

THE TRAGEDY OF ALBERT NAMATJIRA

ALBERT Namatjira has long been the victim of both exploitation and of humbug and, as recent events have shown, his conditions of life are nothing short of tragic. His citizenship is now in danger and there are some who would like to see him eliminated from the artistic scene and "put back in his proper place".

The questions of the condition of Namatjira's life on the one hand, and of his painting itself on the other, are obviously very closely linked. And, of course, both aspects throw light on much more than Namatjira himself.

First then, the drink question. There has been a great deal of cant about Namatjira's drinking. Numbers of celebrated—and not so celebrated—painters drink to excess, but they do so in clubs and comfortable homes, and not in humpies, and they stand in no danger of losing their citizenship.

The question of liquor regulations and the Aborigines are a classic example of smokescreen hypocrisy. The defenders of the dog-collar regulations say that they are designed to protect the native from the machinations of evil white men. What the regulations really do, and are really intended to do, is to emphasise the second-class citizenship of the Aboriginal, underline his lack of fitness to be treated like a white Australian, and increase his sense of isolation and defeat when faced with the civilisation of the white man. "Behind the Namatjira case," writes the Rev. Stan Davey, Victorian Secretary of the Aboriginal Advancement League, in a letter to the Melbourne Herald, "stands the Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance, under which all but six of the 16,000 full-blood Aborigines are 'wards of the State', deprived of normal citizenship rights."

These wards of the State provide the labor force of northern Australia, at wages from ten to fifteen per cent. of white wages. They are a source of great profit to the station owners who dominate the Territory, and they can be moved at will by the Director of Native Welfare.

The Namatjira case has already focussed attention on the appalling neglect and exploitation of the Aboriginal people. But in the study of Namatjira's place as an artist we can find just as much evidence of neglect and exploitation.

For we have had, on the one hand, a position where many people have rushed to buy a Namatjira water-color as a fashionable oddity with a high market value; and, on the other hand, a position where many, including some of the painters and critics who wrote to Mr. Hasluck appealing for Namatjira's release, do not consider him an artist at all.

The key to the latter point of view lies in the way in which dealers have cashed in on the Aranda bonanza. Namatjira's income, soon after he started painting, was said to be £1,000 a year; and last year it was claimed to have been £7,000. Obviously large sums in commission and agents' fees have been made—and a number of professional white water-colorists have had their noses put out of joint.

Such commercial success has proved harmful to many talented artists in the past. It has led to the wholesale production of potboilers, repetitions of previous successes. Eminent names like those of Streeton and Herbert come to mind as examples of talent gone to seed, through the exploitation of commercially successful formulae.

It is evident that, under pressure from the agents and dealers, such factors have operated in

the case of the Aranda artists—just as it is equally evident that among them is very much talent, which it is our responsibility to nurture.

Namatjira has been criticised for not painting in the vigorous primitive traditions of his ancestors. In my opinion such criticism is quite unreal. The primitive traditions embodied in the fascinating cave and rock paintings, the decoration of weapons and utensils, arose from specific social conditions, their content a profound mythology, their fantasy reflecting the tribes' primitive relations with nature.

The white man destroyed the social conditions from which the whole fabric of this lovely art sprang. They were shattered, along with the rights of the Aboriginal people to their land and their tribal ways of life.

How can Namatjira, who is familiar with the internal combustion engine, and whose whole way of life has been transformed and confused, continue the art forms which had validity for his ancestors?

For no great art has risen from a vacuum. The whole great western tradition of art has been at the fingertips of the greatest exponents of that art, and similarly in the east.

Namatjira obviously possesses a wonderful eye and a sensitive, disciplined hand. In a matter of months he mastered the methods of the English school of water-color painting, methods which had taken centuries to develop. Given the opportunity to study the masterpieces of world art, what might he not have done?

Namatjira appears to me a highly-gifted, sensitive man, occupying the unenviable position of the artist of transition, a bridge between two cultures. He is the pioneer of a new school of painting, and has opened the way for the flowering of a school of black artists in no way inferior to others in the Commonwealth.

The responsibility for the creation of conditions which would enable such a school to develop rests not on his shoulders but on ours.

Albert Namatjira must be fought for, his citizenship and freedom safeguarded.

The Government must be asked to grant scholarships to talented Aborigines, with living grants to enable them to study original works by great masters, past and present.

But firstly, and above all, the cause and base of the dereliction must be removed—the inequality in law.

The N.T. Welfare Ordinance must be scrapped and, as a first step in the long and complex task of raising the Aboriginal people to terms of equality with the white, full citizenship should immediately be granted to the whole Aboriginal population.

NOEL COUNIHAN

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