

Indigenous Poet - Kevin Gilbert - *Kiacatoo*

Kevin Gilbert was born in the small New South Wales country town of Condobolin in 1933. Directly descended from Aboriginal, Irish and English stock, he lived on Aboriginal reserves and fringe settlements until 1957 when he was sentenced to life imprisonment on a murder charge. He served fourteen and a half years. Despite these tough years, he began writing poetry and plays while in jail, and became a major figure both as a writer and an activist in the struggle for Aboriginal rights. His best known works include his play about Aboriginal seasonal workers, *The Cherry Pickers*, *Because a White Man'll Never Do It*, a political work, and *Living Black*, a collection of oral history. In 1988, as Australia prepared to celebrate the bi-centenary, Gilbert said: *The purpose of all my writings is to present the truth of Aboriginality and justice, for these two great and wonderful principles are the ONLY principles upon which this land and its people can survive and build on the values my people knew.* Kevin Gilbert died in 1993.

The poem entitled 'Kiacatoo' describes the terrible slaughter of Aboriginal men, women and children by a band of evil white men.

Kiacatoo

On the banks of the Lachlan they caught us
at a place called Kiacatoo
we gathered by campfires at sunset
when we heard the death-cry of curlew
women gathered the children around them
men reached for their nulla and spear
the curlew again gave the warning
of footsteps of death drawing near
Barjoola whirled high in the firelight
and casting his spear screaming out 'Run!'
his body scorched quickly on embers knocked down by the shot of a gun
the screaming curlew's piercing whistle
was drowned by the thunder of shot
men women and child fell in mid-flight
and a voice shouted 'We've bagged the lot'
and singly the shots echoed later to quieten each body that stirred

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above the gurgling and bleeding
a nervous man's laugh could be heard
'They're cunning this lot, guard the river'
they shot until all swimmers sank
but they didn't see Djarrmal's family
hide in the lee of the bank
Dajarrmal warned 'Stay quiet or perish
they're cutting us down like wild dogs
put reeds in your mouth - underwater
we'll float out of here under logs'
a shot cracked and splintered the timber the young girl Kalara clutched breath
she later became my great grandma
and told the story of my people's death
The Yoorung bird cries by that place now
no big fish will swim in that hole
my people pass by that place quickly in fear with quivering soul
at night when the white ones are sleeping
content in their modern day dreams
we hurry past Kiacatoo
where we still hear shuddering screams
you say 'Sing me no songs of past history
let us no further discuss'
but the question remains still unanswered
How can you deny us like Pilate
refusing the rights due to us.
The land is now all allocated
the Crown's common seal is a shroud
to cover the land thefts the murder
but can't silence the dreams of the proud.

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**Curlew = a bird

Questions:

Read the poem and answer the following questions

- Who is telling the story?
- What is the action of the police or 'troopers' and what words show the violence and brutality of the attackers?
- How does the poem ends
- What is the main idea or theme of the poem
- Look up these words in your dictionary: **myth**, **legend**, **history** and **fable**. Decide whether one of these words could accurately describe this poems.
- Repetition is used in this poem, find an example in the poem and explain how the repeated words and/or lines reinforce the main theme or idea.
- In Kevin Gilbert's poem, he names the river and the place where these events occurred. He also names several people in the story. Write down the names of the people and places in 'Kiacatoo'. What effect does the use of names have on the reader?
- Towards the end of 'Kiacatoo', Kevin Gilbert writes:

'...you say, 'Sing me no songs of past history let us no further discuss' but the question remains still unanswered.
What do you think he means by the unanswered question?
- Does the poem seem to be a truthful and accurate record of the events described? Give reasons for your choice.
- Explain the different reactions of the 'white ones' and the Aborigines to the massacre
- What is the meaning of '...can't silence the dreams of the proud'?