

## **A Cacophony of Mayhem** *Ken Canning (Burruga Gutya)*

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Ken Canning/Burruga Gutya* is from the Kunja Clan of the Bidjara Peoples of south-west Queensland. His language name is Burruga Gutya. Poet and playwright, he started writing over 40 years ago from a prison cell in the old Boggo Road Jail in Brisbane, learning how to read and write from a fellow prisoner. He worked for many years in Aboriginal Education and was a founder and former Academic and Cultural advisor at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning.

### **A CACOPHONY OF MAYHEM**

Winds roaring swirling driving sheets of water stinging into your face.

Bed soaked, in a non-existent space.

Light dark light dark light dark zombied faces stare into nothing.

A scream, piercing haunting, from where you or some other form of detached life.

Voices howling internally and externally demanding your demise by lethal rejection.

A sliver of sun quickly appears, you pray for a touch, for a micro-second of warmth.

The apocalyptic soldiers of all righteousness descend of you, the sinner he who is beneath all form of humanity.

They circle – rushing not waiting for death to deliver you to hell.

Condemned to live in their world of morbidity taking your mind to places way beyond mere punishment until you stare face to face with demons.

Thousands upon thousands of screaming souls pleading release.

They are dead, you are living, yet you mirror each other.

The soldiers of justice reign pure terror upon what is left of you.

They retreat, await, to fulfill their calling.

The guardians of decency of a world you left long ago.

A world you're destined never to return.

### **COLONIALIST PRISONS**

Colonialists globally have used incarceration as a powerful weapon and this country is no different. Indigenous Peoples in Australia are incarcerated and

die in custody at a much higher rate. This in effect means any term in prison for Our Peoples carries with it a possible death sentence. This is a fact we are all too familiar with.

The first impact of invasion was more than 100 years of direct conflict leading to the decimation of Our Peoples at the hands of the colonizer. The fact that we fought back so bravely seems to be lost in history as the colonial monster continues to perpetrate myths about fair treatment. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, when the direct killing slowed, the incarceration rates soared and so did the brutality behind bars.

One area that is not looked at as a death via custodial agents are deaths occurring up to a year after release. Given the above information, it is also not hard to imagine a person being so psychologically damaged as to enact very dangerous behaviour which leads to an early death. This is an effect of custody that is far too often overlooked.

Our Peoples have suffered greatly from being locked away. It is an unusual way for us to survive. Our systems of punishment did not include locking men and women up in tombs of decay. I can speak from first-hand of the cruel treatment handed out to Indigenous prisoners as I was incarcerated in the old Boggo Rd jail in Brisbane during the 1970s.

Although the prison authorities refused to admit it, they were using very old underground cells to punish prisoners. These cells were below the floors of the wing. Once inside, it was pitch black and people were kept there for four days at a time. This may not seem a long time, but you could not see and the air was putrid. It was difficult just to find your toilet. During this time, a prisoner received a ration of bread and water every day. Admittedly, the use of the underground cells were used on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners, but the reasons for placing a person there were vastly different. A non-Indigenous prisoner may be put there for attempted escape or assaulting prison officers. On the other hand, I recall when two young 18-year-old Murries were taken to the underground cells for not cleaning their boots. Nobody had supplied them with boot polish as they had only been in jail for a couple of weeks. These two young men were only doing four- and six-month sentences to begin with. This type of punishment should never have been allowed to go on and within nine months of one of these young men being released, he died by suicide.

The road to jail is one that many people would have never known. In Brisbane, police would pick up either a known Aboriginal activist or

just an intoxicated Aboriginal man who would spend four hours in cells before they were freed. Upon release, they had to sign for their property and the police would disguise a confession under the property sheet. When the person signed for what they thought was property, they had signed a confession, often with charges for unsolved crimes. A signed confession sent many Murries to prison for many years. Some Murri prisoners noticed too many of our men were being convicted on signed statements to crimes they knew nothing about. Word was smuggled out to activists who then lead a campaign to stop this practice.

Incarceration in this country has always been very cruel on all prisoners, but our prisoners seem to be signaled out for extra punishment. The means of punishment themselves are hauntingly violent, such as keeping people locked in the cell at night and then placed in another cage during the day. This is the mind of the oppressor – the type of mindset that has invaded our beautiful country. We have stood bravely against this oppression, but we are yet to be recognized as true resistance warriors. Instead, the colonizer puffs himself up with deeds of taming the land and creating a civilization. Is murder civil? The distorting of history is yet another weapon used by the invaders.

History leaves out their own brutality and leaves an impression that Our Peoples did not defend our lands and were worthless. We were led to believe that when the invader landed, the Peoples living in Sydney just moved inland. Such lies led us as children to ask ourselves why we did not fight back. Generations of Our Peoples had this rubbish pumped into us, leaving us with doubts of our own self-image.

The stealing of children that started in the mid-1800s and continues today has left many families scattered far and wide. Many of the Murries I was in jail with were also stolen from their families, yet our governments still do it. Such a vicious cycle left to run riot in Our Communities with the result of an extremely high incarceration rate. This manner of treatment we are subjected to on a daily basis can only serve to keep us in institutions where we are brutalized to a degree that coming home and living a normal life again is virtually impossible.

In different times, some Communities have been allowed to trial circle sentencing. This has an assumed survivor come before a body of Elders and it is them who direct what happens to an alleged transgressor. On the South Coast of New South Wales and in the Western suburb of Sydney, this type of program has been successful, but government dried up the funding. The

only conclusion to withdrawing funds was that the government wanted to keep their power over our Peoples.

There is no question that some children need to be in a better environment, but Our Peoples have been screaming for years that if a child is having trouble at home they should be placed in the care of a relative or community member. This is not happening and while it continues with the mindless taking of Our children, the outcome has only been disastrous. The reasons for kids being placed with a relative should be made by the community Elders or family members themselves. All too often an ill-informed bureaucrat has a quick look at the situation and children are removed and, at times, never to be seen again. Surely it does not take a mental giant to work out this act is detrimental to all kids. By continuing with these acts, I can only conclude it is intentional, a mechanism to provide more clients for Corrective Services.

After 231 years of colonial oppression in Australia and personally being in the forefront of the prison and welfare, I feel strongly that these two institutions should be abolished. The welfare system is intrinsically connected to the carceral penal system and does insurmountable harm. They are a dismal failure to any persons, but particularly to Our Peoples.