



# Great Queensland Women From Our Past

## Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920 - 1993)

### Audio transcript

You do realise that at this period, the Aboriginal population have not got the vote, and the woman who's hugely important in them getting the vote is Kath Walker, who will later change her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, which is the tribe of her father's people on Stradbroke Island.

She left school at 14 to become a maid in a Brisbane home, although she was a very clever girl, she could easily have gone onto university. Kath gained her education during World War II in the Australian Army. They taught her to type, they taught her the skills of being a telephonist, of being well-presented, and this was good as she had had no chance. She was a very clever, talented woman, but all she could do was domestic service, because that was all Aboriginal people were allowed to do.

After the war, she comes out of the army, and once again, she can't get a job even with her skills, she goes to work for the Cilento family. She's married, she's got two children, difficult to work with children at that period, no childcare, nothing. The Cilentos really help her. They lend her books, they encourage her to think for herself, and she starts writing poetry, and they send her poetry to Judith Wright, the poet, who sees a woman of extraordinary talent as a poet, and helps her.

Her book, first book of poems is published by the University of Queensland Press. She goes on air, people love her poetry, she talks about peaceful reconciliation, and she talks about how important it is to be seen as people, they have to get the vote.

She goes to Canberra to see (Prime Minister) Menzies in her deputation, and the women in the deputation are herself and Faith Bandler. Now they're talking to Menzies, and they are getting absolutely nowhere. They go out in the half-time break, and there are drinks all laid out on a table, and Menzies says "Oh Kath, what will you have? Will you have a whisky or a beer?" And she says "Mr Prime Minister, if I accepted your offer in Queensland, I would be in jail", and this absolutely shakes Menzies, and he goes back into the second session, and he is really amenable, and easy to deal with. And they get passed through that there will be a referendum among the Australian people, and the referendum is passed.

Important social measure that Kath Walker is in the forefront of, and she becomes very popular at writer's festivals overseas, in Europe and in China and in America. She becomes the grand old woman of Stradbroke Island. She's also an artist - she sets up an Aboriginal cultural centre, *Moongalba*, on Stradbroke Island, and it is there that she was buried.