A RESPONSE TO GORDON BRISCOE

David Headon

As an 'appreciation' of Kevin Gilbert, Gordon Briscoe's 'The Struggle for Grace' is so severely flawed that one scarcely knows where to start. Had I been the editor who received his article I would have counselled a total rewrite on the basis that the piece reflects the character flaws, at times bizarre subject matter and gross stylistic deficiencies not of the subject in question, but of the individual who so clumsily attempts the discussion. Kevin Gilbert deserves — and is fortunately beginning to receive — far more considered responses to his impressive, iconoclastic life and work.

In order to keep my responses here as brief as possible, let me list in italics those comments of Briscoe's with which I do agree, or at least accept as legitimately arguable (and why), and then list merely the most contentious assertions with which I totally disagree (and why).

Agreement

1. Gilbert's life after incarceration '*can be seen as a struggle for grace*'. There are numerous ways of approaching Gilbert's lifework — 'a struggle for grace' is one. Briscoe, however, explores virtually none of the implications of his interesting title.
2. Gilbert '*meant different things to different people*'. Though it becomes clear to the reader that Briscoe interprets this as somehow reflecting Gilbert's waywardness of character, to me it highlights Gilbert's versatility and ability to evolve as a writer, social commentator and Aboriginal community leader.
3. Gilbert advocated, in his first writings, a '*black nationalism*'. Briscoe obviously rejects '*black nationalism*'. Fortunately Gilbert did not. Strong, forthright Aboriginal spokespeople were desperately needed in the 1970s to publicise the desperate plight of many Aborigines and to challenge white Australia to address the wrongs of the past.
4. *Because a White Man'll Never Do It* (1973) is a '*didactic piece . . . in which ordinary people revealed their innermost feelings on simple fundamentalist themes*'. The book is didactic, though this in no adequate way reflects its ground-breaking content. What 'simple fundamentalist themes' are, I haven't a clue. Nor, it seems, does Briscoe.
5. Gilbert '*experienced a difficult adolescent period, the effects of which must have been extremely traumatic*'. Undoubtedly true — all the more reason to appreciate the distinctive quality of Gilbert's literary, social and political contribution to this country post-1971.
6. Gilbert regarded the NSW welfare system '*not [as] a haven but a form of incarceration*'. True. An understandable response by someone born black in the west of New South Wales in the 1930s. Bobby Merritt's *The Cake Man* (1978) reinforces Gilbert's response.

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7. Gilbert '*reconstructed himself in prison through studying journalism, theology and anthropology, together with the study of lino-cut, and literary art forms*'. Controversial yet interesting idea, and one with merit. If Gilbert '*reconstructed*' himself during his fourteen and a half years in some of NSW's worst gaols—a good bit of it in solitary confinement — then all power to him. It enables us to better appreciate the achievements of the last two decades of his life.

8. Gilbert '*alienated white Australians because he humiliated them in public and made them uncomfortable*'. He did. I witnessed this on more than one occasion. Though I didn't necessarily agree with Gilbert's methods — or, at times, the substance of his public arguments — I thought his confrontational tactics usually made a strong political point, and one which symbolically reversed the established historical patterns of behaviour in this country post-1788.

9. '*Theology, which Gilbert studied in prison, contributed towards his emerging new identity in a number of significant ways*'. Largely true, I think, especially in the last ten years or so of his life. The angry young man evolved into the more thoughtful, even prophetic elder statesman.

10. Gilbert's '*models of the past, present and future took some account of ideas of socialism, liberation and Christianity that emerge in Australian nationalism*'. True, yet Gilbert was well aware of the severe shortcomings and illusions of the 'Legend' interpretation of Australian history. Life in and around Condobolin in the 1930s and '40s, if you were Aboriginal, had little interaction with (White) socialist ideals.

11. The circumstances of Gilbert's earlier life '*made a loner out of him*'. I feel this as well; yet, again, one can only point to the achievements of his later public life when he appeared to be someone to whom the high-profile public life did not come easily. He was the 'conscience' of many Australians, both black and white — an often unpalatable yet vitally necessary voice.

12. Gilbert encouraged '*a movement towards [Aboriginal] traditionalism and their [sic] own system of government*'. In the later years of his life Gilbert was unequivocal on these points, as he demonstrates in *Aboriginal Sovereignty* (1988), his introduction to *Inside Black Australia* (1988) and his contribution to *Cry for Justice* (1991).

13. Gilbert's '*achievements were both undeniable and admirable . . . they lay in the nature of his triumph over adversity, and his success in becoming an acclaimed writer despite the inauspicious beginnings to his writing career*'. 'Triumph over adversity' is only one of the reasons why Gilbert's achievements deserve praise. Briscoe overlooks or avoids all the rest.

Disagreement

1. Before 1972, Gilbert's '*art was difficult to comprehend*'. What? Is Briscoe referring to the manuscript of *The Cherry Pickers* (it wasn't published until 1988)? The early poems? The lino-cuts? None are 'difficult to comprehend'. In fact, they are very accessible products of a man obviously embittered by experiences of the white justice system.

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2. Gilbert had '*a self-admiration with which only a few other people concurred*'. Nonsense. Certainly the older he got, the more confident and imposing he got. But these qualities attracted admirers, as the extraordinary range of tributes after his death demonstrated.
3. '*In his literary works and political ideologies he portrayed narcissistic and surrealistic forms ...*' Utter nonsense. No Gilbert essays, poems or plays are either 'narcissistic' or 'surrealistic'. Indeed, as a writer Gilbert strove to communicate directly in all but a few of his last (almost pantheistic) poems. These are consciously spiritual offerings.
4. Gilbert '*was a fundamentalist*' because he believed '*the past was real*'. Believing in the significance and 'living quality' of the past scarcely makes one 'a fundamentalist'. If so, most of us are 'fundamentalists'.
5. Gilbert believed '*that his own editing was sufficient, and ...refused to have his work edited further*'. As one of Gilbert's editors in his last (assertive) years I have first-hand experience that this is untrue. Gilbert was a patient listener; if you made a good case, he adjusted accordingly. On the assumption that Briscoe would make adjustments to his own writing, on editorial advice, I would suggest that his own editors/readers have done him a disservice by not suggesting major changes to his article.
6. Gilbert's reading in gaol '*denied him a complementary fieldwork experience*' of '*traditional Aboriginal society*'. No Aboriginal creative writers who have emerged in the last twenty years have 'fieldwork experience' of 'traditional' Aboriginal society —only part-traditional society. Briscoe incorrectly implies some do. Name them.
7. 'Naivety' characterises *Because a White Man'll Never Do It* (1973) and *Living Black* (1977). There are many words and phrases to describe these two works — 'provocative', 'culturally significant', 'milestones', 'political bombshells'. 'Naivety' is not one of them. Both works reflect greater Aboriginal involvement with the political process; they are works of liberation and inspiration.
8. '*Instead of confronting his past [Gilbert] sought refuge behind a literature used to construct his own Aboriginal identity*'. First, it is not necessary to confront one's past to be a writer of significance. Second, Gilbert would pass this test anyway because he often addresses the past in his writing, most notably in the brilliant linking sections of *Living Black*. Writing for Gilbert is not a 'refuge' but a means of liberation, a way to express love and a political tool to stimulate action.
9. '*Gilbert's greatest literary weakness ... was his failure to probe the reasons for the rural poverty he experienced before going to gaol*'. He does probe these reasons in *The Cherry Pickers*, *Because ...*, *Living Black*, *The Blackside* (1990) and numerous essays — but this would scarcely amount to a 'great literary weakness', even if he didn't.
10. Gilbert '*does not go beyond reporting what he and his informants felt subjectively comfortable in expressing*'. Anyone who has read *Living Black* and *Because ...* knows this is nonsense. Just read the three-page Introduction to *Living Black* to remind yourself.

11. *The Cherry Pickers* in 'its original form ... received critical acclaim as a great contribution to Australian literature'. It did not; it was, however, correctly viewed as having historical importance. The play wasn't published until 1988, and only then by Gilbert's Burrumbinga Books.
12. 'As time went by the play was transformed to represent "nationalist" symbolisms ...' Meaningless nonsense.
13. *The Cherry Pickers* is underpinned by 'essentialism and particularism'. Ditto.
14. 'What emerged in *Because...and Living Black* was a type of surrealist and populist reporting ... 'Populist'—perhaps. 'Surrealist', never. Briscoe, despite quoting critics on surrealism, at no point uses the term with validity. Worse, I don't think he understands what it actually means.
15. Gilbert 'revealed a non-class understanding of the socio-political order'. Conflated thus, this is meaningless.
16. '[I]n his polemical literature he never localised his Aboriginal informants' Gilbert was, in fact, one of the first writers to do exactly that.
17. '...Blacks are publicly ostracised because they failed to act on [Gilbert's] moral rhetoric'. Gilbert doesn't 'ostracise', he challenges his people, usually with uncompromising statements. He has a vision for the future and he wants all Aborigines to share in it, particularly those who feel isolated and disenfranchised.
18. 'In his later verse, [Gilbert] proceeded to the idea of race hatred'. In fact, virtually the opposite occurred. The race bitterness in some early poems gives way in the poems of *Black from the Edge* (1994) to conscious defiance ('Winter Camp'), pleas for justice ('Choice is yours', 'Red Land Claims', 'Keep') or ambitious, spiritual poems epitomised by the volume's 'Epitaph'.
19. '...[T]he people who appeared to have captured his admiration were mostly White'. Nonsense. The poem 'Winter camp' symbolises Gilbert's admiration for all those Aborigines — past and present — who stood up to be counted in defiance of European incursions.
20. Gilbert's support for those Aborigines 'who saw Aboriginal custom as something tangible' is 'really a form of fetishism'. This is so bizarre a statement (for any who has read Gilbert's work) as to scarcely need a reply. It is not only inaccurate but, it seems to me, deeply insulting to Aboriginal people — despite emanating from an Aboriginal writer.
21. Gilbert 'turned entrepreneurially towards raising money...' Extraordinarily, Briscoe attempts not so subtly to portray Gilbert's money-raising activities (to provide basic necessities in underprivileged Aboriginal communities) as somehow suspicious. The inference reflects sadly on Briscoe himself.

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22. Gilbert moved to Canberra *'to peddle his ideas.'* 'Again, this reads as the assertion of someone desperate to discredit. Gilbert's Canberra home in fact became a strategically important base for his political activities.

23. *Gilbert's populism ...appealed to ideological categories ...'* Populism doesn't appeal to categories, but to people. Gilbert's did.

24. Gilbert's poem 'Look Koori' is *'little more than ranting...'* Literary critics with analytical skills in this area disagree with Briscoe's assessment.

25. Gilbert *'mixed genres such as politics, culture, society and bureaucracy...'* So do Lois O'Donohue, Noel Pearson, Charles Perkins and Paul Keating. So did Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Gilbert is in good company in 'mixing genres'. Social commentators of quality and influence do.

26. 'Gilbert's *'ambivalence was revealed in combining Aboriginal children and reserved land in one thought'*. Ambivalence? Why? The combination is perfectly valid.

27. Gilbert was *'peculiar'* because *'he had a collective view of Aborigines as a body of people acting as a group for a common cause'*. Gilbert did, but this should scarcely elicit criticism from anyone, much less another Aborigine. Gilbert emphasised solidarity for political purposes — as many have done before him.

28. *'The limited biographical information on Kevin Gilbert indicates that he conformed to a proto-nationalist process...'* Meaningless nonsense. There is, in fact, a considerable amount of biographical information available on Gilbert, if one is willing to search, and 'national character' and the 'nationalist process' are irrelevant to the information we have available.

29. Gilbert's *'literary art contained surrealist tendencies'*. It did not. Briscoe's attempts to link Gilbert to 'the surrealist artistic school of thought' are crude and simplistic — and inaccurate.

30. Surrealists were involved in displays of *'public humiliation'* and *'verbal tirades'*. So, Briscoe informs us, was Gilbert. Ergo, for Briscoe, Gilbert is a surrealist. Hardly. By this criterion, our present Prime Minister is a 'surrealist'.

31. Briscoe uses *The Cherry Pickers* as his example of Gilbert's (favoured) *'prose-commentary'* genre. *'Pickers'* is a play.

32. The analogy Briscoe draws between anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's *'great Australian silence'* and the *'capacity of silence'* of Aborigines is absurd. The former 'silence' is conspiratorial and guilt-ridden; the latter, a community response to historical realities. They cannot be compared.

33. *'What many academics, journalists and the various other writers who have promoted him have done, is to turn him into an icon'*. The fact is that for a writer of Gilbert's depth

and productivity there is, circa 1994, far too little written on him. He is no icon; at least not yet; but, steadily, his contribution is being increasingly recognised.

Briscoe's article is no 'appreciation'. It is a confused and confusing response to a figure of major political and cultural significance. Gilbert's output is in desperate need of 'rigorous critical appraisal' but it fails to get it from Gordon Briscoe. The only good that will be served by Briscoe's article is if it acts as a catalyst for those many Australians — black and white — who admire Gilbert, to enter the debate and legitimately illuminate the breadth and creativity of Gilbert's lifework.