

## Ruby Langford Ginibi: Bundjalung Historian, Writer and Educator

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**Abstract:** The chapter considers the leadership of Ruby Langford Ginibi, whose writings recorded the history of the Bundjalung people of the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales. She became prominent in national debates on Indigenous issues from the publication in 1988 of her autobiography, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* until her death in 2011. Langford Ginibi was an effective voice in the attempt to persuade non-Aboriginal Australians to acknowledge the oppressive character of settler colonialism and its outcome in negative aspects of many Indigenous Australians' lives in contemporary Australia. Above all, she drove understanding of the precariousness Indigenous peoples' livelihoods and the social wellbeing of their families when they left impoverished communities to seek waged work in far flung rural and in urban environments. Through her numerous publications, her research, public talks and interviews, Langford Ginibi made a major contribution to Australia that was recognized by numerous prestigious awards and an honorary doctorate. In 2012, a special issue of the *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* commemorated her achievements.

**Key words:** Aboriginal historians, Aboriginal writers, Indigenous rights, Bundjalung people, human rights, social justice

In 1988 a Bundjalung woman, Ruby Langford (later Ruby Langford Ginibi), published her autobiography *Don't Take Your Love to Town* to considerable applause, including the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Award for Literature.<sup>1</sup> Encouraged that she had an audience open to the story of the fraught life situations of Indigenous people, Langford Ginibi continued to produce works that informed non-Indigenous Australians about the past experiences of her people until shortly before her death in October 2011. Her prolific writing in this period included historical and biographical studies, short stories and poetry.<sup>2</sup> Numbers of scholars have considered Langford Ginibi as a writer who offered unflinching insight into the difficulties of her own life and the life experiences of other Indigenous people, Suvendrini Perera, Carole Ferrier and Penny van Toorn among them.<sup>3</sup> This chapter stresses the significance of Langford Ginibi as a woman leader in the writing of twentieth-century Australian history who, from the speaking position of a Bundjalung woman, brought the past experiences of Indigenous

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people into wider national debates on the nature of settler colonialism in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

In an article in the *Indigenous Law Review* in 2006 the Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins, who served as co-chair of Reconciliation Australia and as a commissioner for the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, reflected personally on the ways Aboriginal women lead. The responsibilities of women's leadership in Indigenous communities, she wrote, were 'all-encompassing, incorporating everything from dealing with domestic violence to sending the children to school. Just identifying the extent of these responsibilities is exhausting'.<sup>5</sup> She had found the hardest step was putting herself 'out there' in the first place, but her family had kept her grounded so that 'none of this goes to my head or changes me at the core'. Indigenous women leaders needed to be mindful of advice from their communities and to sustain a collaborative approach that always acknowledged the importance of elders' knowledge. She would find it all much harder without the support of family, of women generally, and of her Indigenous and non-Indigenous fellow workers. 'I draw on them for comfort, support and nourishment all the time,'<sup>6</sup> she said.

Huggins, who notably co-wrote with her mother about her mother's life, has held a respected place within and without the tertiary sector.<sup>7</sup> Langford Ginibi's leadership also arose from personal writing, but she wrote history from outside the academy. Nevertheless, her writing attracted recognition in tertiary circles as well as from a public receptive of Indigenous rights' issues. This chapter considers Langford Ginibi's narrative of Bundjalung people's material survival and Indigenous identity in post World War II Australia at a crucial time when many Indigenous people moved away from reserves and missions to towns and cities. After a brief consideration of Aboriginal women's waged work options in the south-eastern states during this period, the chapter outlines Langford Ginibi's depiction in her 1988 autobiography of her struggle in rural and urban contexts to keep herself and her children sheltered, fed and clothed. It then focuses on her 1994 publication, *My Bundjalung People*, in which she outlines the memories and experiences of those of her extended family and friends who stayed more closely connected to the former missions on Bundjalung country.

### **Making a life**

Ruby Langford Ginibi's autobiography, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, published by Penguin in 1988 and republished by Queensland University Press in 2007, related her experiences as an Indigenous woman working to keep herself and her children in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Langford Ginibi

was born Ruby Maude Anderson on 26 January 1934 at the Box Ridge Mission near Coraki, a small town on the Richmond River in the Northern River region of New South Wales. She took the surname Langford after her marriage to Peter Langford, the father of two of her children; Ginibi was a clan name that a Bundjalung elder bestowed on her in 1990. Her childhood was a difficult one after her mother left the family when Langford Ginibi was six years of age. Thereafter her father provided the best care he could for his three young daughters, eventually taking them to the bush site near Coonabarabran where he worked to protect them from being taken away by welfare officers. She attended primary school in Bonalbo, followed by two years of high school in Casino. At fifteen years of age she worked briefly caring for the child of farmers before her father took the family to Sydney, where she began a working life in earnest. She found jobs in casual cleaning, as a chambermaid in a hotel, and then sewing in a trouser factory where she became a skilful machinist.<sup>8</sup>

In 1951 at the age of seventeen years Langford Ginibi gave birth to her first child and moved with her partner Sam Griffin and their baby to find work outback New South Wales. Work in the city was uncertain for Indigenous men and women alike. Steady employment in a factory as Langford Ginibi first acquired was a seldom-realised ambition. Young women educated on the missions might gain access to white-collar work or a factory position, but most Indigenous women found themselves confined to such openings as laundry work and cleaning on temporary and sporadic contracts. They often had children for whom they carried the main responsibility and hence needed to seek childcare. In household work and casual cleaning they might be able to take a young child with them or if fortunate they might have a relation or close friend who could offer help; they worked if possible while their older children were in school. They seldom lived in homes where they could undertake outwork, as many migrant women did, even if they had resources to buy the necessary equipment such as sewing machines.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous women often had to take whatever work they could find.

Indigenous working mothers' wages, while low, were essential to sustain household economies. The women seldom had much choice about whether to work, or what kind of occupation to take, and had no time to gain training or education. Most of these mothers were the principal carers of their children, and the providers of multiple family services: freedom to enter the workforce meant 'freedom' to take on an extra job. In general, the aspirations they held related to their children, not to themselves. Their coping mechanisms for hard, alienating low-paid work lay in their identification as 'mothers'. But these uncertain and often unpleasant jobs were the norm for indigenous married women if they could obtain employment at all. The conditions for all lower-paid working mothers remained problematic, but for none were circumstances

as severe as they were for Aboriginal women. For periods of time partners contributed to the family upkeep but not infrequently they left to seek work elsewhere and could offer no systematic help. In their absence, the women made do through whatever state help they could access, their own exertions and eventually those of the oldest children, falling back on members of the extended family group; they also supported relatives in turn.<sup>10</sup>

The decision of Langford Ginibi and her partner to seek rural work mirrored the choices made by many other Indigenous people who left reserves either permanently or for the summer to escape the entrenched poverty of reserve life and the oppressive constraints of government regulation. Very often Indigenous people found jobs in intensive seasonal and temporary rural sector. The need for women's skills and employment was complicated by the uncertainty of Indigenous men's work prospects and the compelling need for women, usually responsible for young children, to also bring in income.<sup>11</sup> If the women relied on other childcare it was within the wider family networks or their communities. Grandparents were to the fore in assisting their adult children, sometimes caring for grandchildren for extensive periods of absences when the younger adults pursued itinerant labour. These grandparents would themselves be seeking cash, the grandfather picking up some shearing, perhaps, the grandmother cleaning in a hotel. Most couples therefore worked together in the casual rural employment they could obtain as was the case for Langford Gibini, in work that could be heavy, poorly paid and insecure but where children could be cared for alongside their parents; the older children looked out for the babies and toddlers, and helped with work as they could. The Aboriginal women with the men undertook fruit picking and canning, vegetable harvesting (potatoes, tomatoes, asparagus, millet), rabbiting, and also heavier tasks such as fencing, burning off, droving and shepherding. Aboriginal mothers sought to enhance the family income; security for the children was their goal but a meagre subsistence was their usual achievement. They wanted to see their children get ahead and have better opportunities for their lives than themselves, but seldom enjoyed this satisfaction.

The summer and early autumn provided many families with their main opportunity to amass cash for the whole year. Fiona Davis's work on Cummeragunja reserve in southern New South Wales showed that many families left the reserve in the summer for fruit picking and canning in northern Victoria and then returned to the reserve in the cooler months when waged work dried up.<sup>12</sup> One detailed oral account revealed Aboriginal wives worked alongside men and children bean picking on the Mitchell River in the postwar decades. Albert Mullett and his wife Rachel were married on a Friday one summer and spent their honeymoon in the fields picking. They continued to work every summer at the same place, bringing their growing family and

inducting them into the work as they grew old enough. A large number of families would travel to the area annually. There would be up to one to two hundred pickers in one paddock at the height of the season, so they made a large community for the period. They camped on the riverbank, fetching materials for makeshift shelters from the nearby tip. There they also obtained kerosene tins in which the women could wash clothes and bathe the children. The Indigenous workers began their days very early, about four o'clock in the morning, picking till early afternoon. They then took a break through the heat of the day till about 5.00 pm, when they resumed work till after dark. The pickers were paid by the bag and weight. The men excelled in the amounts they picked; wives not only picked but also bore the additional load of cooking, shopping, washing, shopping and the care of the children outside working hours.<sup>13</sup>

As the rural sector expanded Aborigines were exploited as cheap labour, yet even these opportunities were reduced as mechanisation took over many tasks in agriculture. It was hard to devise a machine to weed between cotton plants, so that 'cotton chipping' remained available. In early 1970s the Black activist, Roberta Sykes, undertook an investigation into the conditions for Indigenous cotton chippers in Wee Waa, a rural New South Wales town. As many as one thousand people undertook this work the summer she was there: chipping lasted from the month of October to February of the following year. Men and women worked together and most brought their children, some of whom from as young as eight years worked as water carriers. The adults were paid a very low wage for a ten-hour day. The crops were sprayed with potent chemicals and people should not have been near the crop till 24 hours later. Instead, they often began work when the plants were still wet, and sometimes were sprayed while they were working. Workers later suffered from boils, asthma, giddiness and rashes. The temperatures at the height of summer were terrible and workers suffered from heat exhaustion and dehydration. They either camped out, in an area without running water or facilities, or they rented run-down caravans at rents that ate into their earnings.<sup>14</sup>

The choices for making a living were few, hard and fraught with poor outcomes for health and wellbeing for whole family groups. Langford Ginibi experienced these challenges to the full.<sup>15</sup>

### **Sustaining a living**

When Langford Ginibi and Sam Griffin first moved away from Sydney into outback New South Wales, they initially joined his mother, stepfather and five other families living at Gunnedah Hill not far from Coonabarabran. Their house was a tin hut: she thought Sam's parents' home for their six children was very comfortable. (Sam Griffin's full brother died at two years of age in a

fire at Burra Be Dee mission). There were three rooms constructed of pine rails, timber off-cuts and walls of opened out kerosene tins papered with newspapers and *Women's Weekly* magazines; the cooking area had an open fire and a camp oven. The huts were clustered near an old well that provided the water supply, though in dry weather they had to cart water in buckets from the river half a mile away. The women kept everything as clean and neat as possible, cutting ti-tree branches for brooms to sweep the dirt floors. They dried washing on bushes; only a few had lines.<sup>16</sup>

The residents kept themselves, their dependents and other relatives by various strategies. One woman, an albino, had for many years travelled with sideshows. Sam Griffin's stepfather kept his family by rabbiting. Every week he loaded his bicycle with rabbit traps, and a tarpaulin, blanket and food, and went off for the week. A truck arrived each day to pick up his catch wherever he was. Other men in the area went droving or to work on nearby stations. Sam Griffin went during the week to a sawmill, while Langford Ginibi and Sam's mother went out chopping sacks of wood to sell and set rabbit traps for the evening meal. Later she and the baby accompanied Sam to stay in spare mill huts on the site where he worked. They slept on blankets on the floor, the baby on a pillow in an empty suitcase. She had an open fire on which she cooked for themselves and two other men who worked at the mill. But then they moved again, to similar work as Sam could find it, returning briefly to relatives and their communities for the births of her next children. When she had someone to watch her babies she earned money cleaning and washing for white people in the nearest town. But one day Sam Griffin went off to seek a job elsewhere and did not return.

Langford Ginibi described in understated style the trials of undertaking the hard work she faced working on properties through subsequent pregnancies and the care of her children with Gordon Campbell, with whom she had formed a relationship. On one occasion Campbell heard there was a job on a property burning off. His mother lent them some pots and pans and a billycan, and they had an advance from the job to buy some food. All they had were the clothes they wore and the car, which broke down. 'Now for the first time I was going to live in and off the bush. Hard physical gut-busting work and stealing sheep and flocks of galahs overhead and clear hot days and keeping the fire stoked all night'.<sup>17</sup> The car served as both daytime shelter and nighttime sleeping quarters. When it rained she and Gordon locked themselves with the four children in the car till it stopped. Pregnant again, she helped build a lean-to out of hessian bags to accommodate their growing family.

Langford Ginibi assisted Campbell in all the hard work, fencing, sawing wood and digging holes for the posts. All the while she kept a close eye on the children who played around the camp all day; she bathed them and washed

their clothes in the creek. When they moved to another property, she fed the chickens and milked the cows, while Campbell ploughed and broke horses. Even when pregnant or newly delivered of a child, the work had to be done. There was never enough money; they killed rabbits and when desperate ate a sheep. Despite their hard work they lived worse than the poorest whites, she thought. And they never seemed to get ahead: always, when they had a nest egg, some family crisis would absorb it and they would be again living day-by-day, virtually penniless. Eventually Campbell, too, left to check on distant work possibilities; she was to receive no future support from him for herself or his two children.

From time to time her need for assistance or because of family events prompted Langford Ginibi to go back to her family, especially to her father who, with his second wife, 'Mum Joyce', always offered generous hospitality. When in May 1960 she heard of the death of her father, she returned to Sydney and made the city her home from that time onwards. She had with her Peter Langford, her new partner and future husband, and seven children. She was now twenty-six years of age. Her eldest child was a nine year old, her youngest the baby, Ellen, born in April 1959; her eighth child would arrive in 1962, and her ninth in 1966. Langford Ginibi's work sustaining the household's needs now shifted in character to urban conditions: to find cash to meet the demands for rent and food, clothes and footwear of her growing family. All the family stayed at first in inner-city Alexandria with the grieving widow, Mum Joyce, her young two sons Dennis and Kevin, and Langford Ginibi's sister Rita. There were now thirteen people in a two-bedroom terrace house. 'The kids and I were sleeping on the floor on mattresses, Dennis and Kevin who were ten and eleven were sleeping with Mum Joyce in her bed and Rita was on the divan downstairs'.<sup>18</sup> She did not like to stay with Mum Joyce and not help out, and so she applied for welfare support. She received a cheque for the children each fortnight but it was totally insufficient. She even thought briefly of placing the children in the Church of England homes so that she could return to machining, but this scheme could be shelved when Peter secured a job. In time Mum Joyce and her sons found alternative accommodation and when Rita moved in with her boyfriend the family had the house. Langford Ginibi secured a cleaning job 5.00 pm to 9.00 pm in a printing place on the Henderson Road while a sister-in-law and Peter fed the children and put the youngest to bed. In such precarious ways life proceeded, with no income or housing stable for long. The family lived as needed with relatives and their partners and children in cramped flats and rented houses in which adults always juggled the balance between those providing wages and those dependent on the food and clothes the wages purchased. When unemployment struck the men there was no nest egg to draw on, and Langford

Ginibi then turned to the central City Mission, or the Brown Sisters (Our Lady's Nurses of the Poor) for help.

In 1972, after a long waiting period, Langford Ginibi was allocated a low-rent four-bedroom house in the Housing Commission suburb of Green Valley in Western Sydney. At first sight she and the five children living with her, the youngest aged six, found it exciting. To begin with, as well as the roomy home, there were the location's great advantages, the large garden with room to grow vegetables, the excellent sporting facilities. But there were only three or four other Aboriginal families in the whole suburb, as a result of the deliberate dispersal policy of the state government policy. She realised that the government intended that Aborigines and non-Aborigines were placed together 'to see if we could live together', but she and the children all felt very isolated. There were sources of tension. Some of her children experienced racist taunts and got into fights at school where there were few other Indigenous children. Their dog caused trouble by chasing cars up and down the street. She found that they were not supposed to have visitors without permission from the Housing Commission, let alone have people to stay. 'It reminded me of the missions,' she said. 'The rule was useless in our culture, where survival often depended on being able to stay with friends and relatives. Here I'd thought I'd got away from this, finally.'<sup>19</sup>

As her children reached the school leaving age, they preferred to move back to live with relatives in the inner city. In time, with only her youngest son still at home, she followed them. Once again, only now assisting grandchildren as well as children, she found herself moving frequently from place to place as needs dictated or opportunities arose. She suffered deep and persistent grief over the deaths of three of her children, two in accidents and one from a drug overdose. As teenagers, her older sons experienced troubled periods in which, like so many of their peers, they took risks that brought them to the attention of police and the courts. Her childbearing, hard work and constant episodes of family illnesses and accidents began to take a toll on her own health. She never stopped working. Hers had been an eventful life. In 1984, as she celebrated her fiftieth year, she took a step that would be crucial in promoting her into a position of leadership: she sat down to begin writing the autobiography that emerged four years later as *Don't Take Your Love to Town*.

### **Life writing as history writing**

While *Don't Take Your Love to Town* was autobiographical, Langford Ginibi's life story immediately resonated not only with other Indigenous people but also with many non-Indigenous readers, students, writers and activists. She had traced efforts to sustain herself and her children within a



wider family network of assistance and reciprocity and within a context of racist discrimination that at the same time represented the realities of many Indigenous people's lives. The Human Rights Commission Award for Literature that she received for the book further promoted her work to a wide readership both nationally and, through centres for Australian Studies abroad, internationally. It was adopted in New South Wales for student reading in secondary schools and appeared on the curriculum for many tertiary courses. Its author was invited to speak at writers' festivals and to students and faculty in universities, and she was asked for interviews for special events and for radio. Encouraged by this exceptional reception Langford Ginibi continued her quest to present an Indigenous narrative of the country's history. She explored an alternative story of settler colonialism and its outcomes in a burst of publications that followed, including, in the next ten years, *Real Deadly*, *My Bundjalung People*, *Haunted by the Past* and *All My Mob*.

Of these *My Bundjalung People*, published in 1994 is arguably the most significant for its historical portrayal of a members of a community sustaining livelihoods and identity over time. The book was the outcome of an award following the recognition of autobiography, when the Literature Board of the Australia Council awarded Langford Ginibi funding towards researching a book on her Bundjalung community. In *Don't Take My Love to Town* Langford Ginibi had begun the task of recovering the history of the Bundjalung people by showing how families scattered under the pressure to find work. It also revealed complex networks of reciprocity in assistance and how they worked in practice to maximise life chances. These themes emerged again in a focused way in her study of people on country in *My Bundjalung People*.

Starting in March 1990 Langford Ginibi made several trips over the course of a year into Bundjalung country in the company of her adopted daughter, the Indigenous artist Pam Johnston, who drove the car, took numerous photos and mounted an exhibition. Langford Ginibi had not been back to Coraki for 48 years, since she left it as a young child. She now travelled over twenty thousand kilometres as she and Johnston visited communities spread out across the extensive Bundjalung lands, including Box Ridge, Mulli Mulli, Baryulgil, Tabulam and Cabbage Tree Island. As she related the incidents of travel with good humour, she described her encounters with relatives, their partners, their grown children and their friends with multiple stories that together revealed the stark difficulties they had faced and continued to face. There is space here for just a few of the stories of her people's search for livelihoods.

The first port of call for the pair was the mission at Box Ridge where she spent her early childhood. At first sight Langford Ginibi experienced grief when she saw that most of the old mission buildings were gone and she

confronted immediately just how many people had departed. It felt, she thought, that the tribal heritage had gone with them. The old people's rules and laws and traditions had been torn apart and 'lost in the white man's world of power, greed and gain!'<sup>20</sup> She recalled the extraordinary control white managers exerted. Here was the place where in Langford Ginibi's childhood Mrs Ella Hiscocks – later the manager of the Cootamundra Home for Aboriginal Girls – first worked as the teacher in 1930s.<sup>21</sup> One day each month she unlocked a cupboard and gave out rations – sugar, flour, tea, golden syrup – to each family: poor enough fare. It was up to residents to find the rest of the food families needed. Each Sunday morning the town preacher came to take a service. Residents' absences from the mission and visitors comings and goings were carefully monitored. In the town there was a segregated picture theatre, a local school that Aboriginal children could not attend, and a hospital that had a sign on the door of a back ward: 'Abos only'.<sup>22</sup>

She first sought out the home of the Bundjalung elder, Mrs Eileen Morgan, her aged aunt, with whom she had a happy reunion. There were just ten acres left for the community, her aunt told her; there was no longer a manager. The mission that used to have tin huts with dirt floors, now consisted of thirteen solid houses and an office. There were three elders left: her Auntie Eileen, Granny Emily and Mrs Mary Wilson; many residents suffered from serious health problems but were pleased their niece was writing a history and keen to help. Langford Ginibi moved from community to community to meet up with Bundjalung people, many of them close or distant relatives. She recorded the lives of those of Bundjalung people who stayed on country but were forced often to move around the extensive region for work, to unite with relatives in times of need, or to seek special medical assistance.

Throughout her interviews further information about her own family emerged that excited her as she widened her knowledge of her clan. At a pastoralist's homestead she learned of the important part her great-grandfather and grandfather played in the work of the property; this prompted her to reflect on the significant role Aborigines had in building these white enterprises. Her grandfather, Sam Anderson, who died in 1979, had worked on the property in his youth. He had been not only an outstanding horseman and drover, the pastoralist emphasised, but a superb cricketer who once bowled Don Bradman out for a duck. She found a portrait and memorabilia carefully stored away. These more hopeful stories of Bundjalung skills, talents and resilience should not be lost, she thought. The information she uncovered was often mingled with sad detail, however. It was during an encounter with a local pastoralist when she followed the track of her grandfather that she was shown a shocking account of settler invasion. It was a terrible massacre of Bundjalung men, women and children at Evans Head in 1842 when a hundred

or more were killed. One of the perpetrators wrote his account of the event later in his life, and a Bundjalung man had also passed on his memories that a later historian had published in a newspaper.

Despite the atrocities that preceded white economic development, she found that some Bundjalung communities had not only undertaken significant labour in the pastoral industry but also in agriculture, utilising white farming practices to their own purposes. The people on Cabbage Tree Island, for example, grew pineapples, vegetables and sugarcane, collected pipis and fished. They became so self-sufficient that as children left school they could find work and at least a subsistence living on the family block. In 1959 they set up the first Aboriginal cooperative in the area and had recently been given a lease of 650 acres on the mainland to work.<sup>23</sup>

The saddest stories she uncovered were of boys denied a path to decent livings when they were removed to distant institutions; if they returned later in life they often found themselves strangers, their close relatives perhaps dead, the way of life requiring awkward adjustments. One such person was her own son-in-law who was taken at the age of eight to the Kinchella Boys' Home. Welfare officers promised him and his two siblings they were going on holiday, but split the children up and sent them to institutions. At Kinchella the boys, he reported, were not able to use their own names. Instead they were allocated numbers; his was number thirty-five. All the children were allocated jobs, the older boys on the farm or in the boiler room. They had neither proper clothing for the winter nor decent footwear. The punishments for deviating from the strict rules were barbaric. Bedwetting children were forced to sit naked in front of everyone on an old 'shit pan' all day. Other boys were forced to run the gauntlet, an old military punishment. It did not matter how old you were, if you did not hit the offender you were caned yourself. 'The older kids were held down by men over a vaulting horse and caned on their bare bum. Humiliating it was.'<sup>24</sup> So many Kinchella boys he knew later had very troubled lives; some became street kids, some took drugs, suicided or ended up in jail.

The complex picture of Bundjalung people that Langford Ginibi depicted revealed their suffering amidst oppression and poverty, within which they were forced to make a life. Yet she was impressed with the resilience so many displayed in the face of oppression. The older residents adhered faithfully to the Christian faith and appeared greatly strengthened by it. 'I was surprised how religious the old ones were', she wrote when she heard a number of older women put on an impromptu concert. 'They could still sing the religious songs they had learnt when they were young. Those missionaries had sure done a good job converting our people'.<sup>25</sup> When Langford Ginibi asked Auntie Eileen what she thought about the wealth of pastoralists still living on their land, contrasted with Bundjalung people's meagre existence, Auntie

Eileen replied with dignity that whatever had been taken from them, no one could take away their spirituality, their spirit.

In her foreword to the resulting book Pam Johnston, Langford Ginibi's travelling companion, declared that *My Bundjalung People* was not an academic history, but holistic, as was true of Aboriginal culture: one part could not be separated from another. 'It tells what it is to be an indigenous person, what that means. Aboriginal history involves fact, spirituality and culture.' The book was the only documented history of the Bundjalung people made up of 'their views, their feelings, their facts. So it is true,' she asserted.<sup>26</sup>

That Langford Ginibi saw herself in no uncertain terms as an Australian historian became apparent in an interview she gave in 1997 for an English academic, Sue Ballyn, of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona.<sup>27</sup> Ballyn had witnessed the remarkable interest her Spanish students displayed when they read *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. 'If the socio-historical context of the Indigenous Peoples of Australia had rocked my students', Ballyn reported, 'Ruby's work spoke to them in a direct and forthright voice that, as they put it, they could "actually hear"'. The students were confronted for the first time by a writer of Indigenous English that 'spoke to them directly, with no punches held back and yet which, as they said, revealed a woman of great courage and spirit, of great generosity and, something that often baffled them, a woman who was able to laugh at almost anything'.<sup>28</sup> The students were puzzled about how she could write what they saw as brutal honesty and yet with no bitterness. One of her great skills, Ballyn thought, was to hold her audience by moving backward and forward in time as she dealt with the history of her people, and her views on reconciliation and restitution. Rather than nurse bitterness and anger at the treatment meted out to Indigenous people, Langford Ginibi's strategy was: 'to get out there and fight with words, with telling the stories of what had happened, with writing the alternative history to the mainstream version most people had access to'.<sup>29</sup> Ginibi's leadership as an historian thus lay not only in her writing of a counter-history of Australia, but also in her use of history as a vehicle to change attitudes of white historians and inspire her own people to speak out about oppression.

In the interview Langford Ginibi made perfectly clear that she saw herself as an historian – not just a writer of autobiography. She explicitly defended her style of writing history, adamant that while critics read her work as auto/biographical, 'she was in fact writing history, history from the long silenced other side'. There were two sides to every story and 'her people's history had never been properly told'.<sup>30</sup> Langford Ginibi moreover defended her prose style, and said she resisted intrusive editing of non-Indigenous editors who attempted to sanitise her writing in some form of linguistic 'colonisation'.

In all her writing, Langford Ginibi moved from recounting incidents of the past to highlighting problems of the present. In her Sydney days in the 1960s she had made contact with Indigenous activists, including Charles Perkins, associated with the Aboriginal Progressive Association and briefly took responsibility for their newsletter, but her heavy domestic demands made her participation necessarily marginal.<sup>31</sup> As the land rights campaign became more urgently debated in the 1990s, less hard pressed for time than when her children were small, she wrote and spoke increasingly forcefully about the need for full human rights and social justice for Aborigines and condemned Australia's evasion of international law. The report of the Deaths in Custody inquiry of the late 1980s had served to publicise rather than solve the bases of these tragic events where she made a particular intervention. Her 1999 book, *Haunted by the Past*, focused on the disruptions and grief her son Nobby had faced, his dealing with police, and ensuing convictions and periods of imprisonment. Again, she explored the past and identified the origins of tragic situations still current.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile the honours kept coming. She was proud to receive an honorary doctorate at La Trobe University in 1998. In 2005 she won the NSW Premier's Awards' special award and in 2006 the Australia Council for the Arts' Writers' Emeritus Award for writers over the age of sixty-five years. In 2008 Langford Ginibi was a special ambassador for people with disabilities. After suffering for some time from serious health problems, she died in October 2011 in Fairfield, Sydney, at the age of seventy-seven years.

## Conclusion

Langford Ginibi was an Indigenous historian telling stories of Indigenous pasts in her own way with amazing impact. As a leader her practice coincided with Jackie Huggins' observations of constructive practices of strong Indigenous women's leaders. As a historian she worked collaboratively, always seeking knowledge and advice from her Bundjalung kin, their in-laws and close friends. As she entered into prominence as a leader she retained her grounding in her people and place, always acknowledging the part her people's own memories played in the recovery of their history. She was a leader who found an influential public voice and presence, persuading countless hearers and readers to an appreciation of one Indigenous person's and one Indigenous family's experiences on the margins of white Australian society while she wrote in effect a wide-ranging critique of current versions of Australian history.

In her contribution to the 2012 special edition on Langford Ginibi of the *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, her adopted daughter Pam Johnston pleaded 'please don't forget Ruby. Please make sure

that her voice and wisdom, through her writings, lives on. Please don't let her writings be put at the very back of the cupboard of history.<sup>33</sup> We can only endorse her plea, given that Langford Ginibi's work enriches and challenges our knowledge of Australia's past in such significant ways.

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<sup>2</sup> Ruby Langford Ginibi's publications include: Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2007; first edition: Melbourne: Penguin, 1988). *Real Deadly* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1992); *My Bundjalung People* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1994); *Haunted by the Past* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999); *All My Mob* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2007). The first edition of *Don't Take Your Love to Town* appeared under the name Ruby Langford. For a comprehensive list of Ginibi's writings see: Oliver Haag, 'A Ruby Langford Ginibi Bibliography, 1988–2012', *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* vol. 3, no. 1 (2012): 126–39. Haag presents a comprehensive list of writing by and about Ruby Langford Ginibi, including her books articles and interviews, as well as scholars' papers and chapters about her work.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive study of the significance of Langford Ginibi's writing see: Suvendrini Perera, "'You Were Born to Tell These Stories": The Edu-ma-cations of Doctor Ruby', *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* vol. 3, no.1 (201): 74–86. This is a special issue commemorating the life and writings of Ginibi (published under the auspices of Coolabah Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona). For literary scholars' studies of the writing of Ruby Langford Ginibi see: Carole Ferrier, 'Ruby Langford Ginibi and the Practice of Auto/biography' in *Approaches to Ruby Langford Ginibi's Don't Take Your Love to Town*, ed. Penny van Torn, [http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/Publ\\_Ruby/ruby.htm](http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/Publ_Ruby/ruby.htm). See also other papers in this collection.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this debate see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clarke, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Jackie Huggins, 'Indigenous Women and Leadership: A Personal Reflection', *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, 6 1: (2004) 5. See also: See Nerida White, 'Indigenous Australian Women's Leadership: Stayin' Strong against the Postcolonial Tide', *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 13 no.1 (2010): 7-25.

<sup>6</sup> Huggins, 'Indigenous Women and Leadership: A Personal Reflection', 5.

<sup>7</sup> Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> For personal details see: Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. For studies of urban Aborigines in postwar decades see: Diane Barwick, 'A Little More than Kin: Regional Affiliation and Group Identity among Aboriginal Migrants in

Melbourne', PhD thesis, ANU 1963; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: A History Since 1788* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 4th edition, 2010); Fay Gale, *A Study of Assimilation: Part-Aborigines in South Australia* (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1964) and *Urban Aborigines* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1972); Patricia Grimshaw, 'Gladys Nicholls' in *Founders, Firsts and Feminists: Women Leaders in Twentieth-century Australia*, ed. Fiona Davis, Nell Musgrove and Judith Smart (Melbourne: eScholarship Research Centre, University of Melbourne, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> For migrant workers see: Renate Howe, Christina Cregan and Patricia Grimshaw, 'Migrant Women Workers and Their Families in Victoria: Two Social Surveys, 1975 and 2001' in *Double Shift: Working Mothers and Social Change in Australia*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw, John Murphy and Belinda Probert (Melbourne: Circa, 2005), 70–85.

<sup>10</sup> For a collection of studies of Aboriginal workers see: Ann McGrath and Kay Saunders with Jackie Huggins (eds), *Aboriginal Workers*, Special Issue of *Labour History* no 69 (November 1995). For Indigenous people in the history of New South Wales see: Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1992* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008); Peter Read (ed.), *Down There with me on the Cowra Mission* (Sydney: Pergamon Press, 1984); Gillian Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1988); Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*.

<sup>11</sup> For other Aboriginal personal narratives and transcribed interviews see: Margaret Franklin, *Black and White Australians: An Interracial History* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1976); Kevin Gilbert (ed.), *Living Black* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1977); Monica Clare, *The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, 1978); Marnie Kennedy, *Born a Half-Caste* (Canberra: Aboriginal Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985); E. Simon, *Through my Eyes* (Melbourne: Dove, 1978); Shurlee Smith with Roberta Sykes, *MumShirl* (Sydney: Heinemann, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Fiona Davis, 'Colouring within the Lines: Settler Colonialism and the Cumeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888–1960s', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell (eds), *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Melbourne: Museum of Victoria, 1991), 24–8.

<sup>14</sup> Roberta B. Sykes, *Black Majority* (Melbourne: Hudson, 1989.)

<sup>15</sup> For more recent assessments of Aboriginal women's employment see: A.E. Daly and D.E. Smith, *Indigenous Household Demography and Socioeconomic Status: The Policy Implications of the 1996 Census Data* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 1999); J.C. Altman, M.C. Gray and R. Levitus, *Policy Issues for the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme in Rural and Remote Australia* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, 55–6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> See Anna Cole, 'Would have known it by the smell of it: Ella Hiscocks', in Anna Cole, Victorian Haskins and Fiona Paisley eds, *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005): 153-70.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Pam Johnston, 'Foreword', Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People*, xii.

<sup>27</sup> Sue Ballyn, 'Meeting Ruby', *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* vol. 3, no. 1 (2012): 67-73.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, 115-16.

<sup>32</sup> Langford Ginibi, *Haunted by the Past*.

<sup>33</sup> Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston, 'I Hate to Talk About Her as Though She Wasn't Here. Oh, She Isn't', *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012): 12-18.