

Clancy & Dooley & Don Mcleod

Shane Howard

Lyrics and album liner notes. © Shane Howard 2010
(Big Heart Music/Mushroom Music)

Come and listen to my story,
It's a mighty tale indeed
Of bravery and decency
against self interest and greed
North West Australia, the mighty Pilbara
Meekatharra, Nullagine,
De Gray and Marble Bar

The squatters ruled that country
and they ruled supreme
Livin' there like feudal lords
with native slavery
You were livin' by the river,
no wages for your work
'Where's the future for our children
It's their country after all'

The sound of freedom
Carried on the wind
The sound of freedom,
In the way the old one's sing
Remember

At the place they call Skull Springs,
the desert lawmen came
They travelled in from far and wide,
some a thousand miles away
There they sat in council,
there they spoke the law
They named McLeod a spokesman
for the future they foresaw
Then they parted. Fadin' in the heat.
They were travellin' into history.
Remember

*You can't deny a man
when the truth is where he stands.
But don't put flowers on his grave
Help him now.
If you're goin' to start a job,
Better be prepared to follow through,
Said Clancey and Dooley and Don McLeod*

Word spread to Marble bar,
Meekatharra too,
Nullagine, De Grey and then clear down the Fortescue.
May 1 was the day, Nineteen Forty Six,
800 native workers walked away from the squatters tricks.

The sound of freedom
Carried on the wind
The sound of freedom,
In the way the people sing
Remember

Station after station
Dooley spread the word
By foot and bike he spread the strike
While Clancy battled on.
McLeod worked on the wharves
Savin' wages he didn't need,
To send supplies to the strikers,
Things like flour and sugar and tea

The sound of freedom
It was ringin' in the wind
The sound of freedom,
In the way the people sing.
Remember.

*You can't deny a man
when the truth is where he stands.
But don't put flowers on his grave
Help him now.
If you're goin' to start a job,
Better be prepared to follow through,
Said Clancey and Dooley and Don McLeod*

Injustice upon injustice,
Things got really tough.
But everyone still stuck together
When the going got too rough.
The police did the squatters squabbling
Standin' over peoples rights
"The blacks'll never stick it out
It's just a war of words"

But Clancy and Dooley were hard,
They knew they had to be.
There were hundreds of people
For whom they had responsibility.
The unions got involved, the Maritime Union crew,
"We defend the right of our native brothers to equal wages too".

The sound of freedom,
It was ringin' in the wind.

The song was freedom,
 In the songs the people sing.
 Remember.

*You can't deny a man
 when the truth is where he stands.
 But don't put flowers on his grave
 Help him now.
 If you're goin' to start a job,
 Better be prepared to follow through,
 Said Clancey and Dooley and Don McLeod*

They had to stick it out,
 They had to find a way.
 Somethin' better for their people
 Than to live their lives as slaves.
 They threatened Don McLeod
 And he took them on.
 The Workers Star reported all the seedy goings on.

The years came and went,
 The people toughed it out.
 'We'd rather hunt and yandy
 Than be slaves to live in doubt'
 Out of sight and out of mind,
 No happy ending here.
 Betrayal after betrayal,
 Slowly wearied by the years.

I was thinkin' of Noonkanbah,
 Thinkin' about Wave Hill,
 Thinkin' of all the people
 Who are strugglin' out there still.

Let the sound of freedom
 Keep ringin' in the wind.
 The sound of freedom,
 In the way the old ones sing.
 Remember.

*You can't deny a man
 when the truth is where he stands
 But don't put flowers on his grave
 Help him now
 If you're goin' to start a job
 Better be prepared to follow through
 Said Clancey and Dooley and Don McLeod.
 Just like Clancey and Dooley and Don McLeod.*

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The Western Australian Aboriginal Pastoral Workers Strike of 1946

In 1942, on the western side of the Pilbara, Western Australia, a great meeting of the Aboriginal desert law men was organised by Dooley Bin Bin and Clancey McKenna. Over 200 people attended, some travelling thousands of kilometres, from as far away as Halls Creek, Darwin and Alice Springs. There, at Skull Springs, they sat in council to discuss the shameful conditions that their people were living under, all through that central and western desert country. The meeting lasted for six weeks. There were 23 languages spoken and 16 interpreters.

One whitefella, the prospector Don McLeod, was invited to that meeting. McLeod was one of the first whitefellas to be born in Marble Bar, one of the most remote towns in Australia. He'd been invited because of the help he'd once given an Aboriginal elder who needed to be taken to hospital. None of the whitefellas at the time would help to transport him, but McLeod took him as a matter of course and thought nothing more of it. His empathy was noted and as a result he was summoned to attend the great desert council.

The people discussed what they could do to improve the future for their children. Work and living conditions were appalling for all Aboriginal people at the time but in the Pilbara, being so remote, it was particularly harsh and 'out of sight and out of mind'. Aboriginal people were under the Native Administration Act and they were slaves in their own country. No wages, no housing, no freedom of movement and meagre rations. McLeod was appointed executor and the group became known as The Mob.

The people waited until the World War II ended, but on 1 May 1946, 800 Aboriginal workers went on strike and walked off sheep stations in the north-west of Western Australia. Under the guidance of McLeod, Bin Bin and McKenna, the strike was well organised and initially stunned the authorities. All three were arrested and jailed and persecuted. Although the strike effectively lasted for at least three years, it never officially ended.

But the strike was about much more than 30/- a week wages and better conditions. They began agitating for rights, dignity and proper entitlements in their own country.

In order to survive away from the stations, The Mob established their own camps and traded kangaroo and goat skins. Initially under Don McLeod's direction, they began alluvial mining with yandys until they could afford equipment. Ironically, their successful mining operations drew attention to the mineral wealth of the Pilbara. They supported themselves this way for over 20 years, acquired three stations, established schools and began developing a way of life based on Aboriginal communal organisation.

The Mob had solid supporters like the Communist Party, some of the churches, women's groups and a small group of artists. The Fremantle branch of the Seamen's Union refused to load the squatters' wool on boats while the strike was on and eventually the Australian Workers Union supported the Mob's claims for wages and better conditions.

When Western Australia was first established as a State by the settlers, the constitution made provision for a small percentage of State revenue to be allocated for Aboriginal people. McLeod turned bush lawyer and went on to argue that this had been illegally changed and continued to agitate for restitution for the West's Aboriginal population.

He also went on to support other actions for justice for Aboriginal people, including the fight against oil drilling on Aboriginal land at Noonkanbah in the Kimberley region of WA in the late 1970s.

At one level the strike collapsed, but like the Eureka Stockade, it was a victory won from a battle lost. Many gains were made. There are so many characters in this heroic story that this song is not enough to give a full picture of the remarkable efforts by a small group of disempowered people. There was Peter Coppin, the songman Donald Norman, Daisy Bindi, Ernie Mitchell and so many more heroes of this struggle and they can take credit for giving birth to the Aboriginal Land Rights movement and inspiring the Gurindji walk off at Wave Hill in the 1960's.

In the foreword to Max Brown's book, *Black Eureka*, the writer Dorothy Hewett wrote, 'A little mob of Nor'-West Aborigines without status, funds, or human rights, challenged the feudal strongholds of squatters, missions, courts, newspaper barons and governments, all the way up to the United Nations. It is a classic story of the underdog and his uncountable resources. It records the birth of the militant Aboriginal movement and it is part of Australian history now.'

This is one of the remarkable stories of Australian history that should be taught to our school children, as a chapter we should never forget.

Remember.

Resources:

How The West Was Lost - Don McLeod - Book

How The West Was Lost - Ronin Films - Director/Producer: David Noakes - DVD

Black Eureka - Max Brown - Book

Yandy - Donald Stuart - Book

'Clancey & Dooley & Don McLeod' - Dorothy Hewett - Poem

Taruru - C. G. von Brandenstein & A. P. Thomas - Pilbara Song Poetry - Book

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