

1958

NAMATJIRA JAILED UNDER RACIST LAW

Albert Namatjira was the tragic hero of probably Australia's saddest success story. An Aborigine, he rose to fame and fortune through his great talent as a landscape painter, yet is today often remembered around the world for the manner in which he fell from grace.

A full-blooded member of the Aranda tribe, Namatjira was born on 28 July 1902 at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission, some 130 kilometres southwest of Alice Springs.

When only seventeen and with only a rudimentary education, he eloped with a girl named Ilkalita, who belonged to another tribe. His first jobs were as a 'camel boy' with Afghan teamsters and as a stockman and stationhand on various Central Australian camel runs.

In the early 1930s Namatjira was hired by a well-known watercolourist, Rex

Battarbee, to take charge of his camels during a painting trip in the Macdonnell Ranges. Until that time Namatjira's only opportunity for artistic expression had been in manufacturing souvenirs by burning patterns on mulga wood which were sold to tourists to raise funds for the Hermannsburg Mission.

But now, observing Battarbee at work capturing the landscape in subtle watercolours, Namatjira obviously experienced the first stirrings of his latent talent, for soon he asked if he, too, could try his hand at painting. Battarbee, probably intrigued, obliged with watercolours, brushes, paper, and a little advice.

Namatjira's first results were hardly encouraging. Pastor F. W. Albrecht, the Hermannsburg missionary, brought Albert his first paints and took along sixteen of his early works while on a visit to Adelaide, where he offered them for sale at 10 shillings each.

Only four found buyers. But Namatjira persevered. In 1938, Battarbee was sufficiently impressed to exhibit forty-one of Albert's landscapes in Melbourne. This time every one was sold, some for as much as £6 30s. As one successful exhibition followed the other in the State capitals, Namatjira's paintings fetched continually higher prices, some reaching more than £35 by 1944.

Only in 1950 did the artist first experience adulation and luxury when he went on an eight-day visit to Darwin. In 1954 he was presented to the Queen and Prince Philip during their Australian visit as one of the country's most prominent artists.

Namatjira was made a full Australian citizen in 1957, a move some people

regarded as a kind of misguided 'reward' for his success as a painter.

This 'honour', which entitled him, among other things, to live among Europeans and to buy and consume liquor — which was forbidden by law to his family, his full-blooded friends, and fellow tribesmen — became a curse which finally destroyed the fifty-five-year-old artist.

His status separated him from his own people as effectively as it failed to turn him into a 'white' Australian. He could not share a drink with his family or friends; although he was allowed to buy land in Alice Springs, he was never able to live in that 'white' community.

In August 1958, a former Northern Territory journalist, the late Douglas Lockwood, who knew Namatjira well, found him living in 'dismal squalor' in a wurlie and two dirty old tents at Morris Soak near Alice Springs. Wrote Lockwood:

He shares them with a retinue of relatives and dogs. At 60 [sic] Albert's best painting days are over. He is sick. He is drinking heavily and working less... Now his trucks have gone and he is too old to walk. So he sits in the dirt of Morris Soak, dirty and seldom shaved, not knowing what to do... The tragedy of Namatjira is that he was brought up too quickly into the dazzling lights of publicity. He tasted luxuries he couldn't afford, and amenities like liquor for which he had no resistance. He was projected into space and left there — a lost, unhappy wanderer between two worlds.

A few weeks after this report appeared in newspapers all over Australia, Namatjira stood in the dock of the Alice Springs Police Court accused of

‘supplying intoxicating liquor to a native ward’.

The case created headlines around the world. When it ended one Aboriginal pastor, Doug Nicholls, later a Governor of South Australia, publicly posed this question:

Is it a crime for Namatjira to give his friends a drink?... To share with others is one of the customs of the social structure of our people. Because Namatjira shared one of the white man's evils, he is brought to trial and embarrassed before the public...

On appeal, the Northern Territory Supreme Court halved Namatjira's sentence to three months imprisonment, which he served in the open air at the Papunya Aboriginal Reserve, 250 kilometres from Alice Springs.

He was released, a prematurely old and broken man, on 19 May 1959. Two-and-a-half months later he died in the Alice Springs Hospital after suffering a heart attack.

Albert Namatjira was buried in tribal earth the following day, 9 August 1959, at a simple ceremony attended by about 150 Aborigines and a few Europeans. It was conducted by Pastor Albrecht, the man who, almost thirty years earlier, had bought the camel boy his first box of paints.

On his tombstone, a granite block weighing more than two tonnes, there is a simple inscription in the Aranda language. It comes from the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians and, translated, reads, ‘By the grace of God I am what I am.’