THE STRUGGLE FOR GRACE: AN APPRECIATION OF KEVIN JOHN GILBERT

Gordon Briscoe

Kevin John Gilbert died on 1 April 1993 from a debilitating respiratory illness. He was an acclaimed Australian writer and he takes his place at the heart of 'the Australian national tradition'. During his life, however, he was an enigma to Australians, Aborigines and other Australians alike¹.

The term 'the Australian national tradition' is a feature of Russel Ward's writing, by which I mean a nation's conception of itself, and I am using this because it is typical of the way many Aborigines lived: people of Aboriginal descent helped, too, to create that legend. This self-conception was important because it influenced the way people acted, whether collectively or by themselves. And as in nations which perceive certain patterns of behaviour as typical of themselves, so the Australian national character, or tradition, makes that character a real one. This character, like Ward's legend,² found its shape most notably in the rural hinterlands of Australian pastoralism. It was in areas like this that many Aborigines, including Gilbert, were raised from childhood to adulthood.

Before being released from prison in 1971, he managed to develop a public profile even though his art was difficult to comprehend. In part, only a handful of people understood the subjects on which he wrote. In part also, it was not easy to gain his confidence sufficiently to be able to understand the life of the man himself. Few people were able to do so. Nor did he reveal much. The world was able to sense, however, a self-admiration with which only a few other people concurred. Gilbert's life from the time of his imprisonment in 1957 can be seen as a struggle for grace. It was a goal which he never quite achieved — for this both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are responsible.

This feeling of public guilt was nowhere more obvious than at Gilbert's memorial service outside the old parliament house, when mourners were already creating an icon of him. Successive eulogies were delivered. It was plain to me that he meant different things to different people. That, presumably, is something from which everyone suffers. Nevertheless, at this ceremony, the icon changed hands and each time it did so a different image appeared. A truly critical evaluation of his works would reveal much about the motives of his uncritical patrons and flatterers, who had something to gain by promoting him to the Australian public.

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¹ Kevin Gilbert became known to most Australians when, in the late 1960s, the art world saw an exhibition of his lino cuts produced while he was in prison serving life for the murder of his white Australian wife. In addition, his literary skills formed part of the idea that Gilbert was a talented Aboriginal writer who had been unjustly treated and should be released on parole. In 1971 he was released and gained wide publicity for his writings and his political activities from then to his death on 1 April 1993.

² Ward 1988.

This appreciation hopes to throw some light on the man by discussing first, my personal view, second, the literary authenticity of what he wrote about, and third, the public Kevin Gilbert.

Kevin Gilbert: a personal introduction

It is not easy for people who classify themselves as Aboriginal Australians to pass judgement on other Aborigines and their lives. Although of Aboriginal descent, I do not find it easy to fit into the position of toryism³ — the retention of rights and power by occupying a place as part of the establishment and the *status quo*, due to birth — that Aboriginal Australians find so comfortable to occupy today. I hope, as I believe Kevin would have wanted, to safeguard his contribution to the Australian literary tradition and to prevent his memory from becoming a fetish. Kevin Gilbert was essentially a 'cherry picker' by inclination — an itinerant rural worker, and that was the world he knew best. The title he chose for his first literary success was *The Cherry Pickers*, a name and an idea fitting for the author as well.⁴ He tried desperately to live up to ideologies of his own making and not to the idealised reconstruction of those white reformers who really made him (notably H.C. Coombs, Diane Barwick and Stewart Harris).⁵ His life tells us a great deal about being a 'cherry picker'. It tells us very little about what it was like being an Aboriginal person affected by a life-time's struggle against state legislative controls.

I first came in contact with Kevin when I was treasurer of the federal government funded magazine *Aboriginal Identity* in 1971-1972. I was also a field officer for the Aboriginal Legal Service and president of the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. Mrs Barry Ovenden, the temporary editor of *Identity*, assisted him to handle the transition from release from gaol to editor. I met him the day after his release but did not see him again for about six months. Kevin was involved in establishing his magazine, *Alchuringa*, which he affectionately called the 'little Alcha'.

The news in 1971 that Gilbert was to be released from prison was greeted with a strong feeling of scepticism by Aborigines living in Sydney at the time, particularly those living in Redfern. They were wary because they had never experienced such a display of public leniency towards any person identifying as an Aborigine. They were used to discrimination rather than favours and under the circumstances they had not been confident he would ever be released from gaol. They were cautious about his new found Aboriginal identity. Younger people had never heard of him because of their isolation in the country towns from which they had recently migrated, while older people remembered his trial in 1957 and the circumstances of his conviction. Even in 1971 they were not ready to display public or private compassion towards him. There were a number of reasons that could have explained their fears: they could have been attributed to their Christian morality. Or it may have been due to their defensiveness against a reaction from the white people of Sydney with whom they came in contact in their daily lives.

What heightened their fear was Gilbert's decision to begin publishing *Alchuringa*, a magazine canvassing Aboriginal issues. The old political movers and shakers like Roy Carroll and Ken Brindle knew of the old magazine *Altjuringa* and that it was used for the

³ Historically the term referred to Catholic Monarchists in 1680 England, but by 1832 they became Conservatives and part of the Imperial establishment. Today Aborigines throughout Australia have become part of the *status quo* in Australian politics as well as part of the landed classes, and in these terms I use the term as an analogy to people who inherit power, land and property by way of the lottery of birth. See Elliott 1977, pp.463-464.

⁴ Gilbert 1988.

⁵ Harris 1979.

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political vanguard of the 1940s and 50s. They recalled that people wanted equality with white rural dwellers, permanent employment, a better standard of living and, above all, respect. Gilbert seemed to them to challenge both the old view of advancement and the hard fought idea of civil rights. These ideas, they feared, would be replaced with those of 'black nationalism'. Rather than racial togetherness Gilbert was preaching a new religion of difference and specialness. In his literary works and political ideologies he portrayed increasingly narcissistic and surrealistic forms, which I discuss below.

Soon after his release he married his second wife Cora, to whom he acknowledged much for his first polemical work, *Because A White Man'll Never Do It* (1973). This book was in the tradition of Studs Terkel's *Hard Working Times* (1970), for which Terkel interviewed hundreds of working people in the western areas of the United States. Handled by Gilbert, such work was essentially a didactic piece of populist journalism, in which ordinary people revealed their innermost feelings on simple fundamentalist themes. For its author, the book was something of 'the education of Kevin Gilbert'. It was about Aboriginal Australian people, from whom he claimed descent. This transformation, as explained below, took a long time and began with the tragedy of his first wife's murder.

At the age of twenty-three he was arrested, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of his wife. In his writings he never named her, referring to her in *Living Black*, (1978, p.243), his second political work, simply as 'a European'. His story was that poverty, grog, work fatigue and domestic arguments brought him down, and led him to murder — nothing more was said about her.

Gilbert was born at Condobolin, NSW, in 1933. The family were small property owners, but the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s forced them, like many other small-holders, to travel in search of casual labouring work. The whole family travelled and was employed casually as fruit and vegetable pickers, small contract labourers, scrub clearers, ring-barkers, rabbit trappers and fencers.

These hard times moving from place to place made alienation a way of life. To add to his pre-adolescent loneliness, at the age of seven his mother and father died suddenly, leaving him at the mercy of the New South Wales welfare system. This part of his past becomes blurred and difficult to reconstruct. What he claimed was that:

when my parents died ... [my] oldest sister took care of the family, but subsequently the children were put into homes. [I] went to Sydney for a time then returned to the country.⁶

He wrote that he spent some time also at the Catholic children's home for 'State Wards' at Cowra. We know that he experienced a difficult adolescent period, the effects of which must have been extremely traumatic. This shaped both his actions and his ideologies. To Kevin, the world manifested its horror in simple black-white, and good-bad, terms. To him, the past was real, and on this point he was a fundamentalist.

His heritage included descent from the Kamilaroi and the Wiradjuri peoples of central and northern New South Wales. This heritage came from his mother, born Clara Naden. Although he never revealed it, Naden is an Afghan name, and from what Gilbert recalled, it was possible that his mother may have been of Afghan descent. The Afghans operated the network of camel transport from the 1860s to the 1920s in western New South Wales. And although she died when he was seven, he said he always considered that, of his immediate family, he was the darkest of her children. From his mother, too, he inherited the awareness

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⁶ Gilbert 1978, p.9.

that his kinfolk were 'those lovely little black relatives of mine on the Condobolin Aboriginal Reserve'⁷.

What became of the Afghan people and their descendants? I am not accusing Gilbert of being a person of no Aboriginal descent, but stimulating enquiry into his immediate and long-term past. One explanation was that, being non-Whites, they inter-married and identified as Aborigines. The depression of the 1890s forced many groups of mixed racial descent onto welfare relief. By the 1920s, there was no way of distinguishing between the new ethnic groupings such as Afghans, Persians, Chinese, Japanese, South Sea Islanders and Europeans, many of whom inter-married with Aborigines. As a result many were moved to reserves. Many of the children were moved to state institutions, or state government Aboriginal reserves. If they escaped the clutches of the police and welfare authorities, as many families with light complexions did, they occupied vacant land where life was free and the cost of living was low.

From his white parentage Gilbert inherited his understanding of the value of property ownership, although the property amounted to only four acres [2 ha] on Goobang Creek. The family's expectation about the property is never revealed. In general, the family had to move around the district in search of work. This characteristic intensified during the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and forced them, like many other small-holders, to travel more widely in search of casual labouring work. The search took them mainly to the Riverina district, between Dareton, Wilcannia and Leeton, in search of pea and grape picking. They travelled by horse and buggy and lived in caravans along the Murrumbidgee and Murray-Darling river basins and the mallee country between.

In this sense Gilbert was something of an Australian 'Huckleberry Finn'. For example, while travelling, he wrote, 'every year we'd go across the Riverina district to Leeton ... to pick peas and grapes. There were days of crossing red sand ridges of the mallee country, ... chasing rabbits, watching huge kangaroos watching us, mallee-hen hunting, looking for bower-bird nests and emu eggs. Always searching for game, ... helping to keep something in the larder; seeing our group swim the rivers to reach a sheep or cattle station to buy fresh meat or flour or tea. And when there was no money ... hoping ... [for someone] who'd fill your sugar bag with tucker.'⁸ At Leeton, the very poor seasonal workers and the Aborigines used to camp on Wattle Hill where, he recalled later, there was piped water, toilets and a shower block. Aborigines began making these places their living areas in the 1960s. Immediately prior to, and following, World War II such places were used mainly by poor whites or people exempted from the New South Wales Aborigines Protection legislation.⁹

While Gilbert spent his youth under the care of the New South Wales welfare system to him it was not a haven but a form of incarceration. By the time he was fourteen he fled the institutional life to return to what he thought was a comfortable and familiar fringe-camp life with itinerant rural casual labour groupings. What originally drove him back to fringe-camp life was the imagined freedom and comradeship. These camps were located on rent free land on the fringes of towns. This was not so much freedom, however, as an escape from collective responsibility. In seeking it he was fleeing the horrors of real life.

Reflecting on his past, Gilbert believed that his Aboriginal identity was the driving force of his return to the itinerant labourer's life. His Aboriginal connections, however, were not the crucial ones. As a young man he had married a white woman, and the marriage

⁷ Gilbert 1978, p.240.

⁸ Gilbert 1973.

⁹ For an extensive study of the effects and coverage of the Aborigines Protection legislation see Rowley 1971.

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produced two children together with pain and torment. After killing her in 1957 he spent fourteen years in a number of prisons. In my view, he reconstructed himself in prison through studying journalism, theology and anthropology, together with the study of linocut, and literary art forms.¹⁰

Journalism provided him with two important attributes, first, a capacity to write prose, second, an ability to search out information, and then write a story based on that material. Gilbert suffered from a hatred of editors. Like his friend and mentor Xavier Herbert, for example, Gilbert believed that his own editing was sufficient, and so he refused to have his work edited further. Unfortunately, he was not alone in that respect: other writers who identify as Aborigines believe that they are more important than their texts. These writers see editorial amendments as an attack on themselves. Their refusal of editorial changes may satisfy their sense of personal integrity but betrays an underlying insecurity. A more important problem is that the reader suffers.

Anthropology provided Gilbert with an entry to the literature of traditional Aboriginal society. It was a book learning acquired second hand in gaol, however, which denied him a complementary fieldwork experience. It was in gaol, therefore, that he picked up his ideas about traditional Aboriginal society. Gilbert went into gaol a 'cherry picker'. In gaol he metamorphosed, emerging as an Aborigine. Most people born and raised in non-Aboriginal society, as Gilbert had been, held little appreciation of the classical Aboriginal society. This was evident in his literary work characterised by naivety in his two polemical books *Living Black* and *Because a White Man'll Never Do It*. In the latter work, he wrote that:

the inheritance of land was totally secure, a never-ending state of possession that extended generation after generation to all those born within the material and spiritual boundaries of their tribal area. Each member of the tribe had his rights and responsibilities — the right to sustenance from the land and responsibility for its ritual upkeep.¹¹

This statement is not applicable, in any universal sense, to Aborigines across Australia. The reason for this was that land areas were not necessarily transferable from one group, or individual, to another. There were large tracts of land which many groups seldom, or never, used. Furthermore, ownership was never guaranteed as Europeans know the word. Inheritance is a Judao-Christian concept that cannot be applied to 'land-use systems' as practised by bush people. There were tracts of land that, through death, could never be reoccupied, or even passed on. Finally, words such as 'tribe', 'spiritual boundaries' and 'responsibilities for ritual upkeep' are anthropological inventions and, while they helped Gilbert to appear learned, were terms which could never be applied in any modern political sense to existing groups. The distribution of land to contemporary groups is a political act. Like most reforms of modern land tenure, it is highly selective and benefits only the few.

In addition, in these two works, many of the informants were like the author: marginalised people, non-traditional Blacks with little understanding either of classical Aboriginal society or of the wider non-Aboriginal society. The most his books can claim to represent is, therefore, the narrow view of the marginalised.

Kevin Gilbert's writing and his literary authenticity

Gilbert died in Canberra of emphysema on Thursday 1 April 1993. To some, emphysema is a progressively debilitating disease, to Gilbert it was a handicap he refused to accept, and his refusal epitomised his whole being. It made him an enigma. Instead of

¹⁰ Rowley, 1971. See also Rowley 1967, p. 7.

¹¹ Gilbert 1973, p.243.

confronting his past he sought refuge behind a literature used to construct his own Aboriginal identity. Gilbert based his literature, as I will reveal, on theological, political and anthropological idealisations. He alienated white Australians because he humiliated them in public and made them uncomfortable. Aboriginal Australians alienated him because they harboured doubts about the sincerity of his remorse for murdering his first wife. Nowhere is Kevin's struggle more clearly expressed than in the words:

I married a European girl. ... There were fights and poverty and jealousy. It ultimately led to a brawl in the middle of the night along some country road. I was pissed, she was tired and despairing and I grabbed a rifle ... the jury in Dubbo called it murder. Five defence witnesses weren't called, and me, an Abo in a hick country town - what was more natural than to receive a sentence for life?¹²

This statement tells the reader more about Kevin than do his other literary works. This is the self-pitying Gilbert, the one who laments 'poor-bugger me', on the one hand, but on the other shows an apparent lack of pity for the woman whom he killed. Curiously, since he spent 14 years in gaol for the killing of his first wife, his writing evinces no sense of remorse. It is as if Gilbert was saying 'she was only a white female so it didn't really matter!' This attitude is surely just as obnoxious as that of the people who regarded him as 'just an Abo in a hick country town!' The passage reveals a surprising lack of self-awareness and self-reflection. Like much of his output it is journalistically superficial. It is clever in conveying impressionistic and emotional glimpses of a fading life in rural areas of Australia unfamiliar to many readers, perhaps, but remains bereft of analysis.

Gilbert's greatest literary weakness, however, was his failure to probe the reasons for the rural poverty he experienced before going to gaol. He left a strong impression of life on fringe-camp allotments and some government reserves, including the experience of rough justice. He raged against authority. He did not go beyond reporting what he and his informants felt subjectively comfortable in expressing. Truly memorable journalism should at least attempt more. It might start by analysing why it was that many Aborigines had to be itinerant casual labourers who lived not on reserves but on vacant marginal land. It might analyse the legislative constraints to show how inflexible were the post-World War II employment prospects in the rural sector preventing Aboriginal labour mobility. Gilbert's identity as an Aborigine was essentially a reconstruction relying on his journalism for its authentication. It was an identity that he discovered in the isolation and solitude of prison, a factor which his play reveals.

Kevin Gilbert the 'cherry picker'

Gilbert idealised his past life as a 'cherry picker', a rural labourer, in his seminal play, *The Cherry Pickers*, which purported to deal with 'the realisation of everyday life'.¹³ In its original form, the play received critical acclaim as a great contribution to Australian literature. As time went by the play was transformed to represent 'nationalist' symbolisms, which detracted from its original universal appeal.

The essentialism and particularism underpinning his only published play determined Gilbert's future theory as well as his practice, and both are discussed below. Moreover, in wanting to portray everyday life Gilbert determined that he would do so through his liberal populist and surrealist perspectives. What emerged in *Because A White Man'll Never Do It*, and *Living Black*,¹⁴ was a type of surrealist and populist reporting that focused on the

¹² Gilbert 1978, p.243.

¹³ *The Australian*, 8 April 1993, p.9.

¹⁴ Gilbert 1978.

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'socio-political' rural struggles, and ultimately on 'sovereignty'. This concept, it will be revealed, was for Gilbert both political and cultural, but was not integrated into an appreciation of the 'economic-cultural' side of Aboriginal contemporary life.¹⁵ In doing so, he revealed a non-class understanding of the socio-political order. The problem with this type of literary structuring is that the 'socio-economic'¹⁶ condition of life is always omitted. The reader is not told how political effects are materially and specifically secured, and so we are given a vulgarised version of a political and cultural life bereft of economic explanations, due to Gilbert's 'disabling disregard for multiple, local, but not necessarily unconnect[ed], political struggles'.¹⁷

Gilbert the journalist

Gilbert tried to convey the idea he was there on location - at the event - and that there was nothing like 'being there'; but in his polemical literature he never localised his Aboriginal informants. His informant is, indisputably, in his or her own habitat or home location, which reassures readers they can trust the writer. But Gilbert is not there as just a reporter. Journalism for Gilbert meant proselytising the informant as well as the reader.

Some of Gilbert's journalistic problems are revealed in the following piece he wrote on Pearl Gibbs:

One day, Aborigines will stop living and dying in hope. When that day happens, land rights will come, our people will look at history and historic figures and we'll see Pearl again, in an Aboriginal Hall of Fame together with Bill Ferguson, Bert Groves, Charley Leon and our tribal patriots, and the patriots starving now in parks, chained on the reserves, battlers battling in the Streets of Redfern, Moree, Woodenbong, Canberra, Brewarrina, Bourke, Nowra, Dubbo, Condobolin, Cowra.¹⁸

This is all moving rhetoric for a particular type of reader, and particularly to uncritical Aborigines who lack a self-constructed ideology. For such readers 'land' was a powerful political symbol representing political and ideological independence. The use of terms such as 'our people dying in parks and kept in chains on reserves' appealed to Aboriginal readers' emotions of the past. Likewise, it nurtured readers' resentments of a perceived social degradation. It promoted the manipulation of the guilt feelings of both white and black readers. On the one hand, whites were made to feel guilty for an unexplained past. On the other hand, blacks were publicly ostracised because they failed to act on his moral rhetoric. Of one person he wrote:

I wonder, Evonne, when you're playing straight sets
And you 'haste' your opponent so well,
Do you ever look back at your grandmother, black
And catch glimpses of her in her hell?¹⁹

We are not told anything about how Gilbert wanted to provide a material subsistence for people who were to occupy the land he wanted returned. Nor are we told that Pearl Gibbs, Bill Ferguson and Bert Goves were members of the Aborigines Welfare Board, a body despised by many Aboriginal people. Their membership of this Board chaired by Professor A.P. Elkin, and which administered the *Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1943* for the New South Wales Government, Gilbert either omitted or never explained.

¹⁵ Laclau 1977. See also Greenfield 1985.

¹⁶ Laclau 1977, p.161.

¹⁷ Greenfield 1985 pp.89-104.

¹⁸ Gilbert 1983, pp.5-9.

¹⁹ Consolidated Press, 18 September 1980, p.2, quoted in Shoemaker, 1989, p.4.

Apparently he preferred the facile manipulation of his readers' emotional proclivities. Yet this is cheap journalism because it evades satisfactory analysis. If Gilbert is the best writer the Aboriginal movement can produce, then the movement clearly has a long way to go!

Gilbert the theologian

Theology was the third element in Gilbert's self-reconstruction. It is uncertain what theological literature he read, but from that reading, and from his second-hand perceptions of traditional Aboriginal spiritual beliefs, he synthesised a loose body of quasi-religious thought I shall call 'theology'. It combined a sense of a creator spirit with an assertion of the universality of Aboriginal spiritual values (however defined) together with a reverence for the 'the dreaming' and a belief in a 'promised land' (sovereignty). I will elaborate on these themes below.

Gilbert had a particular viewpoint on religion, and it was one he attempted to press on his readers. He claimed in an interview with Caroline Jones that he spoke directly to God. He wrote in a very personal way,

I know I cannot question Thee
The mighty who hast made the earth and the skies
Yet still a tiny voice squeaks from my heart
Squeaks terrified.²⁰

This humility is short lived because he then asked a series of questions about being able to look at the world through human eyes and to see different people with different colours.

Theology, which Gilbert studied in prison, contributed towards his emerging new identity in a number of significant ways. First, he learnt the importance of how to convince people to believe in what he was telling them through the use of syllogisms containing spiritual metaphors, and rhetoric he injected into the text. Second, he learnt that there were a number of simple ideological constructs of biblical origin on which to build other ideas that appear to be historically based. These appealed to some form of symbolic and identifiable object - genealogy, or an object which appeared concrete such as compensation or money and land. Third, theology helped Gilbert identify aspects of what anthropologists like Stanner, Berndt and Bell, called 'Aboriginal religion', or what might appear to represent a set of identifiable religious values. He proposed that the future form of organisation of society should be based on Aboriginal sovereignty.²¹ In this way Gilbert preached a form of traditionalism.

Gilbert evinced a deep respect for an authority which he believed emanated from traditional 'lore'. Tribalism, classic Aboriginalism, held a certain prestige both for him and for the middle classes.²² A number of writers have contributed to debate the question of what they have labelled 'Aboriginality'; and Gilbert, too, did so in the late 1970s.²³

Gilbert accepted funding and monetary support from whomever offered it. He was careful not to be labelled a communist, and he could never be described as being a socialist. In fact he was openly hostile to both overseas socialists and international revolutionaries who came to gather support for their cause in Australia. What he argued was that white Australians were 'racist' (a term he used often but never explained)²⁴ and, therefore, for others to seek Australians' support was tantamount to supporting racism. Much of Gilbert's own rhetoric was very racist: the irony was that, in railing against racism, he

²⁰ Gilbert 1990, p.89.

²¹ Gilbert 1993.

²² Gilbert 1978, pp.195-204.

²³ Gilbert 1978, pp.161-184.

²⁴ Gilbert, 1978, pp.238-245.

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demonstrated himself to be racially bigoted. For Gilbert and his uncritical supporters, it seemed that only whites could be racist. Such a position, of course, is the epitome of racial bigotry.

Although he never really understood what class barriers meant (a meaning he might have expressed as the haves and the have nots), these social structures were important to Gilbert. His main early focus of attack was on the rural propertied elite class which he remembered from the late 1950s. But this powerful class was not his only target. He also attacked the emergent Aboriginal bureaucratic class centred in Canberra. In part, it appeared to observers that he was jealous because federal governments were never prepared to make him their confidant. It should not be forgotten, however, that he was employed as a consultant to advise the New South Wales Wran Labor government in drawing up the recommendations on a proposal for recognising land title for Aborigines in that state.

In part also, he saw the burgeoning black 'compradors'²⁵ as serving a master other than the one he advised them to follow. For example, Gilbert wrote of this small influential group:

That man has a price, can be bought
The government wage now ensuring
A people's fight won't be fought.²⁶

Such misanthropy towards other Aborigines tended to display Gilbert's ambivalence towards himself. Each of his three wives were white women; he accepted numerous government grants from the early 1970s.

Discipline was a quality he admired and in many respects he was unable to recognise that quality in the Aborigines he saw in their real social surroundings. His idealisation of them from his readings in prison fell flat soon after his release from gaol. Nevertheless, he never softened either his viewpoint or his rhetoric towards them. But the people who appeared to have captured his admiration were mostly white. The group included Cora Gilbert (nee Walther), Diane Barwick, Nugget Coombs, Xavier Herbert and Stewart Harris. These were people who appealed to his egoism, who were themselves radical conservatives of the tory mould (that is, they supported the election of a particular form of government and then fearlessly resisted change, in this case, Labor policies of the 1970s electoral platform) and who supported him in both life and death. These people were, in their tough-mindedness towards the upper classes, the ones he admired most.

The types of Blacks who drew his support were those who saw Aboriginal custom as something tangible, not an abstraction, a culture inheritable by birth rather than education. This attitude is really a form of fetishism. What many Aboriginal people call 'culture', therefore, was also characteristic of Gilbert's later attitudes. He turned entrepreneurially towards raising money through selling traditional paintings as symbols of culture rather than as art forms. Art featured more as an after-thought to the real concerns of 'blood, land

²⁵ The *comprador* class are people who are resident outside the areas where the groups they support reside. For example, the term normally applies to people who live abroad but support a dominant class in their country of origin. In the Chinese case they sympathised with the Chinese Government of Mao Tse-tung who arranged for the importation of foreign capital. In the case of Aborigines they are people who may (whether misguidedly or not) believe that they can only support Aborigines by becoming bureaucrats because they are not wealthy enough to support them on their own capital.

²⁶ Gilbert 1990, p.87. The footnote reads 'Dedicated to the black Activists who are no longer active. To those who have sold out for jobs and perks. ... Those who have refused to bring about a new strike for land rights on Australia Day 1977 - at a time when it has never been more necessary'.

and community', all of great prominence in the romanticism of his play, poetry and polemics.

The strange feature of Kevin Gilbert's following was that it consisted mainly of a small group of mostly white liberal humanists rather than any Aboriginal groups. The latter were more or less forced to accept Gilbert reading his verse to small captive audiences at the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and National Aborigines Day Observance celebrations. He moved his home to Canberra in order to peddle his ideas, his literature and himself. He used the rhetoric of an imagined leader of a great (but non-existent) mass movement, and he loved the centre stage in front of Parliament House where publicity (like his family's living on vacant Council land) was free.

Historically, there may be at least two reasons why the nationalist ideologies which Gilbert believed in were not easily assimilated by Aboriginal Australians. Firstly, Aboriginal Australians are not a politically aware group who can easily identify authoritarian nationalist sentiments. Secondly, Gilbert appealed to a group whose political awareness was still influenced by both a belief in government legislation²⁷ and traditionalism.²⁸ Although a picture has emerged of a figure who espoused an ideology of regressive and atavistic nationalism, Gilbert was swept along by circumstances not of his own making. As Bernard Smith noted,

during the past twenty years or so a spirit of nationalism [appears to have been] uniting people of Aboriginal descent. ... Whether the Aboriginal people constitute today a nation within a nation is arguable; but there can be little doubt that it is now the most important and vocal national minority in the country, is growing in strength and confidence daily, and is developing widespread international connections.²⁹

Bernard Smith's perceptions were excessively romantic. Furthermore, he was misled by the noise of political opportunism rather than the existence of any spirit which united Aboriginal Australians. The nationalism Smith spoke of was non-existent then and is the same today.

Kevin Gilbert the populist

Populism manifests itself throughout the world in various forms and has its roots in ideas expressed by people from Machiavelli to Foucault. Australian populism emerged from liberal traditions of New South Wales Labor politics in the nineteenth century. Nineteen-sixties radical politics in that state was an important manifestation of radical populism, to which the politics of Aboriginal Affairs³⁰ was intrinsically connected.³¹

Gilbert's populism cut across class divisions and appealed to ideological categories (that is, ideas which appeal to people's own perceptions of themselves such as in the verses cited below, but are not themselves an ideology). It called on Aborigines to assert themselves against what he saw as corrupt ruling elites (black or white) who maintain their power by conspiratorial cunning. He focused on enterprises on the land and emphasised myths about the strengths and virtues of traditional culture. These were the strategies

²⁷ Rowley 1970, pp.288-305.

²⁸ Bern 1979, pp.118-131. This paper is instructive for groups of urbanised Aborigines whose political consciousness is affected by 'false consciousness'.

²⁹ Smith 1980, p.36.

³⁰ Smith 1980, pp.51-80.

³¹ Briscoe 1990, pp.123-141.

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adopted by the nineteenth century *norodniki* (or historic Russian populist ideologues).³² The problem with Gilbert's populism was the belief that the 'social relations' of the Aboriginal producers (or black workers wherever they existed) were naturally harmonious, and with the elimination of both élite landlords and white oppressors, harmony would be restored.³³

Like Jack Davis and Colin Johnson, Gilbert assumed, in what I call 'prose in metre' (or rhyming prose), that he was interpreting a new set of ideas for 'the people'. For example, his use of mythology is typified by the verse:

Look, Koori
Look to the dawn, dark brother
Look to your knife and gun
Look to your martyrs stepping forth

...
Look at your patriot's grave
Look to the justice they have done
Before yourselves grow brave.

...
Rise to the height of a first born son

...
Look to the new-found Dreaming
Rise as a new-born man

...
It's better to die than to live a life
As gutless scum, Koori.

This cannot seriously be considered as poetry. Like much of the so-called poetry of protest, it is little more than ranting. It ought really to be laughed out of the anthologies. To say that Gilbert's verse quoted above is poetry is to patronise Aborigines in the worst possible way. It provides for double standards: a critically rigorous standard for Whites and a lower 'empathetic' but uncritical one for Aborigines.

In his early work Gilbert feared that 'a new black consciousness ... [was] going to militate against the part-Aboriginal'. He proceeded to offer a somewhat contradictory corrective through a 'rejection of contraception, a change in the curriculum and a return to anything identifiable as traditionally Aboriginal which, [to him] was all positive or healthy ideas about race'. Such ideas came to Kevin during and after his imprisonment. He assumed, falsely, that these ideas, in the verse above, were constructed to appeal directly to readers and leave them vulnerable to the shock of the final stanza.

Gilbert's populist ideas may also be appreciated in his reaction to a reading of Dr Charles Duguid's *Doctor and the Aborigines*. He claimed support for his own ideas on 'natural hygiene':

you see dirty, lazy blacks trying to excuse themselves by saying that they refuse to keep themselves or their homes clean because they want, totally, to 'reject white values'. If you don't believe me, if you want tribal authority ... [see] how the nomadic Aborigines had a good sense of hygiene.³⁴

³² Markey 1986, p.2.

³³ For this interpretation I acknowledge Bongiorno 1993. There is an author's embargo placed on citation of the paper.

³⁴ Gilbert 1973, p.199.

Although one journalist credited Gilbert with extensive knowledge of Aboriginal languages and culture, that was not the case: what Gilbert knew about Aboriginal culture he learned from his readings during his incarceration.

I wanted to educate myself. There was a prison library where you could get three books a week, and I wanted to study some of these subjects which to me were new.³⁵

Most of what Gilbert learned, therefore, was not acquired from personal experience but from what he read of classical Aboriginal society out of travelogues such as the many books by Bill Harney. Other literature included that of Duguid, Norman Tindale and Charles Mountford. Finally, Gilbert must have been influenced by Xavier Herbert, for they were good friends and their attitude to editors was the same.

People who knew the Gilbert family saw his rage as part of his own ideology (or self-perception) and not his heritage. As Gilbert himself wrote in his second work,

My father was white, English-Irish; my mother, Aboriginal-Irish. A mixture like that becomes an interesting family cocktail. Sometimes it becomes a family catastrophe.³⁶

Much of Gilbert's political ideology as well as his social ideas are directly traceable to the shaping, or construction, of the kind of nationalism in his writings. He had the tendency to mix genres such as politics, culture, society and bureaucracy in which liberalism and socialism came uncomfortably together. These problems emerged in his first book:

if we are to build a healthy black society on our little portions, our black Israels all over this continent, we will need doctors, lawyers, engineers, agriculturalists, accountants, you name it. We all know that reserve kids can't become these things. Because it ruins them, it poisons them - and all blacks, if they want to be honest, admit it. The reserves are pest holes. Trouble is, we don't want the kids off the reserves either.³⁷

Gilbert was constructing a kind of homeland needing workers as a form of black state. This state, it is hinted, would be run on liberal social justice lines. His ambivalence was revealed in combining Aboriginal children and reserve land in the one thought.

He proceeded, in a romantic mode, to suggest forms of worker cooperative gangs based, it would appear, along the lines of socialist-type guilds:

a different spirit would prevail ... through parts of Queensland and Western Australia ... [in] all black construction gangs in road-making, railway building where:

- (a) the authorities were full of praise for their workmanship;
- (b) morale was at an all-time high;
- (c) there was little evidence of conflict from within;
- (d) the whole thing built good strong healthy black men that no whites dared mess with.³⁸

Equality, it appeared, it would be enforced on males and females alike. He indicated that 'Blacks have got to make the weak elements shape up or get out'. His authoritarianism in relation to Aboriginal women is clear in his declaration:

the sluts, the child neglecters, the irresponsibles - handled by community ostracism ... if necessary a hiding from other women. It is human values not

³⁵ *The Australian*, 8 April 1993.

³⁶ Gilbert 1978, p.240.

³⁷ Gilbert 1973 p.194.

³⁸ Gilbert 1973, p.197.

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to neglect and starve your kids. It is human values to work hard and contribute to your own community. It is human values to keep your house clean. It is human values to stop your kids from dying. It is human values to maintain a level of conduct commensurate with dignity and pride. It was so in the tribe, it is so today if human development is to have any meaning.³⁹

There appears to be another overlapping of ideas of socialism and liberalism whereby collectivism and individualism come together with democracy. It must be remembered that he had close relations with prison chaplains who might have explained aspects of his political ideas. His models of the past, present and future took some account of ideas of socialism, liberalism and Christianity that emerge in Australian nationalism. It would not be out of character of the Australian national tradition, therefore, to suggest that Christian socialism and liberalism affected white and Aboriginal rural labour in similar ways, incorporating them both into 'the Australian national tradition'.⁴⁰

Kevin Gilbert the proto-nationalist

Proto-nationalism refers to a phenomenon of national movements, or the mythology of their existence, which can

mobilize certain variants of feelings of collective belonging which already existed and which could operate, as it were, potentially on a macro-political scale which could fit in with modern states and nations.⁴¹

The definition is broad enough to account for Gilbert's nationalism even though it overlaps with other socio-political currents such as 'national-socialism', and nationalism proper.⁴² Ideas like these were important to the construction of what he came to identify as Aboriginal Sovereignty. Proto-nationalism does not describe him so much as it does the fledgling Aboriginal political groups at which he aimed his rhetoric. He thought that these groups had a potential to assume a body of macro-political proportion. Both he and his mentors were misled because in reality such models did not exist. Gilbert's ideas originated in the breakdown of relations, or alienation, between himself and the rural group with whom he strongly identified. The movement he represented was largely a fabrication. Aboriginal groups in Sydney alienated him immediately on release from prison in 1971, and, later Australian society did likewise.

In addition, Gilbert had two major disillusionments about the world in general. The first was when he escaped the life of the institutions to return to an idealised life as an itinerant rural labourer. The second was as an adult after he felt the alienation of post-prison-release, following the publication of his first literary work.

Gilbert's alienation began by '[being] tossed between stern aunts then snatched by the child welfare system following the death of his mother and father'.⁴³ More than likely the children were regarded as deserted or neglected. He ran away from institutional care and, at the age of fourteen, headed back to what he thought would be the perfect life. By the time he was twenty-three he was behind bars for the murder of his first wife. He blamed the murder on alcohol and his racial mixture. He also blamed his parents for leaving him alone when he needed them most. These are all understandable reactions to his predicament, but it made a loner out of him. Gilbert's individualism was the real force behind his proto-nationalism because he largely acted alone or with small groups and was not accountable to

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³⁹ Gilbert 1973, p.198.

⁴⁰ Briscoe 1993, pp.133-161.

⁴¹ Hobsbawm 1990, pp.46-47.

⁴² *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, pp.45-70.

⁴³ *Canberra Times*, 3 April 1993, p.7.

anyone for his actions. What was peculiar about his circumstances, and his literary style, was that he had a collective view of Aborigines as a body of people acting as a group for a common cause.

For example, the idea of 'assimilation', to Gilbert, broke people up. In his first book he wrote

it is argued that wherever blacks settle as a group, they will form 'another mission' with all the horrors. ... Many blacks agree with this policy ... [but they've] never seen an all-black body with the type of internal discipline. ... Other blacks ... say ... that it can only come in highly specialised circumstances, in black Israels which I have described elsewhere.⁴⁴

He implied that there was a need for 'black groups' to form their own state-building organisations. The nationalism of both his early and later writings was pregnant with hyperbole. In a simplified pictorial form,⁴⁵ he appealed to a sense of both Aboriginal nationalism and the possible achievement of Aboriginal 'sovereignty'. There was only one route for his politics to follow:

'power' remained addressed only in terms of sovereignty [and therefore] any available distinction between populist and ... democratic forms is unable to be constructed, rendering a whole range of possible ... struggle[s] unavailable [as a political strategy].⁴⁶

The same problem was apparent in the ideas expressed in a pamphlet entitled 'Aboriginal Sovereignty',⁴⁷ which he edited and distributed. In this pamphlet Gilbert caricatured the whole of Australian society as recognising Aboriginal demands for sovereignty. He portrayed Aborigines as having elaborated their legitimate and just claims for their statehood to be accepted. The function of the ruling body, which he called the 'Sovereign Aboriginal Body', was both to present and legislate for Aborigines throughout Australia.⁴⁸ First, the basic structure was a colonial one depicting a hierarchical body made up of regional councils with a peak assembly. Second, he incorporated the very colonial structures which he so vehemently opposed. He attempted, therefore, to portray an authentic and representative body, that caricatured people who identified themselves as Aborigines and also demanded forms of sovereignty. No explanation was attempted in the pamphlet of what sovereignty meant.

Such attempts at political organisation through the use of nationalist and proto-nationalist symbolism conform to the Australian national tradition and mirror closely Ward's Australian legend. More simply, these activities are patterned behaviour conditioned by time, circumstance and the political and economic conditions prevailing at the time.⁴⁹ The limited biographical information on Kevin Gilbert indicates that he conformed to a proto-nationalist process, whose foremost characteristic encapsulates the national character today in its appeal to a mass movement which both government and the media encourage. In the Aboriginal Australian case, however, the movement he professed to represent relied heavily on public support and acceptance: but the movement was largely a myth.

In Gilbert's pamphlet the mystification is continued through the idea of a homogeneity of the Aboriginal ethnic or racial groupings. Of further interest is his use of the term 'cultural self-determination', a sentiment that the writer never defined. These types of

⁴⁴ Gilbert 1973, p.185.

⁴⁵ Gilbert 1993.

⁴⁶ Greenfield, p.98.

⁴⁷ Gilbert, 1993.

⁴⁸ Gilbert, 1993.

⁴⁹ *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, pp.45-50.

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sentiments caused problems across most of his literary and political activities. Furthermore, the pamphlet links two characteristics of significance, first, the search and demand for a promised land, ('land rights') and second, a return to a lost and golden past in which the narrow tribalism of ancient times was expanded into 'sovereignty', implying a separate type of Aboriginal government. Similarly, these elements featured in his socio-political appeal. This phenomenon was no accident: a number of American black radical political groups are sometimes classified as 'black nationalists'.⁵⁰

Ideas similar to those of this pamphlet appeared in his earlier literary work. For example, he reproduced one of his informant's views that:

Aboriginals should be busy changing [their] situation. Aboriginals should be building a modern Aboriginal culture, something that is meaningful in today's context. This radical re-education of Aboriginals by Aboriginals and at the direction of Aboriginals is vital. We know that a white Australian will never do it.⁵¹

These sentiments are not revolutionary but separatist. He wanted to have a place where Aborigines could not only be separated from white society but have the trappings also of their religion, their own reconstructed authority to encourage a movement towards traditionalism, and their own system of governance. These are classical nationalist and, therefore, proto-nationalist ideals, but they overlapped with ideas highlighting his alienation.⁵²

Gilbert the surrealist

Kevin Gilbert's literary art contained surrealist tendencies. First, he portrayed images to shock the sensibilities of the comfortable middle-class and the rural landed gentry. Second, some of the images were bizarre, reflecting his own alienation. Third, both his polemical writing and verse descended into dream-like worlds. Fourth, he confused the abstract with the concrete metaphors or similes.

Possibly as a result of his introduction to art as occupation in prison, he displayed signs of surrealism through his lino-cutting skills. He possibly came in contact with the great surrealists in his reading on abstract art forms. A characteristic of the early surrealist school was its rejection of middle-class artistic representations. Following the art-world's representation of the post-World War I alienation from middle-class values, a new artistic *genre* emerged. This new school evolved from works by European artists such as Picasso, Dalí and Hans Arp. The last artist, in particular, displayed abstractions which appeared as earthy, simplistic and portraying the essence of the late 1920s school in which he was 'trying to present art as more closely representing every day life', and in particular, the poverty of material life.

Gilbert was drawn to things which society rejected. He was obsessed with dreams and dreaming, and captured by the idea of trans-cultural intuition which would stand against Australianism (that is Australian nationalism but not 'black nationalism'); and, finally, he was possessed with the belief that he knew how to resist prejudice, or racism. In the Australian context he reflected surrealist developments in that he portrayed the idea that 'human thought is humiliated in that it is compelled to note, to affirm, from day to day, a

⁵⁰ *International Encyclopaedia*, pp. 63-70. The section under the heading 'nationalism' provides a good explanation of modern day nationalism in the USA and other places.

⁵¹ Gilbert 1978, pp. 3-4.

⁵² *International Encyclopedia*, p.47.

series of events which have no bearing on rational intelligence and which are related solely to barbarism'.⁵³

Other criteria of surrealism emerged at public rallies and demonstrations where Gilbert not only challenged but also mocked white society. He challenged whites by attacking their wealth, their society, and their lack of awareness about the message he was delivering. His verbal tirades were released to his audiences wilfully and at random into every crowd he addressed. In a display of public humiliation - an important criterion of surrealist activists - he mocked both his subjects and his audience as if he was living out art. Unlike other political orators, he mocked Aborigines because he vainly thought he had the answer to their social political, cultural and, most importantly, economic weaknesses perceiving that simply as landlessness. For instance, he chided Aboriginal Australians for their alleged lack of interest in land ownership as an economic base. He set high standards for his audiences by mocking them. This was a strategy for gaining their undivided attention. These traits were sometimes explicit, but mostly they were implicit in his oratory and literature.

Gilbert's genre was prose-commentary, old fashioned, opinion-driven journalism, often using out-worn clichés which other people had dumped. *The Cherry Pickers*, his first attempt at public exposure, typified the bizarre images of reality that stamped him as a surrealist. In the soliloquy of Act 1, Bungaree, a historic character, has a dialogue with the audience. This represents the mythical or dream-like world coming in direct contact with the real world. It may be dismissed as typical of many plays in its use of ghosts. But the use here is different because the speaker is asking the audience to accept both a legal and a historical argument, neither of which is explained. The audience is then told that it is witness to an event at which it was not present but which will now come to life.⁵⁴

The dream-like world used in *The Cherry Pickers* is repeated in such poetry as 'My Father's Studio'. In this verse, he wanted his readers to believe that it is his own father speaking to them in a special 'traditional' way. He disguised the fact that his father was a white man. Moreover, he mixes names of language groupings with words of a colloquial nature. This technique gives the impression that the writer is speaking in an Aboriginal language. The reader is asked to accept, in an unreal way, the real words of the dialogue as one taking place directly with a traditional Aboriginal. This technique is not meant to appear to either Aborigines or other Australians, as bizarre. It is meant to appear as a dream-like transmutation. Surrealism, therefore, is manifested throughout Gilbert's artistic presentations. It derives from a European heritage and is merged integrally with his populism. Gilbert skilfully forced Australians to notice him.

Gilbert the icon?

An 'icon' is something that is idolised, stands for something of religious significance and possesses a mystical power that grows with time. There is a danger that Australian commentators and some writers have created an icon of Gilbert. Like Xavier Herbert, he was somewhat of a social recluse. Both writers became alienated from their respective circles of colleagues.

An example of the construction of the Gilbert iconography relates to what three other writers have written about Aborigines and the past. The first of these was the anthropologist Professor W.H. (Bill) Stanner, who, incorrectly, in my view, blamed Australian society for 'the great Australian silence'.⁵⁵ Stanner might have added that this

⁵³ Breton 1941-42. For the literary linkages between the surrealist artistic school of thought and that of post-structuralism of writers like Foucault, see Clifford 1988, pp.21-54.

⁵⁴ Gilbert 1988, pp.4-5.

⁵⁵ Stanner 1968.

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capacity for silence about social responsibility for which he criticised Australians, should have been extended to include Aboriginal Australians. It was their capacity for silence which failed to give Kevin Gilbert the grace he sought.

The second writer to interpret the Aboriginal Australian past incorrectly was Bernard Smith. Smith, as noted above, believed that a radical nationalism was developing among Aboriginal people. What he was observing was the emergence of a few individuals, mainly those of an economistic and opportunistic mould, who emerged as a result of federally funded social and economic policies. These people had been buoyed by their own economism and their false consciousness in general.⁵⁶

Smith misled other writers. For instance, a third writer to engage in the mystification of what he calls both an Australian 'Fourth World', and an 'Aboriginal literature' was Adam Shoemaker, who wrote, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*.⁵⁷ In a superficial introduction he observed:

strong indications of a global trend towards a collectivity of indigenous peoples. ... It is probable that a necessary precondition for full participation of the Australian Aboriginal people in [the] Fourth World movement will be a unified black collectivity within Australia itself. Although the Aboriginal people do not constitute today 'a nation within a nation', it does seem both logical and likely - at least in symbolic terms - that this is precisely the direction in which they are presently heading.⁵⁸

What Stanner, Smith, Shoemaker and many other writers have done is to distort the Aboriginal Australian past. Whatever these writers' views are, Aboriginal Australians have, since 1901, been part and parcel of Australian nationalism. Their incorporation by the states began in earnest in the 1920s and ended absolutely in the 1940s.⁵⁹ The fact that many people tried to maintain the old remnants of traditional life made no difference to their overall dominance by Australian nationalism.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Aborigines have never been constituted as a separate state, neither in 1900 nor today, in any reasonable understanding of the historic term. Notwithstanding that, it has become fashionable to speak of, for example, the 'Kulin', 'Yolngu' and 'Kamilaroi' 'nations', as if the various separate 'tribal' (but linguistically related) groups inhabiting Australia, before 1788, constituted politically unified entities. This, of course, was never the case. Even more indicative is the current misuse of terms like 'Koori' and 'Nyungar', which similarly but wrongly impute a nationhood that has never existed.

Conclusion

Kevin John Gilbert struggled against adversity in order to achieve self-recognition. What many academics, journalists and the various other writers who promoted him have done, is to turn him into an icon. Equally uncritically, various prominent Aborigines — Dennis Walker, Jack Davis, Robert Bropho, to name a few - have seized on his capacity to draw publicity. For there is not one Gilbert icon but many, each made by the one promoting it, and made to serve the maker's individual purpose.

Gilbert began as a marginalised person, but despite being acclaimed by his flatterers his powerful admirers and a compliant press, he remained a fringe-dweller. He lived and

⁵⁶ In using this term, I follow Lenin in Clark, 1988, esp. pp.54-55, where Clark explains Bernstein's concentration on economic change and rejects political revolutionary change.

⁵⁷ Shoemaker 1989, p.4.

⁵⁸ Shoemaker pp.14-15.

⁵⁹ Stevens 1978. See also Rose 1986.

⁶⁰ Inglis 1991, pp.13-31.

worked on the margins, never part of traditional Aboriginal society, never in the mainstream organisations for Aboriginal advancement, and never unequivocally a son of the white society from which his father came. His achievements were both undeniable and admirable, but they were not those promoted by his flatterers. Instead, they lay in the nature of his triumph over adversity, and his success in becoming an acclaimed writer despite the inauspicious beginning to his writing career, the long term gaol sentence for the murder of his first wife. In his death he has become an icon to many. Whether the icon can remain intact, particularly when his writing is subjected to rigorous critical appraisal and the details of his career are revealed by some future critical biographer, is a matter for speculation. Kevin Gilbert struggled for grace, and his flatterers and promoters sought to bestow it on him. Whether he achieved it is uncertain. Less certain still is whether, if he did indeed attain grace, would he be allowed to retain it by the unforgiving society that created him.

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The editors invited eleven scholars of Aboriginal Australia, or colleagues of Kevin Gilbert, to respond to the article by Gordon Briscoe. The following four articles were the response.