

Hector Jandany on Lake Burley Griffin

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A speech delivered for the opening of Hector Jandany's mural

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Friends, this marvellous mural brings back so many memories. It has the potential to touch us to the core, to illustrate hope, and to keep doing so.

Let me begin, however, by acknowledging this place as Aboriginal land - always was, always will be. And let me acknowledge the memory of our dear friend, Hector Jandany.

Your Excellency, distinguished guests and all who have come to this site today.

Hector Jandany lives in the spirit of what he has given the world to see: even, to use his own words (and he was a man whose dry sense of humour should never be lost when we view this magnificent piece), 'those mad bastards in Canberra'.

I can't look at this mural, though, without connections of my own.

In my last days of ATSIC, two very dear friends and I sat down to discuss a disused block of land that had been once allocated to the building of a new Anglican Cathedral for Canberra.

What grandeur might have been erected here to the glory of God was strangely not on our minds.

What WAS on our minds was the meeting place it had become. It had become a place of meeting for the down-and-outs, the forgotten people of Canberra. And buried in the burned coals of that fire place are their forgotten and often painful stories.

On cold Canberra nights, it was a warming fire-place, a place of violence sometimes, even suicide, but a place where people who had no other options gathered to keep warm and share some 'grass' or a cheap flagon over burning flames.

For George Browning, William Deane and me, it became a place that demanded compassion, nurture and an injection of hope and purpose; never without recognition of the people who had adopted the space to find warmth and companionship.

Bishop George, whose mind is understandably permeated with biblical images, imagined a 'Tent of Meeting', the old idea of a Tent that travelled with the Hebrews through the desert after the homeless nation had fled persecution in Egyptⁱⁱ. They were people of no fixed address - simply led by a cloud by day and a fire by night (and maybe the people who used to camp here would understand that better than I).

The 'Tent' (or Tabernacle) was the Jew's place of meeting. It was where they expressed their grievances and where they symbolically made contracts with the God who resided in the Tent.

When King David came dancing in questionable dress (or undress) to the Tent's final fixed-address in Jerusalem, he brought with him the Ark of the Covenant. Saul's daughter said it was a 'shame job'. It was. No matter what David wore (or didn't wear), he was no longer pilgrim. He was now a 'settler'. And so was his God.

And David celebrated by offering everyone a flagonⁱⁱⁱ.

A great temple was mounted in solid stone to house the Ark^{iv} of the Covenant and the threads of the tent drifted back into the desert from whence they'd come.

In its day, however, it had been a place of meeting for the lost and homeless, like those who came to here, to THIS site, and built their fire.

How are we to connect THEIR stories to the story of the artist who gave us this mural, Hector Jandany?

Let us contemplate what connections there might be.

Hector Jandany was born out of violence and persecution in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. His grandfather was shot by white settlers and his grandmother was harmed and soon died in childbirth.

Even Hector's father was to die in conflict with whites while the artist was a child^v.

The violence his family faced was due to pastoralists forcing the Gija people off their land by massacre and poisoning: otherwise leaving them to die of disease or malnutrition.

But that wasn't all. We all know the name of the Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, A.O. Neville, who, trying to take control of church-run missions, and to force Aboriginal people into government-run cattle stations (quote) *"to pacify the natives and accustom them to white man's ways and thus enable further settlement"*^{vi}(end of quote), refused rations to those who wouldn't be 'rounded-up'.

So the story of the Gija people became one of displacement and homelessness.

But the Gija people were not to be defeated. They started to express a way forward through their art, taking the raw earth ochres and fashioning them meaningfully upon simple boards to reconstruct the songs and dances of the past. They did this after a mysterious visitation of a woman's after-death experiences began to inform what became known as the Krill Krill ceremony of the Kimberley.

And the ancestral owl-spirit became a feature of Krill Krill painting. So too the story of Jiwigun Hill, where people and animals sought refuge from a great flood above a dry ledge depicted as a black band rimmed in brown, waters lapping below the ledge.

I want to tell you a secret. My totem is the owl, which means I am identified with the owl and its protection in tradition and the Dreaming given to me by the ancestors. And one of the difficulties I face as I 'downsize' nowadays is what to do with my VAST collection of owls.

In Aboriginal cultures, the white owl has had many adventures. But in the Kimberley, I understand, the name of the owl, the sacred bird of the Wadjina, is Dumbi^{vii}. He, like the Gija people, suffered torture but managed to fly away. When he complained of his treatment, the Wadina sent a great flood. Only two were saved, male and female. They grabbed the tail of a kangaroo who took them to higher ground, where they were fruitful and multiplied. And here we all are.

Now the artist, whose mural we see here today, instinctively knew how to couple his ancestral knowledge of the land, in which he was firmly placed, ("You can feel that paint, you can feel that country"^{viii}), he would

say) with his strong Christian beliefs as a Catholic. For him, he was reconciled.

What the artist (bless him) has done, is to take us to that ledge above the water's edge by way of the spirit, the white owl. And in doing so, he reminds us (in the eternal wisdom for which the owl is 'unquestionably' invested) of those who once built their fire in this abandoned place above the water's edge of Burley Griffin to, by good means or ill, fly to safety.

20 years ago this year, delegates from all over the world met in Canberra for the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Its motto was 'Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation'.

In St Paul's epistle to a burgeoning church in Rome, he said that the Spirit gives life. "To set the mind on the flesh is death", he said, "but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace"^{ix}.

And, with that, I again honour Hector Jandany who has given us a vision and helps us also to remember.

ⁱ Newstead, A: Hector Jandany c1929-2007 Top 200 Australian Aboriginal Artists
www.aboriginalartcoop.com.au

ⁱⁱ Exodus 33:7-10 Bible

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Samuel 6:19 KJV Bible

^{iv} 1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron. 5:13, 14 Bible

^v Newstead, A: Hector Jandany c1929-2007 Top 200 Australian Aboriginal Artists

^{vi} Warmun (Turkey Creek) art and community, East Kimberley www.aboriginalartonline.com

^{vii} Aboriginal Mythology: <http://www.vicharef.com/pdf/aboriginal%20Myths%20I.pdf>

^{viii} Newstead, A: Hector Jandany c1929-2007 Top 200 Australian Aboriginal Artists

^{ix} Romans 8:6 Bible