



Jack Featherstone

Adventurer, dental surgeon, friend to Indigenous peoples and intrepid walker. He paints from his life and spins a great yarn.

First words from Merrie Hamilton ...

The first time that I went into Jack Featherstone's home, he was working on a canvas — heavy calico, six-foot long and one-foot wide, and he was painting it on the floor.

In front of where he was working he had a cushion, his paints and brushes and other things, and I thought, "My goodness, here's a man in his early 80s, kneeling on the floor to do a painting. This is someone who is really serious and this is very special".

Over the months we became more friendly and eventually I asked him if he would have a retrospective at the next Two Fires Festival because I work on the Indigenous Stream of Two Fires.

He said, "I'm not indigenous". I said, "I know you're not but you've had a long and illustrious professional career working with Indigenous people and for Indigenous people in dental health. I don't think anyone will mind if we have you in the Indigenous stream".

At first he was very rigid about what he would show; he seemed to feel that he had to have things in the show that had Indigenous content or an Indigenous link somehow. But he did eventually free up a bit and included in the show, which goes right through the Centre, 62 works.

It is a lifetime of painting. He started painting as a passionate amateur in 1966 and he sold works but a lot of the works he made are here.

My involvement with Indigenous people began in 1957 when I led a scientific expedition into Central Australia in a VW beetle. That beetle had oversized tractor tyres and the critics of the Volkswagen said it was an enclosed motorbike with a wheel in each corner. I repeated that little trip in '58 and went across the Nullarbor which was still a dirt road. And then up the Warburton Track.

On this trip we got to in contact with the Pitjantjatjara and on a third expedition in Arnhem Land, we contacted the Escarpment people. At Warburton, the superintendent of the Mission, which as at that time the most isolated mission station in the world, said, "You want a guide — take David".

David's job was to take me across the Gibson Desert and bring me back. When we got to Ernest Gilles waterhole, David said, "We can't camp here boss. We can't camp here. Spirits. When I was a boy of four I saw my grandmother speared to death. She had so many spears through her she looked like a gum tree. Can't camp here boss, can't camp here".

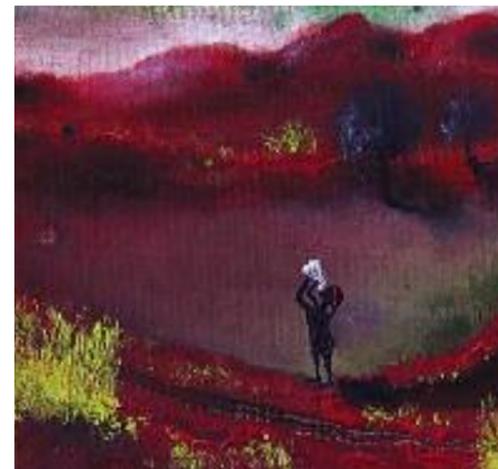
He came to me and said, "Boss do you mind if I pray?". And the painting is David's prayer. He put his head on the sand for half an hour. The moon was coming up over the Spinifex. He then stood up to his full height and said, "Boss, I'm alright now. We can camp here".

The poor old Volkswagen broke its back. It had half a ton in it. The front wheels were out of alignment — one wheel went this way and the other went that way. It was impossible to do a right hand turn. David said, "Me get help boss. Me walk, me know rock hole. Me come back with help. Me take rifle. Me take kangaroo leg".

He stuck the leg under his arm and he walked off just 10 yards and then he came back and said, "Boss, I just want to say two words: be strong". Then off he went. After two days, I got the car going and followed David's footsteps in the sand because the track petered out — it wasn't very distinct.

I came across a terrible mob of sandhills and I slid down one sandhill — a beautiful feeling — and there right in the middle of the track was a black stump. I would have to go around that black stump. As I approached it, the branches started to move and then I saw two white eyes right in the middle of the stump.

It was David. He ran up to me and threw his arms around me and said,



DETAIL FROM 'DAVID'S THIRST' (LEFT) AND THE SLEEPING PLATFORM BESIDE THE RIVER IN 'ARNHEM LAND' (RIGHT).

JACK WITH MERRIE HAMILTON AT THE BRAG SHOW OPENING.

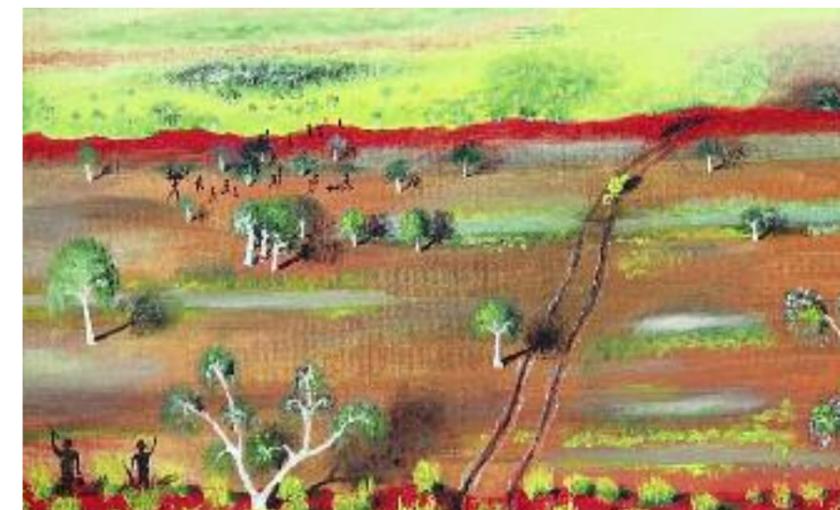
"Boss am I pleased to see you". He said, "I'm very thirsty, I couldn't find water. Have you got water?". The painting is David's thirst. He swallowed a gallon. I don't think he actually swallowed, he just tipped it back. That was David's thirst. Eventually the poor old Volksie packed up completely. So we then transferred to a Landrover and trailer.

Another time I went on a trip to Arnhem Land. And we had to cross this river. I said, "Well can't we go round it?". With me I had four Indigenous carriers with the traditional stuff on their heads. And they said, "No mate we have to go across it. Righto boss you go in first".

Audience interjection: Were there crocodiles in that river?

They said, "You go in first and the water will come up to here [gestures to his neck]. This is all done in pidgin and sign language. "We will surround you, the four of us, but when you hit the water you move. Don't stand there and light a gag — move!".

'DAVID'S AND DARKIE'S TRIUMPH'.



I trusted them and that is exactly what we did. I hit the water surrounded by four blacks carrying everything on their heads and with their other hand, splashing the water as hard as they could. We got to the other side and you never saw four happier blacks. They speared goanna and then someone said, "Give me rifle boss". He shot

a bird on the wing and we had that bird for lunch. But there was tragedy about to unfold. We were all sleeping on these platforms. There's three here and two there [shown on the painting]. They were talking to themselves, beautifully, a beautiful Aboriginal language and it was lovely to listen to in the pristine environment.

All of a sudden they stopped. Just like that, they stopped. And I said, "What's wrong?". They said, "If that cloud covers that Evening Star, some man die tonight". They said, "You have the torch, you have the .303 carbine. When it gets dark you sweep that torch up and down the river until you see the two little purple eyes looking at you and you put that bullet straight between his eyes. That was my job.

The next day. Malaria took hold of me and I couldn't get off the platform. They thought that was the greatest joke of all time. "Silly bugger white-fella, he can't get off the platform".

We got as far as here [shows on the painting], fall down, stand up, fall down — then a miracle occurred. Out of the bush comes a ten year-old Aboriginal boy built like the infant,