

Margaret Sterling Bain 07.06.1923 - 14.03.2018

Margaret was born in Melbourne Australia.

Her working life began, after graduating in 1946 from Melbourne University, B.Sc., with a teaching position at Scotch College Melbourne. She was then employed as a laboratory assistant at Baker Institute - Alfred Hospital Melbourne and following this took a position as a bookkeeper in her father's business. The skills gained in these fields were to prove useful in her life's work.

From 1956-59 Margaret began her years of involvement with traditional Aboriginal people as a missionary to Mornington Island (Queensland) with the Presbyterian Mission where she was a teacher, mostly in literacy.

1961-67 saw Margaret serve at Ernabella Mission (South Australia) as Assistant to the Superintendent in administration and Christian instruction. During the day she did varied work for the mission which included the book work, assistance to some of the women, and in the evening she visited the sheep camps (out stations). From late 1961 she visited Finke once a month for the purpose of collecting supplies for Ernabella from the train and "making friends with the Aborigines" who lived in there.

In 1968 Margaret pioneered alone a new mission work at Finke, upon the invitation of an Aboriginal man in that community and with the support of the Presbyterian Church Australian Inland Mission and Board of Missions. She was appointed as the Regional Community worker, and lived in a caravan.

In November 1968 Margaret wrote, "...Before I came here folk used to ask, 'What are you going to do?' My invariable reply was words to the effect that it would be necessary to play it by ear. It has so proved. Briefly, the purpose of this work is to assist the Aboriginal people of the area towards independence and effective living within the community in which they live, ... Having said this I add, for this is my real concern and none other - to preach the gospel." Throughout her work, as she had opportunity, Margaret encouraged people to grow in their relationship with God and for quite a number of these people God became a reality.

Margaret intentionally sought to empower men, women and children in practical ways in all aspects of daily life. Not long after Margaret's full time work in Finke began she wrote, "It is obvious some sort of authority is needed in Finke among the Aboriginal people themselves. ...So we talked about the old days, who had the authority, how they used it, what happened and other like matters. ... It was decided to consider forming a council." The formation of the council, men who had traditional seniority, (together with one Aboriginal man who was a church leader in Finke), had immediate and long term positive outcomes on a day to day basis within the community itself and in planning appropriate developments from then on.

In the early stages Margaret suggested "the Council work out what they (their community) most needed." They asked her how they could implement these ideas. She sought in small matters and large to facilitate their desire to carry responsibility in work, family, community and health matters. In some things she was an advocate for them and she taught the Council how to represent their community in church and governmental arenas. Through many 'ups and downs' some of the outcomes of this approach were a water supply, septic tanks, fences, land for housing and jobs. Initially work included catching and selling a few camels, collecting australites for sale, making artefacts and other items to sell. Later the community bought and managed the Aputula Store. This was followed by work in the Aputula Construction Company, (with the help of John McNeil), where local Finke people learnt skills which enabled them to build their houses, a Medical Clinic, and later a hospital and church. The Finke Council also bought the hotel so that they could set guidelines on the responsible serving of alcohol.

From the outset, in what ever location, Margaret always spent much time listening to the Aboriginal people, marvelling at their skills and learning their language. She learnt to speak Pitjantjatjara

fluently. Throughout her years of work with Aboriginal people Margaret recorded, daily where possible, day to day events, interactions and relationships between Aboriginal people of similar or different tribal backgrounds, and other aspects of life that helped her appreciate and understand them and their culture. These detailed objective records became primary to her insights and understanding of differences in the world views of “traditional Aboriginals, that is, people for whom an indigenous language is their first language and who may well live on a remote community”* and Westerners. Improving communication, understanding and connection between the two cultures was very important to her. To this end she undertook a short period of study from 1971-72 and graduated from Monash University with a B.A.(Hons) - Anthropology.

She returned to Finke from early 1973 to mid 1975 to continue her missionary work and further her preparation for a post graduate degree.

In 1979 Margaret graduated from Monash University, M.A. - Anthropology. The title of her thesis was, “At the interface: the implications of opposing views of reality.” She identified differences in world view, thinking and language between Aboriginal people and white people. Her thesis was published in 1992 under the title “The Aboriginal-White Encounter - towards better communication”. In 2005 a condensed version of the thesis was published as “White Men are Liars”, which was a quote from an Aboriginal man underscoring differences in perception. It was reprinted in 2010 with a new title, “Adapting to Difference” but from 2017 is available as “White Men are Liars”. She has many other publications on Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Australian relations.

On completion of her thesis Margaret worked as a Community Worker at Mornington Island employed by Aboriginal Advisory and Development Services of the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia and in her retirement when she was in her 80's Margaret gave pastoral care to Aboriginal people in Alice Springs hospital and prison.

Margaret was awarded an OBE (Aboriginal Welfare) in the New Years honours list in 1977 for her work.

At the end of 1973 Margaret found the following in a note left in her caravan:

“Dear Margaret B you are our friend in Aputula Mission. Without you nothing will ever change our own country”

At Margaret's funeral some of the comments from Aboriginal people were:

“...She was like a mother to us...When I grew up I started following the Lord. I've seen all the Catholics they look at Mother Theresa, I really like to admire Billy Graham...but we had our own, we had Margaret Bain. She lived with us, she even learned our language,...she was my Mother Theresa she was my Billy Graham. She was so faithful, a woman, a lady, strong faith, she was my mentor. Afterwards when I start following the Lord I think back to her. That's what she was trying to do with us, she was there with the bible.”

“We spent time (night) outside her caravan protecting her not from the aborigines but from the white people residents of Finke the fettlers and the station people...they were angry at this woman because she was so close with us, she protected us...this woman was a very strong woman, every night every day we spent time with her in the caravan in and out,..she taught me how to drive, ..she worked with the elderly man elderly woman, she never made any mistakes talking amongst our people...this woman poured love into our hearts, she was a number one woman for us,.. (she) taught us the bible...every Christmas she let me wear one of her dresses...for the Christmas party, she would take us for meteorites, she would come camping with us out in the bush for two weeks or one month the food would be hunting gathering,..she said we are going to build a store for Finke, go back with the rocks get some money,..also helping us English every night every day I sit with her and learn, she was also like a nurse to us,..she was on the go every day never had much sleep months and years that's why we went out in the bush eating rabbit, goanna, honey ants, she knew all the bush tucker she was the best on the land.”

“She was a missionary telling us the stories of God and helping people in various ways,..several women heard the Christian message from Margaret's teaching and, believing it, she was able to

disciple them and they eventually asked to be baptised,..I will always remember Margaret as a good teacher who was fond of us Pitjantjatjaras' and cared for us driving us around as long as she was able, sharing our language only wanting the best for us,..she advocated on our behalf helping others to understand us."

The trust and respect Margaret held amongst the Aboriginal people is a testament to her care, dedication, vision, courage, tenacity, sensitivity and compassion.

All quotes are from Margaret's letters to the family held by Strehlow Research Centre, unless otherwise indicated.

Resources:

Bain, Margaret S. 1992. "The Aboriginal-White Encounter: Towards Better Communication." SIL Occasional Papers No 2, Australian Aborigines and Islanders Branch, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Darwin

*Bain, Margaret S. 2005. "'WHITE MEN ARE LIARS' - Another Look at Aboriginal-Western Interactions" Published in Australia by AuSIL Inc. PO Box 8794 Alice Springs NT 0871

National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame and Old Alice Springs Gaol
2 Stuart Terrace, Alice Springs 0871 Contact: Dianna Newham-Curator, phone 08 8952 9006
Email: curator@pioneerwomen.com.au

Ara Irititja Archives <http://www.irititja.com>

To this official archive for the Pitjantjatjara people Margaret donated many papers, documents and newsletters and approximately 800 photographs related to her work in Ernabella and Finke. She also donated approximately 200 items which had been made by the Indigenous people of Ernabella South Australia, Mornington Island, Queensland Gulf, Aurukun and Cape York, Queensland.

Ara Irititja Project, PO Box 1234 Marleston, South Australia 5033 Phone 0882264873
John Dalwitz, Coordinator, Email: john.dalwitz@irititja.com

Strehlow Research Centre

Margaret's letters to her family 1959-84, 55 personal diaries, many photographs and 17 boxes of Kodak slides, 16 manila folders of various papers and notes, Ara Irititja correspondence, Aputula Aboriginal family tree, 37 various library books.

61 Larapinta Dve, Araluen, Alice Springs 0870 NT

Contact: Felicity Green Email: felicity.green@nt.gov.au Phone: 0889511111

Northern Territory Archive Service - Oral History Program

An oral history interview by Stuart Traynor in 2013 with Margaret. Reference is: NTRS3678

NT Archive Service 58 Hartley St, Alice Springs 0870, Contact: Lis Marnie Phone 08 89515669

Email: elisabeth.marnie@nt.gov.au

Monash University Clayton - Matheson Library

Bain Margaret S. 1979.

Monash University, M.A. (Anthropology)

Title of Thesis, "At the interface: the implications of opposing views of reality."

Margaret identified differences in world view, thinking and language between Aboriginal people and white people.

Margaret's insights were presented to a National Conference (see below) in 2006 by Dr Jan Richardson. Dr Richardson says "Frustration and anger can arise when, despite mutual goodwill, communication breaks down between first-language Indigenous speakers and first-language English speakers. Margaret Bain's research provides new insights into why and offers ways to craft

language that is clear and meaningful in both cultures. Her theory derives from her study of traditional Indigenous and Western cultural use of abstraction. She shows that unless the differences are understood, people can be talking past each other rather than with each other. An example is questions in English that are generalised rather than grounded in the specific, leading to failed consultation. Reframing such questions in culturally-appropriate ways opens the dialogue to allow a successful debate. Achieving positive inter-cultural communication can then allow discussion of complex subjects and deliver social justice in a manner not understood before.”

Dr Jan Richardson (unpublished National Conference paper):

“Effective consultation in remote communities: a new perspective on the language we use”

Presented on November 20 2006 at the National Conference Freemantle Perth for:

AASW-Australian Association of Social Workers, AIWCW-Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers, AASWWE-Australian Association for Social Welfare Workers Education, SPSW-Society for Professional Social Workers.