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Speeches – The Hon; Jenny Macklin MP

Launch of Written in the Land: the Life of Queenie McKenzie

24/11/2008

Canberra

I would first like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land.

And I want to acknowledge the contribution made by Argyle Diamonds – the first major company to make Aboriginal employment a priority and a supporter of the book.

And Peter Woodgate here today from the Cooperative Research Centre for Spatial Information and a great supporter of the cultural mapping project – developed as a result of the book.

I would also like to welcome the author, Jennifer Joi Field – and to say what a privilege it is to have the senior women from Warmun with us today, especially Peggy Patrick and Shirley Purdie.

This book is a significant accomplishment.

It is not only a tribute to Queenie McKenzie – to Queenie as a painter, as a traditional Law woman and as a custodian of the Barramundi Dreaming site.

It is also a celebration of the people and culture of the Kimberley – particularly the Warmun community.

It is an oral history – in a beautifully printed format – of the love of country, the loss of land, and the rebuilding of culture.

It celebrates the magnificence of the landscape and the unfolding of a major Aboriginal artist.

Queenie was born in the early 1920s on Texas Downs Station – a vast cattle station that had been settled by white pastoralists in the 1800s.

Her mother Dinah was a traditional Law woman, and her father Roy, a white horse breaker from Queensland.

Queenie had several names – her skin name was Nagarra but as her father was from Queensland she was also called Queenie.

In these early years, the police were frequent visitors to take the children who had been fathered by white men, but Dinah was vigilant in her protection of Queenie.

The station had a variety of bosses over the years.

One, Jimmy Klein, was most respected, – he provided work for the Aboriginal people: mustering, cleaning, cooking, clearing, building.

It was through the mustering that Queenie and others could keep visiting their country and continue teaching the young people the Dreamtime stories for each place.

Dinah passed on her teaching and her leadership role to Queenie, who ultimately became the Law Woman of the East Kimberley.

When Jimmy Klein retired from stock work and moved to Turkey Creek – now known as Warmun – a lot of the people moved with him, including Queenie and her husband Charlie McKenzie.

Queenie played a critical leadership role, helping the community stick together and deal with their problems.

Remarkably she was in her seventies when she started to paint.

Queenie used to watch her friend Rover Thomas paint, and that made her think about doing her own.

As the author Jennifer Joi Field says in the book, to Aboriginal people painting is not just about producing a work of art, it is a journey back to their land.

For some, it is the only way they can return to those places. And it was a way for Queenie to return to Texas Downs.

Many of Queenie's paintings are autobiographical, showing episodes of her life on the remote cattle stations of the East Kimberley.

And always present is the remarkable topography of the Kimberley landscape.

It is ten years since Queenie died. Her death was a great loss to the whole community at Warmun particularly the Gija women.

However, Jennifer – who had spent many years working with the Gija women – realised that Queenie's legacy could help the women get through this tough time.

In fact Queenie herself had bestowed on Jennifer her same Skin name, Nagarra, thus ensuring that these expectations were met.

So in 2002 Jennifer knew that she had to keep alive Queenie's memory and the women's culture.

When she began work on the book with Gija women, Peggy Patrick demanded of her: 'Don't

you let them do that thing where we only get \$10 a month!

Too often, their stories have been stolen – and the returns almost non-existent.

So Jennifer went to publishers on the proviso that the Ngali Ngalim Purru Warmun women's cultural group – which was set up to be the recipients of the book – would get a minimum of \$35,000 plus substantial royalties.

And she found one – Melbourne Books. Publisher David Tenenbaum was very responsive and willing to negotiate a deal.

So this wonderful publication does two things: it gives the women a proper return for the telling of their stories.

And it is a catalyst for the women to feel proud and to rebuild their cultural strength – to reclaim the law that has languished since Queenie's death.

This book has been six years in the making. It owes much to anthropologist Patricia Vinnicombe, a friend and colleague of Jennifer's.

But it has principally come about because of Jennifer's dedication to the Gija people of the Kimberley, her love and admiration of Queenie and her dogged resolve to tell the story.

Congratulations Jennifer. And I take great pleasure in launching *Written in the Land: the Life of Queenie McKenzie*.

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