

## Central Queensland University, Australia

### Bronwyn Fredericks

#### 40 years ago, 40 years since: The Tent Embassy

##### Biographical note:

Bronwyn Fredericks is an Aboriginal Australian woman from South-East Queensland (Ipswich/ Brisbane). Her published work includes chapters, articles, prose, poetry, critiques and commentaries in a range of areas including education, health, arts practice, gender and race relations and community development. She has been invited to submit to a number of prestigious international journals including *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*; *Outskirts: feminisms along the edge* 23; and *Cultural Studies Review*; and numerous others. Bronwyn also orally presents her work. For example, last year she was invited to speak at the *Festival of Dangerous Ideas* at the Sydney Opera House and at Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi (Indigenous University), Whakatane, New Zealand. Bronwyn Fredericks, PhD, is a Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement), BMA Chair in Indigenous Engagement and President of Academic Board at CQUniversity, Australia.

##### Keywords:

creative writing – poetry – Indigenous - Aboriginal – Embassy

## **40 years ago, 40 years since: The Tent Embassy**

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

The Tent Embassy

Embassy of

The Aboriginal People

The Indigenous People

First Nations People

Of this

Land

Country

Our Country

Our People

Us People

US

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

The McMahon Coalition Government

Issued its intent

‘Aboriginal Policy’

25 January

No admission of land rights

Rejected land rights

No compensation

No recognition

Mining allowed on Aboriginal reserves

Rejection of the Gurindji Land Claim

Not treated the same

Aboriginal infant mortality 17 times the national average

Not getting to the same old age

Feelings of anger and unhappiness

No legislative kindness

Unrecognised sovereignty

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

4 motivated and impassioned men

Aboriginal men

Michael Anderson

Billy Craigie

Tony Coorey

Bertie Williams

From Sydney to Canberra they went

Business they meant

Planted a beach umbrella

On lawns of green

In full view to be seen

Opposite the house

Of Government power

White, monolithic building

Steps derived of Westminster

Politics of domination

A history of colonisation

A colonial past

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

The Sign read

'Aboriginal Embassy'

Proud and loud

'Enough' as the shroud

Canvass tents were established

Symbols of poverty and impermanence

That offered little sustenance

Others arrived

2000 or more

Campaigning and yelling

Passion filled to the core

'Land Rights Now'

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

Standing in solidarity

No doubts in clarity

Leaders developed and grew

Invigorating the movement anew

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

Stalwarts in

Hot, cold, wet, dry,

Wind and snow

Police forever present

The public resent

Ripped down the tents

Arrested people

Captured on film

The public enraged

People engaged:

Disenfranchisement

Landless

Alienated

Non-recognition

Marginalisation

Aboriginal people

Indigenous people

Us people

US

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

Canvases established, maintained and sustained

Camped out

Sweaters, jumpers and scarves throughout

Cans of soup, baked beans and spaghetti

Bread, butter, vegemite and jam

Bully beef, stew and spam

Eaten by the people

Brothers and sisters in the struggle

Resistance warriors

Bound under a flag

Roger Thomas' design

Black, red and yellow

And every colour of Country

Sovereignty of all

Developed to bind collective hearts and spirits

Sit down, stand up assembled

Day in Day Out

Week in Week Out

Year in Year Out

1972  
40 Years Ago  
40 Years Since  
Much has happened  
Launches on the lawn  
A Marriage of two  
Tents and buildings  
Removed and re-erected  
A permanent fixture built (1992)  
Heritage listed site (1995)  
For all to remember  
Every 26 January the Corroboree for Sovereignty  
We stand still, dance and sing to remember  
3 of the original 4 men are no longer with us  
Their history is also of us  
Lighting of the Sacred Fire (1998)  
Guardians maintain the fire's fuel  
We still maintain the fight  
We can't loose sight  
The ongoing passion  
To end discrimination  
Continuation of the struggle

1972  
40 Years Ago  
40 Years Since  
When you go to the Tent Embassy  
The Embassy of Aboriginal people  
First Nations people  
Us people  
Us  
Take gum leaves with you  
Add them to the Sacred fire  
Not just for 1972  
But for all that has been since then  
Of the four of them  
Of us, me, you  
And all that it is still yet to be  
And it will be  
The Tent Embassy isn't going anywhere  
And neither are we

## Research statement

### *Research background*

On 26 January 1972, four Aboriginal men formed the site that became the Aboriginal (or Tent) Embassy (Koori History Web Site 2012). The Tent Embassy represents one of the most significant movements for Indigenous land rights in Australia and remains a powerful symbol of unity. This creative non-fiction poem attempts to unite readers around 2012's National Aborigines and Islanders Observance Day Committee (NAIDOC) theme of 'The Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 Years On'.

### *Research contribution*

This work explores how historical events can inspire creative non-fiction text. It contains documented evidence of real people and events from the last forty years. The use of interchangeable voices offer authoritative overtones in regards to the references to policy, the police and government, while other forms of voice offer lightness in relation to the social elements of people within place, highlighting how both first person and collective voices can be used interchangeably within a repetitive verse.

### *Research significance*

This work was created for both text and performance and was performed live at the opening of the Capricornia Arts Mob's NAIDOC Exhibition on 2 July 2012 (CQUniversity 2012), which was attended by over 150 people. The author also recorded this work in a theatrically-staged performance as if she was sitting at the Tent Embassy in 1972. The recording was installed in the Walter Reid Gallery, Rockhampton, Queensland (2-10 July 2012).

## Works cited

CQUniversity 2012 'Bringing together the old and the new, NAIDOC art exhibition opens'  
<http://uninews.cqu.edu.au/UniNews/viewStory.do?story=9581> (accessed 2 September 2012)

Koori History Web Site 2012 *Aboriginal Embassy January–July 1972*  
<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/emb72/embassyindex.html> (accessed 2 September 2012)