

Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, also known as Kath Walker or Kathleen Ruska, was a proud Minjerribahn woman, artist, teacher and poet. In fact, in 1964 she was the first published Aboriginal poet in Australia and was one of Australia's best selling poets. Growing up, Oodgeroo would face racism which inspired her and her poems. She was well-known for her poetry and writing however, she was also an Aboriginal rights activist and in 1967, would make history.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born in North Stradbroke Island, south of Brisbane on the 3rd of November 1920. She had two brothers, Edward Ruska and Eric Ruska and a mother and father, Lucy McCulloch and Ted Ruska. Her father worked for the Queensland government which treated it's Aboriginal employees unfairly. As a child, Oodgeroo was left handed which wasn't a problem until she started school where she would get punished for using her left hand for writing and needlework. She attended the Dulwich State School in Stradbroke Island until 1933 where she then became a domestic servant. At the age of 16 Oodgeroo decided to pursue her career in becoming a nurse however, she found herself turned away by racist regulations that banned Aborigines from joining the program. Years later Oodgeroo Noonuccal decided to join the army.

In 1941 during World War 2, Oodgeroo Noonuccal joined the A.W.A.S (the Australian Women's Army Service) at the age of 21. She joined the army because she did not accept fascism as a way of life. Her two brothers were captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore in February 1942. She spent most of World War 2 as a switchboard operator, a telephone operator. In 1943 she left the A.W.A.S and trained to be a secretary and bookkeeper in Brisbane.

Oodgeroo started poetry in the 1950's when she then became the first published Aboriginal poet in Australia. She started poetry because she saw it as the most personal form of written expression and was a natural extension of Aboriginal traditions of story telling and song-making. Her poetry strongly reflected Aboriginal culture and her political beliefs and identified Aboriginal people as the inspiration for her work. Her first book *We Are Going* was published in 1964 and is about the result of the British invasions in Australia. It was also the first book to be published by an Aboriginal woman. This book

became very successful and Oodgeroo became one of Australia's best selling poets. Another one of her amazing books called Freedom was about how Oodgeroo wanted freedom for Aborigines to aspire and to be free to decide what matters in their lives and not have people controlling them and always treating them like they are nothing. She won many awards like The Mary Gilmore Medal in 1970 and the Jessie Litchfield Award in 1975. Oodgeroo Noonuccal wanted to show people how proud she was to be an Aboriginal woman.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was one of the main people behind the campaign for the changes of the Australian constitution in 1967 to end state control over Aboriginal people. She urged for people to stand up for Aboriginal rights and Australian's voted in a referendum to include Aboriginal people. These changes gave Aboriginal people full citizenship. She changed her name from Kath Walker to Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1987 at the Australian Bicentennial celebration. Oodgeroo meaning paperbark tree and Noonuccal being her people's name.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was an amazing teacher, artist, poet and writer winning several awards and being the first published Aboriginal poet but she was much more than that. She was a hero who fought for justice and an Aboriginal rights activist. Oodgeroo died due to cancer on the 16th of September 1993 but no one will forget how she changed the way Aboriginal people were seen for the rest of Australia in a way that they had not heard before.