

Something Regal: Uncle Fred Murray Extracts from a compilation of tributes, photographs and stories

June Perkins

WARNING : The author wishes to advise that in some communities it is distressing for photographs of people who have passed on to be featured. The following article contains such images from the Australian Bahá'í archives and people's personal photographic records.

This is an extract from a larger work which includes the following:

Introduction

Something Regal, June Perkins

On the way to the World Congress- Margaret Bluett

Coming home from the World Congress-David Podger

My story-Uncle Fred as scribed by Howard Harwood

Pelican Peter- by June Perkins

Tributes - Universal House of Justice, Hands of the Cause, Howard Harwood.

Recollections of early Indigenous believers, Madge Williams, audio interviews.

*Fred Murray Institutes- to request photographs and report for inclusion**

*Extracts from the Tape of the World Congress-still to locate**

Photographs, from various sources

Introduction

This collection began as extended research for a play composed in draft form five years ago. The play was inspired by the story of Fred Murray as told by Howard Harwood in a pamphlet. It resulted in a short poem and a correspondence with Howard Harwood, which lasted right up until his passing.

It also resulted in a few kind Bahá'ís sending me their stories, an interview with Madge Williams, meeting Betty Hindson, and being in touch with her on a regular basis.

Several times I have tried to write the script of Fred Murray's life, and ended up wanting to research more of the history of his life. As a result I have ended up with a compilation of memories, of stories gathered in the process of the desire to bring such a story to life- and several unanswered questions.

The image I have of this play is that it will consist of the people whom Uncle Fred had touched, entering a museum. Into that museum comes a big light that indicates such a story does not belong in an archive or in a few peoples unrecorded memories but they must tell the story. They then escape the museum to live and tell us the story.

So out comes the foster mother, the young George, brother of Fred, the Crowder brothers, Tindale, Howard and Myrtle, Collis, his wife Winnie, his son Fred Junior and others characters as well as Fred himself, to help build a picture for us.

Enacted before us are some of the scenes of these stories, we are in the outback, along the River, in Rome, Paris, London, Murray Bridge, the House of Worship....

Excerpts from the text of this compilation were performed at the Scholarship Institute at Yerrinbool in 1998. Howard, Fred, David, and Margaret "told" their stories. It was moving to hear those accounts. The play will one day happen, but the process of collecting the stories is ready to be shared now and if more stories should come forth perhaps there will be a second edition of this one day.

The script is writing itself, and if it should ever come to a movie screen or theatre near you, that will be wonderful, but for now it has life as a book. And also in the work of those Aboriginal Bahá'ís who wish to continue the work of Fred Murray and Howard Harwood, and Harry Carter and others who wanted to share the message of Bahá'u'lláh with the Aboriginal people of Australia.

"Something Regal"

He loved to watch Westerns. He would cover his eyes when there was a lot of violence and ask whoever was sitting next to him to tell him when it had stopped.

There was something regal, about Uncle Fred. He was the sort of person who would say, "Could you please get me a cuppa", unlike his friend Harry, who would get up and ask everyone, "well who'd like a cuppa, I'm about to make one"

So different, yet great mates. Petite Fred, tall and large framed Harry Carter.



Portrait of Fred Murray (From National Australian Bahá'í Archives)

These are some of the memories of Madge Williams, who was present when Uncle Fred became a Bahá'í.

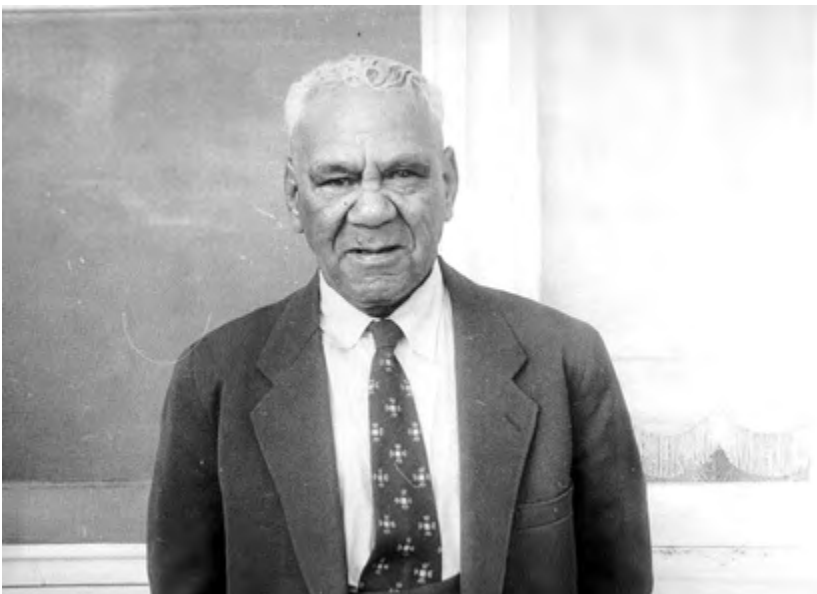
His life, like a dramatic movie, had rousing crowd scenes in which the central character gets to speak before hundreds of people, sacred spaces like the House of Worship, travel across the land and continents. He lost a family and found a family.

Many people have said, "I was touched by a small pamphlet about his life. It made me want to know about the Bahá'í Faith. " Sue Obah, states "it was the reason I became a Bahá'í" That small pamphlet has enabled Uncle Fred's spirit to walk the dreaming tracks of this land.

It was his mate Howard Harwood, who served as a Member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia, who helped him put it together. Uncle Fred couldn't read or write, but he could tell stories, and he had a life that made a great story.

Anywhere where his story is told, you can sure his spirit is there. Maybe he is adding incidentals, smiling, and happy that he can continue to reach people through its rich tapestry. This collection of stories, is a development of that pamphlet- a filling in of some details and pictures to illuminate more the mystery of one human soul.

Howard Harwood a friend of Uncle Fred's, close to the next life and recently having passed on, spoke of Uncle Fred and the hardships he had throughout



Photograph of Harry Carter (From National Australian Bahá'í Archives)



First Aboriginal Bahá'í Conference (From National Australian Bahá'í Archives)

his life. He would speak or write to anyone who asked about Uncle Fred and these accounts provide some moving moments from Uncle Fred's life.

Howard recalls his first meeting with Uncle Fred, at the Aboriginal settlement of Gerard, which was situated on the River Murray South of the Fruit growing area:

"We went to Gerard seeking pure souls and we found Fred. He was in grave trouble and very sad. He had lived on the settlement for some years with his wife Winnie and their three children, Annette, Fred and Rhonda. His wife had died so his daughter Annette became the lady of the house- sadly her husband drank heavily and caused a lot of trouble on the settlement. The Superintendent banned him from living there. So Fred had to leave his house and move into the single men's quarters. Rhon[d]a and Fred Junior were separated from him and moved into dormitories. Their house was allotted to another family... sometime later there was an epidemic on the settlement and one day I received a telephone call from an Aboriginal Friend of Beiru, 15 miles out of Gerard, saying that he had seen Fred walking and Fred was walking from ... to my place."

Howard then explains how he went to out to get Fred, and found him soaked, as it had been raining. He found Uncle Fred 30 miles from ... and picked him up to drive him home with him. From the story Fred told him of the Reserve Howard concluded that it sounded very much like a concentration

camp. Not surprisingly Uncle Fred asked if he could please live with Howard and his wife Myrtle.

However, Howard was to find that responding to this request was not so straightforward due to the law at the time. All Aboriginal people were wards of the state and could not choose where they wanted to live. Also, Fred suffered from diabetes and needed insulin. Nevertheless Howard kept his promise and telephoned the Chief of the Aboriginal Department in Adelaide, who agreed to this. Fred's pension went to Howard, and Howard also got Fred switched from needles to tablets for his insulin.

Fred bought many bounties to Howard's family by coming to live with them; and there were many discussions of the Bahá'í Faith to which a lot of other Aboriginal people came. The connection of the Harwood family and Fred's did not begin with their meeting at Gerard though, but much earlier.

Hand of the Cause, Collis Featherstone and Madge and Morris Williams attended some of these discussions. Many of them took place around a fire, in the starlight. Up to 40 Aboriginal people would be there.

Margaret Bluett and Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánúm also met Uncle Fred.



Elizabeth Hindson First Indigenous person to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly (From National Australian Bahá'í Archives)

Fred, in his regal manner, and with a sense of timing, accepted the Faith at a large gathering at Murray Bridge. In his heart he had been a Bahá'í for sometime, but the moment and occasion were right and he declared his belief in Bahá'u'lláh.

There were to be other moments of occasion throughout his time as a member of the Bahá'í community. One of these was to make the front page of the Adelaide News "World's Longest Walkabout". Uncle Fred gathered with Bahá'ís from around the globe in London, for the First Bahá'í World Congress. Also there was Elizabeth Hindson, the first Aboriginal Bahá'í, a young woman from Queensland.

Somewhere in the Archives is a recording of Uncle Fred giving a speech at that Congress.

For the journey to and from the congress Uncle Fred had travelling companions. Their accounts of their time with Uncle Fred give us glimpses of some of the highlights of that journey. Less close to him, perhaps, than Howard, they are touched in a different way by his personality.

Margaret Bluett and David Podger's stories tell us a lot about their emotions at the time with Uncle Fred.

David was recovering from the loss of his first wife and this permeates his story. Something about Uncle Fred gave him some solace at that time. He recalls a request Uncle Fred made to go to the World Centre, and his absolute acceptance that it was not possible at that time for him to be granted a visit.

Margaret's account gives us a vivid picture of Fred's travels on the way to London. Margaret does not seem to be that experienced a traveller, and misses planes, and gets lost whilst being Uncle Fred's "guide". It's all such a big experience for her, and Uncle Fred, seems to be the calmer one- although not that keen on sleeping in tall buildings.

We learn of Alessandro Bausani, a Professor of linguistics at the University of Rome recording an account of Uncle Fred's life as the last surviving member of his tribe. Maybe that account is somewhere in the archives of the National Spiritual Assembly of Rome.

The World Congress is a place where many people may remember Uncle Fred. Margaret remembers that he was not overwhelmed by the size of the Albert Hall rather he was looking forward to sharing his story.

From a campfire under the starlight to a large global audience of thousands of people, gathered in Albert Hall; Fred's ability to always be himself shone though.

According to Margaret, he began by stating, "I have come like a giant kangaroo across the world to stand on this stage and tell the world how happy I am to be a Bahá'í." In other accounts he said, "When I was a baby my people died, I thought I have no people! But now I am a Bahá'í you are all my people". The story of his suffering and persecution because he was

Aboriginal, the journey before he became a Bahá'í are mostly recorded for us by Howard Harwood.

In scribing Fred's story for him Howard recognised a bridge builder and wanted to help him build that bridge.

Fred Murray, was born "beneath a shady tree somewhere along the coast of Esperance Bay in West Australia" in 1884. His mother was of the Minen people. When he was around two years old and his brother was one, their parent died in a measles epidemic. They were orphaned... He and his brother were fostered by a European women, the wife of a sheep station manager who lived in the area".

It is a mystery to Howard why Fred and his brother were not fostered by the tribe. At the time a lot of Aboriginal children were being taken from their parents, and a lot of Europeans felt that Aboriginal people couldn't care for their

children. Howard states that this sad event of separation from the tribe, which would have included other family members, "This proved the means of saving their lives" as soon after there was a drought and then the drinking water of the Minen was poisoned.

Howard, suspects that they would have been sent back to the tribe after once they were older, but because they were so tiny they were saved. This is theoretical, as there was no tribe for them to go back to, or be sent back to.

Who told Fred and his brother the story of the poisoning we don't know, but they did learn who did it- and this same man was beating them up, and generally ill-treating them on the station where they lived. They endured this treatment for 9 years or so, until it just

U.K. TRIP FOR ABORIGINE

A 79-year-old aborigine will fly to London on Easter Sunday to take part in the centenary celebrations of his religion, the Bahá'í World Faith.

Fred Murray, of Renmark, who is undertaking the journey, is the last of the Minen tribe, which was almost wiped out last century by drinking polluted water.

When he was 12 years old he walked to Yalata station, where the owners took him in and gave him their name of Murray.

When Mr. Murray was 29 he was chosen as the perfect specimen of his race in S.A. and a plaster cast was taken of him. The cast is in the National Museum of America.

Mr. Murray, who has never flown, will make the trip with 41 other members of the Bahá'í faith for the celebrations. It will be his first trip out of Australia. About 7,000 Bahá'ís are expected to attend the congress from all corners of the world.

The religion originated in Persia when a Persian was exiled for his religious and social reforms.

The growth of Bahá'í in Australia was accelerated in 1961 with the completion of a house of worship at Inneside, Sydney, the fifth of its type in the world.



Mr. Fred Murray

Newspaper cutting of Fred Murray's trip to London.



At the World Congress- sitting with William Sears (Photo provided by Margaret Bluett)

became too much for them and they ran away. Did their Foster mother know of this ill treatment, if she did how she viewed it, whether she ever attempted to help them we do not know? Did she grieve when she found them gone?

"They travelled by foot many hundreds of miles overland to Yalata sheep station in South Australia, living of the land" Yalata station was on the border between Western Australia and South Australia.

Howard elaborates on this account from Bahá'í World and explains, that it took Fred and his brother George 18 months to travel from Western Australia to South Australia. At Yalata Station Fred and his brother came into contact with the Murray family, who were kind and caring people. George and Fred must have been happy here, they chose to adopt the name of Murray as their surname. On Yalata station the Murray brothers learned about Christianity. Fred had an interest in all Spirituality and his investigation of many stories, including the stories of Aboriginal peoples he met was something he held in his head, and shared with others. We have snippets of this in the pamphlet he produced with Howard.

Sometime later, the Crowder brothers came to Yalata Station and the Murray brothers went with them as horse boys. The Crowder brothers had a sister Annie, Howard's grandmother. This link between Howard and Fred went

back longer than their first meeting on Gerard Station. Perhaps this explains why Uncle Fred walked in the rain to Howard's house. He was going to stay with "family".

Life for a number of years consisted of herding sheep and cattle, rising horses and prospecting. Fred's brother died one day whilst taming wild horses. One can only imagine what it must have felt like for Fred to lose him, with them both having been through so much together.

Fred's marriage was apparently arranged. Howard thinks this was by Professor Tindale. Fred married a woman from Lake Victoria, Winnie Reed. No one seems to know where they spent their first few years of marriage, but it was during this time that Harwood says Fred began to hear the spiritual stories of his own people, and develop a deeper interest in them. He learned about Ngurenderi.

Fred went to live along the Murray and he worked on the paddle steamers and picking fruit. Although earlier, Howard speaks of three children, in later letters he states that Fred and his wife had 9 children, but only three of them survived the rest dying of gastroenteritis.

Fred's family lived a tribal life. What Winnie, Fred's wife, went through as he went up and down the river, and she lost child after child one can only wonder at. She passed away well before her husband. In fact, a short time after Uncle Fred retired from working and just after they had moved to Gerard settlement. The settlement had been a model reserve once, but gradually it had become an unpleasant place to live.

In 1998 Howard mentioned that one daughter of Uncle Fred's could still be alive and living at Gerard Settlement.

Life was challenging for Uncle Fred's children with the Australian laws the way they were and the effects of alcohol in Annette's family. More details about Fred Junior reveal that he had two sons but the government took them.

Apparently, Howard thinks Fred junior's children were raised in European homes, but eventually left to go and live in the bush again.

It seems a source of sorrow that the descendants of Uncle Fred's family for the moment remain away from the new family their father had found for them. And maybe one day these children will come home too.

Uncle Fred, loved to share the spirit of the Bahá'í Faith, he went travel teaching with Dr Muhajir and Howard and Myrtle and his great friend Harry. Uncle Harry and Uncle Fred would sit having long chats with Dr Muhajir. One wonders how wonderful it would be to have listened to those conversations.

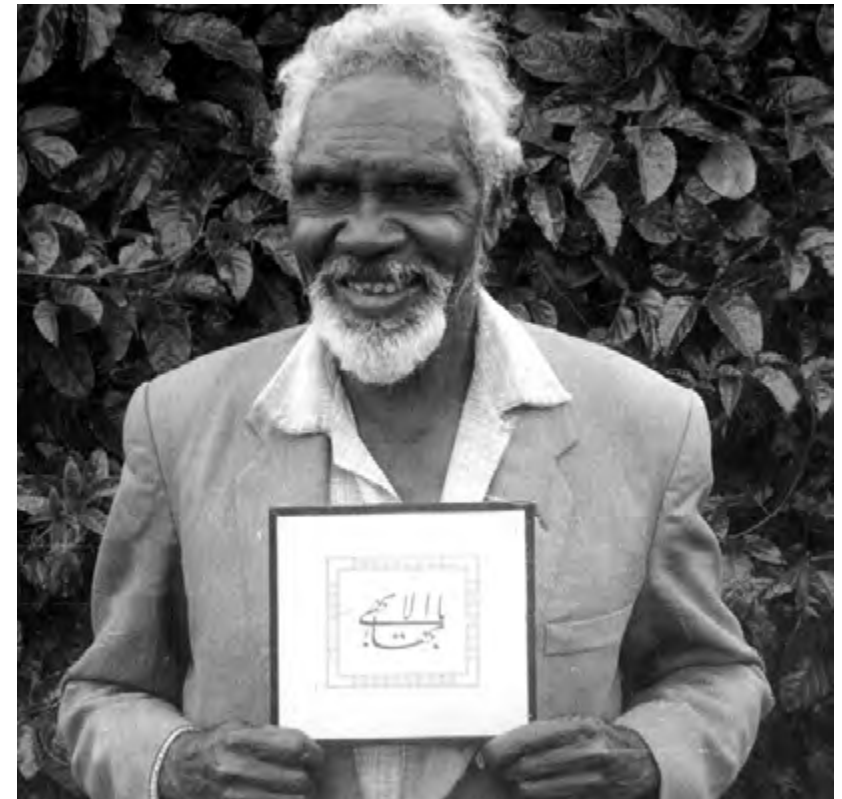
He also met Rúhíyyih Khánúm at the dedication of the House of Worship in Sydney and at Murray Bridge as well. Rúhíyyih Khánúm was quite taken with Fred Murray, she sent a photograph of him at the World Congress, and requested that the National Spiritual Assembly place it at the House of Worship

where people could see it. Fred, for his part, called her "the dear lady who sent out the love from Haifa".

The World Congress experience's effect on Uncle Fred was profound, and according to Howard, he was so inspired by it he wanted to go and live in Adelaide to teach the Bahá'ís there about Aboriginal people and to help in bridging the gap between Aboriginal people and others. His project was bold and ahead of its time, well before Reconciliation councils, but Fred was to live only a few months at the Salvation Army hostel before quietly passing away in his sleep. Elizabeth Hindson was also greatly affected by the World Congress, and went to live in a small community to assist the development of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia.

There is bronze bust of Uncle Fred in the South Australian Art Gallery and the American National Museum made when he was thirty-five.

On his passing, messages came from both the Universal House of Justice and the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land.



Portrait of Fred Murray (From National Australian Bahá'í Archives)

“Praying his example will open way rapid spread of Faith, his long suffering people” (Hands of Cause)

“We recall Mr Murray’s attendance at the World Congress in London and we are very grateful that he was permitted to observe this historic event before his passing to the Abhá Kingdom. Please assure members of his family we have offered prayers at the Holy Shrines for the progress of his soul”. (Universal House of Justice)

Howard Harwood, said that it was Fred’s wish that all the Aboriginal people should learn about Bahá’u’lláh and he was doing all he could to fulfill his wish”. Recently Howard Harwood passed away.

We sat with him and prayed for him as requested. He was getting ready to go and meet old friends. Maurice Nicholson a local indigenous Bahá’í had come into see him as well and as we sat around his bed even to his last breath he was passing on bits of Fred’s story.

The text of the pamphlet in which Howard took down Fred’s words is produced in this collection in full.

In it, Uncle Fred, speaks about how he and his brother learned the wisdom of tribal elders of other areas, although they could not learn it from their own people. His work represents the first translation of Bahá’í concepts into Aboriginal cosmology. It is almost certain that Uncle Fred knew more, and had more work to do in this area, as his move to Adelaide indicates. The Fred Murray Institute represents another chapter in such work.

The dreaming track of Uncle Fred stretches from Western Australia to South Australia, and along the flow of the Murray River. His greatest wish was that more of his people would learn of the significance of the Bahá’í message.

Acknowledgements

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