

The life and death of an Australian hero, whose skin was the wrong colour

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Arthur Murray died the other day. I turned to Google Australia for tributes, and there was a 1991 obituary of an American ballroom instructor of the same name. There was nothing in the Australian media. The Australian newspaper published a large, ritual image of its proprietor, Rupert Murdoch, handing out awards to his employees. Arthur would have understood the silence.

I first met Arthur a generation ago and knew he was the best kind of trouble. He objected to the cruelty and hypocrisy of white society in a country where his people had lived longer than human beings had lived anywhere. In 1969, he and Leila had brought their family to the town of Wee Waa in outback New South Wales and camped beside the Namoi River. Arthur worked in the cotton fields for a flat rate of A\$1.12 an hour. Only "itinerant blackfellas" were recruited for such a pittance; only whites had unions in the land of "fair go". Having not long been granted the vote, the First Australians were still not counted in the national census – unlike the sheep.

Working conditions in the cotton fields were primitive and dangerous. "The crop-sprayers used to fly so low," Arthur told me, "we had to lie face down in the mud or our heads would've been chopped off. The insecticide was dumped on us, and for days we'd be coughing and chucking it up." In 1973, a Sydney University study reported its "astounded" finding of fish floating dead on the surface of the Namoi River, poisoned by the "utterly mad, uncontrolled" level of spraying, which continued.

Arthur and the cotton-chippers made history. They went on strike, and more than 500 of them marched through Wee Waa. The *Wee Waa Echo* called them "radicals and professional troublemakers", adding that "it is not fanciful to see the Aboriginal problem as the powder keg for Communist aggression in Australia". Abused as "boongs" and "niggers", the Murrays' riverside camp was attacked and the workers' tents smashed or burned down.

Although food was collected for the strikers, hunger united their families. Leila would wake before sunrise to light a wood fire that cooked the little food they had and to heat a 44-gallon drum, cut in half lengthways, and filled with water that the children brought in buckets from the river for their morning bath. With her ancient flat iron she pressed their clothes, so that they went to school "spotless", as she would say.

The enemies Arthur and his comrades made were the Australian equivalent of those standing in the way of Martin Luther King's civil rights campaigners in the United States. They were the police, local politicians, the media. "Who in the town was with you?" I asked Arthur. He thought for a while. "There was a chemist," he said. "who was kind to Aboriginal people. Mostly we were on our own." Soon after the cotton workers won an hourly rate of

A\$1.45, Arthur was arrested for trespassing in the grounds of the Returned Servicemen's Club. His defence shocked the town; it was land rights. All of Australia was Aboriginal land, he said.

On 12 June, 1981, Arthur and Leila's son, Eddie, aged 21, was drinking with some friends in a park in Wee Waa. He was a star footballer confident he would be selected to tour New Zealand with the Redfern All Blacks Rugby League team. At 1.45 pm he was picked up by the police for nothing but drunkenness. Within an hour he was dead in a cell, with a blanket tied round his neck. At the inquest, the coroner described police evidence as "highly suspicious" and their records were found to have been falsified. Eddie, he said, had died "by his own hand or by the hand of a person or persons unknown". It was a craven finding familiar to Aboriginal Australians. Everyone knew Eddie had too much to live for.

Arthur and Leila set out on an extraordinary journey for justice for their son and their people. They endured the ignorance and indifference of white society and its multi-layered political and judicial bureaucracies. They won a royal commission, only to see the royal commissioner, a judge, suddenly appointed to a top government administrative job in the critical final stages of the hearing. They eventually won the right to exhume Eddie's body, and suffered terribly in the process, in order to prove the true cause of death, and they proved it; his sternum had been crushed by a blow while he was alive. And they reaffirmed how common their story was. "They're killing Aboriginal people," Leila told me. "... just killing us." Today, Aborigines are imprisoned at five times the rate of blacks in apartheid South Africa, and their death and suffering in custody is widespread.

In 2000, the New South Wales Police Minister, Paul Whelan, met Arthur and Leila in his office in Sydney and ordered an investigation by a specialist unit, the Police Integrity Commission. He promised them that this "would not be the end of the road". There was no serious inquiry and the minister retired to his stud farm. He has returned none of my calls.

Leila could not read, yet this remarkable woman memorised almost every document and judgement. She died in 2004, broken hearted. Incredibly, Arthur reached the age of 70 when most Aboriginal men are dead by the age of 45. In a typical case this year, CCTV footage in Alice Springs police station showed a policewoman cleaning blood off the floor while a stricken Aboriginal man was left to die. Australia, said Prime Minister Julia Gillard on 26 September, deserves a seat at the top table of the United Nations because it "embraces the high ideals" of the UN. No country since apartheid South Africa has been more condemned by the UN for its racism than Australia.

When I last saw Arthur, we walked down to the Namoi riverbank and he told me how the police in Wee Waa were still frightened to go into the cell where Eddie had died and had pleaded with him to "smoke out" Eddie's spirit. "No bloody way!" Arthur told them.

Peace to all their spirits; justice to all their people.

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