street, Hamilton in Newcastle. They were eventually joined by their brothers Clem, George, Alf and Russell all of whom boxed with great success. All of the brothers wore green satin boxing shorts with a white star.

Dave was the outstanding fighter of the family holding the British Empire title as well as the Australian Middleweight, Light Heavyweight and Heavy-Weight titles all at the same time. If Dave Sands was down in the 'Big Smoke' to fight at the Sydney Stadium large crowds of fans would pack Tom Laming's Golden Gloves boxing gym at 49 Glebe Point Road gym to watch him spar and workout. He also trained at the nearby Victoria Park, in front of enthusiastic onlookers as cars and buses would stop to watch him run and exercise. ²

He was on the verge of gaining a world title fight at the time of his death in the trucking accident. He and his brothers had been out timber-getting when the truck rolled and the only one injured was Dave the driver. Carl 'Bobo' Olson would be crowned as World Middleweight champion in October 1953 after defeating Randolph Turpin for the vacant title at Maddison Square Garden in New York. Olson would say after his victory: "If that Australian was still alive this title would be his."³ Dave Sands had beaten both Carl Olson and Randolph Turpin soundly in two fights. The man today recognised as pound for pound the greatest middleweight of all time, Sugar Ray Robinson, had refused to fight Dave Sands.

² <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/dave-sands-lane/>

³ Clarke, M (1999) *Fighting History of the Sands Brothers*, Topmill Pty Ltd, Sydney, p. 141

Dave Sands' exploits in the ring inspired many young Aboriginal men to pursue a boxing career. The great social and political changes of the 1960s including the overwhelming 1967 Referendum result released Aboriginal people from the tight restrictive government controls over their lives and thousands flocked to Sydney and Redfern looking for better working opportunities. Many of the young men were also keen on looking to sport to provide a financial bonus and boxing was the big drawcard. Redfern community leader Lyall Munro Jnr reflected: 'Led by Dave Sands and Ron Richards, Aboriginal boxers were the early heroes and warriors who led us off the missions with their successes. Dave helped us believe that we could compete.'⁴

Many of the sites connected with Dave Sands remain around the Newcastle area including memorials at the site of the gymnasium where he trained, the old Newcastle stadium site, a Stockton sports oval pavilion with a plaque in Dave's honour and another monument near the Stockton ferry wharf and his headstone at Sandgate cemetery.

There have been a number of stories passed on to me regarding Dave Sands. The Tom Maguire gymnasium was directly across the road from the Broadmeadow racecourse where a number of Aboriginal jockeys rode during the 1940s and 1950s, including my father and others like Stan Johnson, Gordon Taylor, and Normie Rose. My father told me that Dave and his brothers used to do their road running by going round and round the racecourse to build up stamina and endurance. On the non-Indigenous side of the family my mother and auntie stated that Dave Sands was the most gorgeous man you could imagine. My auntie said, "when Dave Sands walked along Hunter Street (main street of Newcastle), all of the girls would be standing to the side giggling and saying 'giday Dave'". Sands would just smile and walk on.

⁴ <http://www.youngvictorboxing.com.au/DaveSandsMemorial.htm>

I have been fortunate to interview some people with memories of the great boxer, including a story of how at his Stockton home the garage had been fitted out with bunk beds to accommodate family and friends who might be staying in town. But Dave had a firm rule there was to be no alcohol or people under the influence of alcohol on the property. If someone came home drunk a light on the back of the house would come on and then footsteps would be heard coming down the path. The garage light would be switched on and Dave would be there in his dressing gown carrying two sets of boxing gloves and he would point at the perpetrator and indicate for him to get up and put on the gloves. Dave then instructed the wrong doer on the errors of his ways and not to break the law again. Another story that has taken on legendary status was during the Second World War. Two of the younger Sands brothers were on Newcastle beach when they were confronted by three American GI soldiers who were based in Newcastle at the time. The GIs in no uncertain racist terms said ‘get off this beach you black bastards’. Dave Sands had turned up and hearing the disturbance on the beach and strode down informing the US soldiers to refrain and apologise to his brothers, upon which the men let loose with a fusillade of further abuse at Dave. The story says that Dave Sands threw three punches and knocked out the three soldiers who were left lying out cold on the sand. Next year, it will be seventy years since Dave Sands death. He was a remarkable boxer and man and remains as an inspiring individual.

My second hero is **Douglas Grant** – The Black Digger. Douglas Grant is one of the better-known Aboriginal servicemen of the First World War. His life was the stuff a Hollywood film director could only dream of. As a so - described ‘full-blood’ baby he was ‘saved’ by the chief taxidermist of the Australian Museum in Sydney Robert Grant after his family were ‘killed by

a punitive expedition of white settlers and native police, apparently launched from the colonial outpost of Cairns'. This vigilante group had massacred a large group of Aboriginal people and the baby was the lone survivor. Robert Grant and his wife had been in Queensland collecting artefacts for the Museum at the time of the massacre. They legally adopted the baby on their return to Sydney. Douglas was raised on equal footing with the Grant's other children living in Annandale, in Sydney. He received a very good education and later qualified as a draughtsman and woolclasser. During the First World War, he followed several of his workmates and volunteered for the army in 1915. After enlistment, he sat the 'Sergeant's examination successfully, his previous training with the Cadet movement being of a great advantage'. It was noted he was 'a wonderfully accurate rifle shot, and at the Rutherford Military encampment just before leaving Australia, he hit the "running target" 30 times with consecutive shots at 1,000 yards' When about to leave Australia for overseas active service Grant was shocked to be discharged because of regulations preventing Aborigines leaving the country without government approval. Probably through his adopted family connections and influence, he managed to quietly re-enlist and finally embarked for France to join the 13th Battalion. He was wounded in the first battle of Bullecourt and captured by the Germans. He would spend the rest of the war as a prisoner of war in the Wittenburg and Wünsdorf Zessen camps. He became an exotic curiosity for German doctors, scientists and anthropologists. The Germans recognised Grant as a well-educated leader with great organisational and administrative abilities. He was also nominated by the other prisoners to act and speak on their behalf, becoming President of the British Help Committee and organising the distribution of Red Cross food parcels, comforts and medical supplies. One of the German scientists described him 'as an unmistakable figure' and noted that the other prisoners afforded him great respect for 'his honesty, his quick mind, and because he was aggressively Australian'. After the war, and his return to Sydney he returned to his position as a draftsman with Mort's Dock and Engineering Company.

Grant enjoyed a brief spell as a celebrity war hero, but he was clearly unsettled and disturbed by his war experiences. He moved to Lithgow working in a small arms factory where a report in the Sydney Sun said he was 'immensely popular'. He became the Secretary of the Lithgow Returned Soldiers League and conducted a weekly "Diggers Session" on the commercial radio station. It was whilst in Lithgow that Grant read in the newspaper that a local rugby league team had been put out of the competition because they had a number of Aboriginal players and the other teams had refused to play them. Grant wrote a response into the press where he stated his displeasure highlighting 'there had been no colour bar in the trenches on the western front'. Of course, today we know that over 1000 Aboriginal men fought at Gallipoli and the Western Front in World War One.

It was during this period that Grant became more and more outspoken on the issues facing Aboriginal people in the country. In 1929 following the shocking massacre of a reported 31 Aboriginal people at Coniston in the Northern Territory he stated the massacre 'was damning in the extreme. It shows the utter lack of the law and order and protection that is theirs by law of the same government whose officers shot these unfortunate natives'. He later stated that when his people 'called for justice, they are answered with the lash and gun'.

Grant returned to Sydney in the early 1930s and he descended into alcoholism. The loss of his stepfamily left a hole in his life too difficult to fill. Despite having been at one time a friend of the likes of poet Percy Cowan and writer Henry Lawson, Grant found that acceptance in the wider community was now a thing of the past. On one Anzac Day in Sydney, as ex-serviceman Roy Kinghorn noticed Douglas outside the Domain. Roy encouraged Douglas to attend, but Douglas said to him:

“No I’m not wanted anymore ... I think I’m better out here ... I’ve lived long enough to see that I don’t belong anywhere, and they don’t want me.”[\[7\]](#)

Roy took Douglas by the hand and led him into the Domain, where they attended the service together.

At one point, as a result of his war trauma he was a patient at the Callan Park Mental Hospital. Nevertheless, his abilities were utilised at the hospital as a clerk. He lived on site and as an architect oversaw patients design and construct a replica of Sydney Harbour Bridge which the governor general inspected. Grant also put forward an official application to be considered as the architect of new cottages to be built for the Aboriginal community at La Perouse contending that ‘because he was an [A]borigine he knew and understands the needs of his people’. He was overlooked for the job.

He later lived at the Salvation Army Old Men’s Quarters in Sydney and after 1949 at the War Veterans House at La Perouse. He had lived a lonely life across the last decade of his life until his death in 1951. Douglas Grant Park in Annandale, New South Wales, was named in his honour in 2015.

Finally I will speak of **Jane Duren – The Forgotten Aboriginal Political Warrior**

Jane Duren an Aboriginal Yuin woman from the South Coast of New South Wales remains as one of the great forgotten Aboriginal political patriots. Duren was a very prominent member of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) headed by Fred Maynard my grandfather. Her record and memory are largely tied with two significant moments. Today there is much written about William Cooper’s famous 1930s letter to the King, outlining the severe disadvantages suffered by the Aboriginal population at the hands of state and

Commonwealth government. Cooper's letter sadly was never sent on by the Australian government to the King. Jane Duren on the other hand in 1926 did write a direct letter to the ruling monarch and her letter did reach Buckingham Palace and was returned to Australia postmarked from the Palace. Duren's impassioned plea highlighted the plight of Aboriginal children of Bateman's Bay being forced from the local school. 'I beg to state that it is months and months since those children were at school and it is a shame to see them going about without education'.⁵ She stated that the school was a public school and if this was the case, why were Aboriginal kids denied their place in this so-called public institution? Duren declared that education was compulsory under state legislation, but this was obviously only the case if you were white. She informed the Monarch that she had written 'to different places, namely, the Minister of Education, the Child Welfare Department, the Aborigines Protection Board also to our Members of Parliament but cannot get fair play'.⁶ She powerfully illustrated her frustration at not being heard and concluded by revealing that the Aboriginal reserve land itself was under threat to white appropriation:

Even the reserve land where the coloured race were bred and born the white race are trying to have them turned off on to another piece of land. It is unfair and I hope you will see that fair play be given let them stay on the land that was granted to them.⁷

Duren did not receive a direct reply to her letter. Archival evidence reveals that the Governor General received notification of the letter from the Palace, and he delegated responsibility back to the New South Wales state government to respond to her letter.

I have the honour by His Majesty's command, to transmit to you, to be laid before your Ministers, the accompanying letter which has been addressed to His Majesty by Miss Jane Duren, of Moruya, New South Wales, concerning the question of the education of coloured children at Bateman's Bay.⁸

⁵ J. Duren (1926) *A Letter sent to King George V*, Box 5/14819, New South Wales State Archives, Sydney.

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⁸ Governor General's instruction to above - Box 5/14819, New South Wales State Archives, Sydney.

One can only speculate at the consternation and embarrassment that the revelation of this action and letter would have caused in the hallowed halls of the New South Wales State Parliament, particularly the Aborigines Protection Board itself. They would have been highly uncomfortable that their actions had been brought to the attention of the King himself. For them, the exposure was highly unsettling. Their practice of making decisions behind closed doors, that was their long-established habit of secrecy and unquestioned executive power, had been revealed to the highest seat of power in the Commonwealth. However, instead of the letter influencing positive change the Protection Board intensified their attacks upon the Aboriginal activists.

In late 1927 Jane Duren was again in the news when an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed she and Fred Maynard attended a meeting at St Andrews Cathedral Chapter House, Sydney with high-ranking church officials. Duren and Maynard made it clear that the AAPA wanted a repeal of the Aborigines Act. Duren strongly stated her dislike for the Board: ‘The Aborigines Protection Board was a nice name. She told officials of that office, but when this kind of thing occurred where did the protection come in? Influence was everything. If one did not have it, one got nowhere.’⁹

The article revealed aspects of the discussion at St Andrews and the make-up of the Aboriginal delegation.

Two of the natives were women, and one of them, Mrs Duren, astonished Bishop D’Arcy Irvine by saying she had written to the King.

“To the King” – he asked.

⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 15 November 1927

“Yes”, replied Mrs Duren “I addressed it to King George V, England”¹⁰

Jane Duren emphasised that it was the stripping of Aboriginal lands that had driven her to write directly to the “Head of the Empire”. The land in question on the South Coast had been reserved for Aboriginal use but suddenly pressure had been applied to alienate it from their hands.

“Do you think the King received it?” asked Bishop D’Arcy Irvine.

“Well” replied Mrs Duren. “I registered it so he must have”

She admitted, however that she had received no reply. But the land had not been sold.¹¹

Despite their appeal the AAPA’s hopes of widespread support amongst the religious brethren was sadly not forthcoming. The AAPA disappeared from public view in 1929 and evidence strongly suggests that police acting for the NSW Aborigines Protection Board hounded and harassed the organisation out of existence. There are some personal memories recorded of Jane Duren who it was said loved to fish down on the South Coast and how she would sing whilst wetting a line ‘a broken-down squatter like me...what hope for a broken-down squatter like me.....’. She was also noted as a keen euchre card player and attended many tournaments and won many trophies. Apparently, she was no mean musician on the concertina. Her talents as a musician were apparently much sought after as she was frequently asked to accompany a Mr. Stevens Harbour cruises in his launch. She was also an invited guest on the American boat “California” whilst it was in Sydney Harbour entertaining some of the personnel with her songs. Jane Duren passed away on 13th April 1947. It is important to recognize that as an Aboriginal woman Jane Duren’s story had been lost to history even more so than Dave Sands and Douglas Grant. Even so, we can find her voice in the archives. Aboriginal people stood up to injustice, and can and will continue to do so. The stories of Dave Sands, Douglas Grant and

¹⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 15 November 1927

¹¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 15 November 1927

Jane Duren have largely been overlooked in Australian history but their rich and varied lives through difficult time periods for Aboriginal people showcases the tenacity, courage and determination of our people. These were individuals like Koki Eddie Mabo who were fighting against the strict and enforced barriers of exclusion that have impacted upon Indigenous lives for much of the history since 1788. They challenged what was understood to be the norm for Indigenous people and proved that we could achieve in an entirely disadvantaged world in total contradiction to the wider communities understanding and appreciation.

In conclusion this lecture has sought to impress not just the importance of Indigenous history but how these missing stories of individuals can enhance the entire nation's history. History unquestionably is about stories and how many varied viewpoints of history captures the fabric of what makes a nation. It is the unknown treasures in our collective historical memory that ignite my passion for history. I am driven to reveal these gems of our past. These stories remain to inspire and enrich the nation on a past they have been largely deprived. I take time to salute all of the Indigenous heroes and heroines of our past, and in honour of the memory of Koki Eddie Mabo, thank you for listening.

ITEM INFORMATION

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