

FOREWORD

A memory of *Old Man's Story* — Big Bill Neidjie — My great uncle

Not only is this a rare opportunity, but it is an honour and an enormous privilege to write the foreword for a book of such significant spiritual history that still lives today.

I say thank you to Big Bill Neidjie, my great uncle, not only for your teachings over the decades but your passion and resilience in ensuring your stories are passed on to future generations. I honour you.

Every time I arrive back home in Bunitj Country, in Kakadu, I think and feel about the connection to country and how the land and its habitat identifies us with a complete sense of oneness, how it is all dedicated to maintaining an order, and a balance.

Old Man told me about where I'm from and what my inherited responsibilities would be. He reminded me that to be Aboriginal is to be the land and everything around it and on it. He used to say:

'My children got to hang onto this story. This important story, I hang onto this story all my life, my father tell me this story, my children can't lose it.'

I've always held onto those times with Old Man in a special place; close to my heart, close to my spirit. Whenever the thunder rolls and crashes, I'm reminded of his voice. Sitting there with him looking out over the Magela flood plains, this deep voice, filled with authority, would fit just in the right way with the scenes and the things he was describing.

I was reminded how we all have to return home one day to take up our responsibilities. I always feel this huge obligation but nonetheless I have a real sense of pride and it's one that I'm proud to maintain.

It would not be possible to continue the cultural practices and pass these stories on without Big Bill. He has enabled us to do that.

He taught me that our duties take many forms and is lived every day of our lives. He used to say it is important to teach the sacred knowledge to each new generation and that this learning is absorbed over a lifetime through the teachings and examples of the elders and in a series of ceremonies.

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I felt like I belonged when he spoke to me. He told me about my place in the landscape, my place in country.

The sounds, the colours, the special stories of special places just flowed from him. He was both inspirational and at times intimidating by demanding authority about the ‘humbug’ world destroying our cultural inherited responsibilities.

But most of all he was gentle yet he sounded so powerful. He lived a proud and often very tough life. He possessed great presence and he walked tall — not for nothing was he known as ‘Big Bill’.

‘Look at your country, your people’s country. You can see it and you can feel it.’

Throughout my career as an athlete, advocate and now as a Senator in the Australian Parliament, I’ve held those times close and used them as both a guide and strength to know what it is I am standing for as an Aboriginal woman in Parliament.

There are many great Australians, past and present that have shaped our views of Australia. But for me, the voice of Old Man remains the most insightful and dignified measure of what makes the land so vital. He understood what country means and how important it is to sustain our tradition.

Big Bill spoke for the Earth. Ma, Bor bor.

Senator Nova Peris OAM

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