

The Rags to Riches Story continued



Travelling from Perth to Sydney on the Indian Pacific railway, I asked the attendant if there was a viewing platform to see the carriages in front and behind me as it goes round bends. "You'll be lucky to see the front of the train", he laughed. "This track's as straight as a drongo's dingaloo". He was right. For hundreds of miles, the Nullabor's landscape is flat, with barren red soil, clumps of bluebush, spinifex and scattered rocks. With no shade, it is one of the most forbidding expanses on earth. This has nothing to do with the story, only serving to set the scene.

Our cabins for three nights were compactly arranged. The table and seats became the bed squeezed behind the toilet and folding basin. My friend Yvette was across the corridor, so narrow that two people couldn't pass without stepping into a cabin. The dining car was several miles away.

Returning from lunch, Yvette noticed the elderly gentleman in the cabin behind mine was sitting in the same position as when we had left. She asked him if he had eaten but he said he didn't know if he would be allowed to eat with everyone else.

Brian was an Aboriginal Elder. Over the next few hours he told us his story. Brian was playing in the bush with his sister when he heard a noise. Too late to run away, he was swept up by a big white man and taken to the Mission. He never saw his family again. Brian explained that Aborigines were classified as flora and fauna and were treated worse than animals. When he was older he was put to work in the mines in Kalgoorlie. It was hot and dark and they toiled over long hours in inhuman conditions. Many miners fell to their deaths down mine shafts or were trapped in machinery, some because of the treacherous

terrain but others because they were too exhausted to stay awake. We saw the poignant roll call of names when we stopped at Broken Hill.

Eventually, the Australian government gave Aborigines parcels of land as compensation. Brian mined his land and speculating for gold brought him prosperity. He set up schools for First Nation's children in Western Australia to teach them about survival skills in the bush and about their native language to try and preserve their heritage. He had won awards for his work and now he decided to reward himself by going to Sydney on the Indian Pacific Railway to visit the library.

That evening we persuaded Brian to join us for dinner. As we entered the dining car the room fell silent but undeterred we sat down and ordered our meals. Gradually people stopped to talk to him. By the end of the journey, Brian had become popular with passengers listening attentively to his stories, hardly being able to believe the way First Nations people had been treated, all within our lifetime and sadly still are discriminated to some extent.