

Dancing with the Prime Minister

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Abstract: When Ruby Langford Ginibi and her daughter Pearl prepared for the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs Debutante Ball in 1968, they contributed to development of a significant new expression of Aboriginal identity and community belonging. Debutante balls were traditionally staged as a rite of passage that introduced a select group of young ladies to British high society. They went into decline in the UK in the late 1950s, under pressure from anti-establishment and sexual revolutions. The tradition remained popular in Australia, as the debutante ball had developed important status as fundraising events for local organisations. This article examines the history of Aboriginal girls 'coming out' at a debutante ball. While the inclusion of Aboriginal girls in debutante balls was encouraged as a means to achieve assimilation, proud celebration at all-Aboriginal events provoked controversy. Ruby Langford Ginibi's reflection upon her daughter's dance with the Australian Prime Minister at the 1968 Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs Debutante Ball is instructive. It explains how an exclusive, sexist British ritual has been transformed into a vital, inclusive Aboriginal rite of passage and challenges non-Aboriginal readers to re-evaluate their assessment of the tradition.

Key Words: Aboriginal life writing, Ruby Langford Ginibi, debutante, rural society, Country Women's Association

I didn't do my deb. When I was a teenager, in 1980's inland New South Wales, a lot of girls still 'came out' into society at the annual debutante ball. It was a great excuse for a party and the highlight of Year Eleven. Girls who didn't have a boyfriend were escorted by a recruit drawn from within the ranks of their class mates, the football club or their more persuadable male cousins. The focus wasn't on the bloke anyway; it was all about the dress, the hair-do, and who would ride together in the hired limo. Girls did their debbs in packs; but I didn't presume that I would be included in the popular girls' plans for table arrangements and white dresses. Perhaps I chose to self-exclude to avoid the embarrassment of potential rejection. I got married just two years after I left school anyway, so I didn't have to wait long to get my hands on some sequined white satin. Getting married 'so early' seemed to confirm my outsider status amongst my age-mates in small town NSW. I didn't care; I had moved on. I was a newly-wed undergraduate at the University of Wollongong, living by the beach and majoring in Literature. I discovered new frameworks for understanding my experience, including the conservatism of my in-land rural background. I discovered that I was a fourth-generation-white-settler-woman; I'd never thought about my racialised identity before. I also decided that I was a feminist. Now I was glad I didn't do my deb- on political grounds.

About this time I was reading *Don't Take Your Love to Town* in one of my literature classes. Ruby Langford was one of the authors that made me stop (alas, only fleetingly) to examine my ingrained assumptions and recently acquired prejudices. According to my new-found feminist perspective, debutante balls exemplified and perpetuated the repressive class-bound practises of patriarchal whiteness; yet here, on page 141, an Aboriginal mother openly celebrates her daughter's presentation to the Prime Minister,

Pearl looked radiant in her re-made dress and as the ball began I went inside to watch the girls being presented to the Prime Minister, John Gorton. A grey-haired man walked up to Pearl and clicked his heels in salute and took her hand. He led her to the middle of the floor and the band struck up and away they waltzed. I couldn't see from my seat very well, so I asked someone, "Who's that man dancing with Pearl?" Next day it was in the newspapers. Pearl had made history being the first Aboriginal ever to dance with the Prime Minister. I was so proud. (Ginibi *Don't Take Your Love to Town* 141)

Shouldn't Ruby have been protesting instead? I vowed, 'If I ever have a daughter who insists on doing her deb, I'll make protest placards and chain myself to the steps of the Town Hall!' By the end of my second year at university, while I was discovering the 'Diane Bell affair' and Aboriginal women's critique of white feminism, I was also breast feeding my new-born daughter. I was now a struggling young mother myself. Perhaps it was then that I finally began to empathise with Ruby Langford and to consider the validity of an Aboriginal mother's perspective? In truth, it probably was much later.

Now when I look back on Ruby Langford Ginibi's multifaceted legacy, her perspective on the debutante experience continues to challenge my acculturated political certainties. A key passage that critiques my standpoint is Langford Ginibi's description of preparations for the ball,

On a Saturday in July of 1968 the Foundation had its first debutante ball. It was to be in Sydney Town Hall and Pearl (who was sixteen) badly wanted to go. Money was short and Lance was unemployed then, so I went to the Smith Family in Crown Street, Darlinghurst, and asked the welfare worker for a white ball gown. The only ones they had was a size 18 which was miles too big for her, so no problem, I got out the machine, took the dress to pieces and remade it, adding a bow on the waistline. I was halfway through this when I went broke and had to pawn the machine to get a feed for the kids. I finished the rest by hand, just in time for the ball, and I did up Pearl's hair. Charles Perkin's brought her a pair of white shoes and gave me a free ticket to the ball. (Ginibi *Don't Take Your Love to Town* 140)

A photograph of Pearl included in the centre page illustrations of *All My Mob* reveals the basis of Ruby's pride in her daughter: a radiant, demure and thankful debutante, well aware of the effort and skill invested in preparation for the ball. The photograph also reveals Aunt Ruby's deft and determined handiwork. Under the pressure of extremely restrained resources she turned out an elegant and fashionable ball dress of "bubble nylon over taffeta" that was well cut and perfectly fitted (McGregor 9). The most significant observation to be drawn from Ruby Langford Ginibi's reflections upon Aboriginal debutante balls, however, is the capacity

of tenacious Aboriginal communities to re-fashion a tradition that was then being cast-off by white society. Aboriginal debutante balls, established in NSW by the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in 1966, endowed an arcane patriarchal and elitist practice that demarked privilege and enacted social exclusion with new cultural significance that celebrates Aboriginal survival and belonging (Cole).

While Australian debutantes contented themselves with a single night of glory at the annual ball, their upper-class British sisters enjoyed a whole 'season' of pampering and frivolity that included a circuit of cocktail parties, London dances, country dances, horse racing carnivals at Royal Ascot and rowing at Henley Regatta (Pringle). These socially exclusive events introduced girls on the cusp of marriageable age to other high-society families and to eligible bachelors, but only after they had been presented to the monarch. This tradition is said to have originated in the late eighteenth century in the court of King George III at the annual birthday feast of his wife Queen Charlotte (MacCarthy). By the time Queen Victoria ascended the throne, the descriptor 'debutante' was understood to be reserved for those with a connection to the throne. As Fiona MacCartney argues,

The decorative elements of the presentation ceremony masked its serious, even ruthless, *raison d'être* in the stratification of society. By the mid-nineteenth century the annual presentation had gradually become the key event in a formalised connection of the monarch and the court with the Season and society. Presentation acquired an important role in the regulation of society in Britain. It became a kind of bulwark, defending the elite inner circle and securing channels to power and influence. (MacCarthy 11)

The requirement that girls were nominated by a woman who had themselves been presented at court, usually from amongst their kin, protected the exclusivity of the season until the mid nineteenth century, when ninety percent of debutantes were daughters of aristocratic and land-owning families. By the end of the nineteenth century daughters of families who had made their fortunes in industry and commerce had succeeded in gaining access to the season, forcing the proportion of nobles down to fifty percent (MacCarthy). By the 1950s, a British social columnist complained that the Season was "becoming a racket" with "more and more people trying to buy their way in" (MacCarthy 14). In 1957, Buckingham Palace announced that Presentation Parties would be discontinued the following year. A quote attributed to Princess Margaret bluntly summarises the provocation, "We had to put a stop to it. Every tart in London was getting in" (MacCarthy 14). As Carol Dyhouse notes, a system designed to perpetuate the inherited wealth and status of 'the establishment' had been besieged by the *nouveaux riches* and socially aspirant (Dyhouse). In the context of a society undergoing anti-establishment and sexual revolutions in the late 1950s, the British crown chose to discontinue the presentation season rather than suffer further democratisation. Sociologists Bossard and Boll noted in 1948 that the decline in upper-class debutantes in the USA, as in the UK, had been preceded by modification to "upper social class barriers" and the inclusion of debutantes who, though wealthy, did not hail from "old families" (Bossard and Boll 248).

A similar abandonment of the exclusive and expensive debutante ball tradition by the "high-up people" occurred in post WWII Australia. This trend was accompanied by the entry of girls from social divisions previously excluded by their lack of breeding (O'Shea 132). The democratization of debutante balls in Australia had been further aided by the traditional link

between the 'coming out' ball and community fund raising for philanthropic and civic institutions. As Thompson and Northey argue, "fundraising debutante balls for the Red Cross, CWA and hospital auxiliaries have a long history of combining duty with pleasure" (Thompson and Northey 3). Class background was arguably less of a barrier to aspiring debutantes in Australia, particularly in rural communities, as support for philanthropic and community groups was an expected attribute of all classes. As Joan Tully observed of rural communities in the 1960s,

It is the tradition in Australian rural communities that all members of the community can and should belong to the local organisations and take part in local functions. The local 'ne'er do well' can and does attend the Debutante ball run by the Country Women's Association. (Tully 14)

Prior to the roll out of services by the welfare state, rural people of all class designations were expected to belong to local organisations and support their functions. Philanthropic organisations ensured that sufficient funds and labour were available to provide essential services from baby health centres, to student hostels and ambulance services. Members of the upper classes usually fulfilled leadership roles in charitable organisations as they had the benefit of education and resources including time and money. In a 1957 sociological study, Jean Martin argued that social and service clubs played an important role in expressing and perpetuating class differences in rural Australia (Martin 33). She identified class-based qualification for community leadership as one of the methods used to maintain class boundaries. Martin argued that, "the highest offices in the highest status associations tend to be filled by the local people of the highest class positions" and that frequent personal contact between people of very different status provided the necessary information for country people to engage "in the task of 'placing' their fellows" (Martin 34). Regular contact between the classes in rural Australia may have given rise to "mutual understanding and ready cooperation" but as Martin argues, it also leads to "a heightened awareness of class differences" (Martin 34). Well known social facts including family background, residence and occupation, pressured individuals to moderate their behaviour in keeping with their class position.

Prior to 1967, the majority of Aboriginal people in NSW lived in rural areas. The transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal affairs to the Federal Government, an outcome of the 1967 referendum, saw the eventual demise of the Aborigines Welfare Board of NSW and their regime of Aboriginal Stations and Reserves which had effectively concentrated Aboriginal people a convenient distance away from rural towns and cities. Aboriginal people like Ruby Langford who worked as domestics and farm labourers were integral to the rural economy but firmly placed at the bottom of the class hierarchy. The formal and informal practices of the 'colour bar', a line of demarcation between Aboriginal and white people in rural communities, restricted the rights of Aboriginal people to participate in community life and to access social services. This legislation ranged from exclusion from the census, to segregated treatment in public hospitals and prohibition from entry to town halls and function centres where debutante balls were likely to be held. In rural areas, the colour bar also operated at an informal level; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people both understood which public services or spaces were off limits to Aboriginal people. These unspoken local codes prescribed the availability of shopping facilities, saw the operation of curfews, specified locations for Aboriginal housing and determined which community organisations or social functions

Aboriginal people could expect to attend. The progressive retraction of discriminatory legislation at local state and federal government levels in the 1950s and 1960s, achieved by dogged campaigning by Aboriginal people and their supporters, also influenced the tentative inclusion of Aboriginal people in the social life of white rural communities.¹

Given the entrenchment of the colour bar as a feature of rural life, it is unsurprising that references to Aboriginal participation in debutante balls in early 1960's NSW focus upon the novelty and privilege of their inclusion. Harriet Ellis made her *début* at the Queen's Birthday Ball held at the Sydney Trocadero in 1962, "one of the most colourful galas of Sydney's social season" ("Belle of the Ball: Thrill of a Lifetime for Harriet Ellis at the Queen's Birthday Gala"). Harriet's respectability was endorsed at the highest official level, as she was escorted to the ball by the Superintendent of the Aborigines Welfare Board and received by the NSW Governor. Clearly her participation held propaganda value as evidence of Aboriginal assimilation and suggests that when endorsed by elite community representatives, the rite of passage still retained some of its social exclusivity.

Perhaps more significant was Miss Jenny Irving's *début* in 1964, in the small rural town of Guyra (a sheep and potato farming area in the New England district). Jenny was the first Aboriginal debutante presented at the Catholic Ball, then acknowledged as "one of the social highlights in Guyra" ("Aboriginal Deb Presented at Guyra"). The host of the debutante ball, Father Kelly, was delighted that debutantes were "representative of all sections" of the community. Jenny's inclusion in this important community event may have been evidence of the liberality of the district, of her family's respectability or of their determination to contest the restrictions of the colour bar. The degree to which racism was accepted as a social norm in a community that staged racially inclusive debutante balls may be taken as a factor influencing how 'early' or 'late' Aboriginal families attempted to press for the social inclusion of their daughters in this era.

Until the mid-1960s the goal of many Aboriginal community members and leaders had been inclusion in mainstream society on the basis of civic equality. Social assimilation was to be more easily achieved when civic benefits previously withheld by discriminatory legislation were made available to Aboriginal people (Haebich 182). A common expectation was that Aboriginal people would willingly relinquish their culture and associations in exchange for these benefits. Proponents of assimilation like prominent anthropologist A.P. Elkin then believed that Aboriginal people with mixed racial heritage were "definitely seeking or hoping to be assimilated [...] to become unobtrusively absorbed in the general community" (Elkin 375). Aboriginal people who moved to Sydney from rural NSW in the 1960s looking for work and to access the increasing freedoms available outside Aboriginal Welfare Board control, did not necessarily assent to this view of assimilation. They did not want to relinquish their kinship ties to be absorbed into the general community. Upon moving to the city, Aboriginal people continued to rely upon each other to survive.

The NSW based Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs [FAA], established in 1964, was a social welfare organisation established to assist the rapidly expanding metropolitan Aboriginal community. As Anna Cole records, community building was fostered by the FAA through a number of active subcommittees including a "Social welfare, Education, Health, Women's Auxiliary and a Dancing Group" (Cole 206). Fund-raising activities conducted by these various subcommittees provided finance for the core business of the Foundation. These

activities included regular community dances held at Sydney County Council venues including Redfern Town Hall.

The Foundation began a tradition of holding Aboriginal debutante balls in 1966("Foundation's First Ball a Colourful Affair"). Anna Cole suggests that the first ball was held in July 1966, but photographs of the official party in the May 1966 edition of *Dawn* magazine, the official organ of the Aborigines Welfare Board, indicate otherwise. The *Dawn* reporter records the Foundation's first debutante ball as taking place at Paddington Town Hall on the 1st April 1966. The date of the debutante ball is important, because it appears that this celebration of Aboriginal respectability and solidarity embroiled the Foundation in a controversy over access to other dance venues in the vicinity of Redfern where the majority of Aboriginal people lived. Meeting on May 30th 1966, Sydney County Council responded to complaints of rowdy behaviour at a Foundation dance by banning the group from conducting Aboriginal dances in Redfern, Alexandria and Waterloo Town Halls. The Council attempted to mollify criticism of this decision by allowing dances to be held in the distant Darlington Town Hall. The use of the Darlington Town Hall by the FAA was immediately contested by The University of Sydney's Buildings and Grounds committee, which did not want Aboriginal revellers in the vicinity of the University.² The debate that ensued in the *Sydney Morning Herald* indicates a growing sympathy for the tenets of the Aboriginal equal rights movement in 1966 and the entrenched racism still experienced by Aboriginal people.

Letters sent to the Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* were sympathetic to the Aboriginal cause, arguing that depriving a whole group of access to harmless recreation activities was blatantly discriminatory, just because "a few members" of the same demographic "give offence"(Hiatt 2). This argument was taken up by the Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, who suggested that civic leaders should be embarrassed by the action taken by Council because it was in direct contradiction to their official support for the FAA ("Dust for Dancers" 2). The Chief Secretary of the Aborigines Welfare Board, Mr Willis, consequently reminded the Lord Mayor that, "both the Government and the Council sponsored the Foundation [and] the Council's present attitude seemed to run counter to the policy on which the Foundation was established" (Civic Roundsman 8). After the issue was discussed at a closed Council meeting, a veteran Alderman reflected that the council "had rarely seen an issue on which opinion was so divided" ("Dissension on Hall Use Likely" 5). This polarised response to the gathering of Aboriginal people at a public venue highlights a division of opinion regarding the right of Aboriginal people to enjoy civic benefits, particularly access to spaces frequented by mainstream groups. The 1966 controversy over access to dance halls in the inner-city Sydney suggests that the Aboriginal community not only had to overcome social barriers to participate in mixed-race events, but also to stage a performance of Aboriginal civility and solidarity at an all-Aboriginal debutante ball.

The stark contrast between Sydney County Council's handling of the 1966 dance hall controversy and their support for the 1967 FAA Debutante Ball reflects a shift in the Foundation's cultural capital and social influence. The 1967 Foundation Debutante Ball was not held in any of the halls involved in the 1966 controversy: Redfern, Alexandria, Waterloo Town or Darlington Town Halls. On July 15th 1967, the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs Debutante Ball was held in the prestigious Sydney Town Hall. Held only seven weeks after the historic 1967 referendum, when 90.77 percent of voters supported the proposal to remove two discriminatory clauses from the Australian Constitution, the Foundation for Aboriginal

Affairs Debutante Ball was later viewed as the “symbolic coming out” of the entire Sydney Aboriginal community (Cole 206). This assessment of the events of 1967 positioned the referendum and the debutante ball as evidence of the ‘coming of age’ of Aboriginal people into the privileges and responsibilities of adult citizenship. It reflects the persistence of social Darwinian thinking which positioned Aboriginal people as a child-race finally entering the realm of adulthood. These attitudes were evident in the philosophy of key figures and institutions that supported the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs and their debutante ball, including Thelma Bate of the Country Women’s Association (CWA) of New South Wales.

From 1956, the CWA, a conservative women’s organization dedicated to the improvement of women and their circumstances, encouraged the participation of Aboriginal women as individual branch members and in the establishment of special Aboriginal branches. When members of the Blue Mountains CWA approached Ruby Langford Ginibi to consider becoming their first Aboriginal branch member in December 1964, she described them as “salt-of-the-earth type women” (Ginibi *Don't Take Your Love to Town* 122). These worthy women focused their unstinting support upon Ginibi and her children, as there “weren’t many Koori’s in the mountains”, paying for dancing tuition and providing food parcels and Christmas gifts (Ginibi *Don't Take Your Love to Town* 123). At this time the wider CWA movement in NSW was struggling with the ongoing challenge of brokering Aboriginal assimilation in rural society.

Thelma Bate, a former State President of the CWA of NSW, was an Executive Member of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs and an outspoken advocate of Aboriginal assimilation (Oppenheimer). Under her guidance as CWA State President from 1959-1962, the movement expanded its controversial program to assist Aboriginal assimilation by establishing Aboriginal CWA branches in rural NSW (Jones). Bate envisaged that these branches would foster cross-racial social mixing and provide opportunities for white women to act as mentors in the domestic arts. Although Aboriginal CWA branches had already peaked in popularity and had begun a slow decline by 1965, Bate continued to passionately support the assimilation cause. Writing to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1965, Bate contended that the provision of modern suburban housing for Aboriginal people must also be supplemented with “some elementary instruction on home craft, hygiene and health” (Bate 2). She argues that it was,

absurd of us to expect women, mostly illiterate, with a deep rooted sense of inferiority bred into them by the white people’s arrogance, living in the most primitive and unhygienic squalor, to adapt themselves to the bewildering and unfamiliar refinements of modern pressure living, without some sort of elementary preparation. (Bate 2)

Bate envisaged that “a commonsense and practical course of elementary instruction” would “bridge the gap between the old life and the new” (Bate 2). Whilst advocating the systematic training of Aboriginal women, Bate also pursued more modest contributions. In 1967, she attempted to harness the good-will of CWA members in the form of material assistance for the FAA Debutante Ball.

Bate recognised that Aboriginal debutantes not only faced social barriers to participation, but also had to overcome financial hardship to gather the necessary finery. In 1967, twenty

debutantes were training for the July 15th Foundation Ball, but the cost of a special outfit was prohibitive for some of the aspiring Aboriginal debutantes. Country Women's Association records reveal that Thelma Bate acted as the contact point for an FAA appeal for donations of sewing material and second-hand deb dresses. CWA response to the appeal was very modest: only two rural members are recorded as having rendered assistance. Gertrude Draper from Lucknow, near Orange sent ten dollars for the purchase of dress material, apologising that she could not contribute more, "as I am a very sick person [and] am unable to do much".³ Bernice Bradford from Nubba, near Harden, sent "a frock for the Aboriginal appeal [and] a dollar to pay for having it cleaned when it is altered".⁴ This muted response to Thelma Bate's appeal, made in the June 1967 edition of the CWA magazine *Country Woman*, may have reflected her personal unpopularity or discontent amongst CWA members who were increasingly tired of making financial and personal contributions to Aboriginal branches. Neither of the contributors to the deb dress appeal lived in districts that hosted Aboriginal CWA branches. Nonetheless, preparation and training for the 1967 FAA Debutante ball progressed "most satisfactorily" despite the meager assistance rendered by the CWA.⁵

While the CWA members may have been tiring of their patronage of Aboriginal improvement, enthusiasm for the FAA Debutante Ball continued to grow amongst the Aboriginal community. Beginning with seven debutantes in 1966 and twenty debutantes in 1967, the fledgling tradition boasted twenty-five debs when Pearl Anderson prepared for her big night in 1968. A crowd of more than 1200 enjoyed the unseasonably warm July evening; dancing to the music of popular Aboriginal artist Jimmy Little and rubbing shoulders with dignitaries including Prime Minister John Gorton, and fashion columnist Maggie Tabberer, alongside "thirteen Aboriginal grandmothers, Negro sailors from American ships in port, an Eskimo, a Canadian Indian, a Maori and three Aboriginal 'Miss Australia Quest' entrants" ("Stole the Show at Aboriginal Ball").

The *Sun-Herald* report emphasised the novelty interest of the occasion, including pan-Indigenous and international Black support for the event. When questioned about the crowd, FAA manager Charles Perkins, by contrast, drew attention to the support and participation of local white people. He remarked, "We told the girls to bring their boyfriends even if they weren't Aborigines [...] we don't have a colour bar" ("Stole the Show at Aboriginal Ball"). Four of the twenty-five Aboriginal debutantes were partnered by white men at the 1968 ball.

A large photograph of Pearl Anderson dancing with Prime Minister Gorton provided visual interest for the *Sun-Herald* article. The story title "Stole show at Aboriginal Ball" suggests that Pearl Anderson eclipsed her fellow debutantes when she danced with the Prime Minister.

Pearl Anderson dancing with Prime Minister Gorton,
Courtesy *Sun-Herald*



The story stimulated sufficient interest to warrant a follow-up story by journalist Adrian McGregor. McGregor dubbed Pearl Anderson the “Cinderella” of Newtown suggesting that she was “still walking on a cloud” one week after the ball (McGregor 9). Pearl is presented as a modern young woman “dressed brightly in lemon jumper and miniskirt” who put aside her preference for “go-go dancing” to take up the Waltz and the Pride of Erin (McGregor 9). Her beauty and dancing prowess attracted her Prince Charming, Prime Minister Gorton, who “out of 25 debutantes at the Town Hall last week [...] chose to dance with Pearl” (McGregor 9). The gallant Prime Minister introduced her to his party, thanked her for the dance and wrote a complimentary message on her ball card. Significantly, the article does not linger on the ball itself; it focuses instead upon Cinderella Pearl’s hearth-side reality.

McGregor’s story emphasises Pearl’s Cinderella transformation by establishing her appropriate status as a step-daughter who emerged from a disadvantaged social context,

In Fitzroy Street, a narrow street off King Street Newtown, I met Pearl after she returned successfully from job hunting. Pearl is a daughter of Mrs Langford’s first marriage. The second eldest of nine children, she lives with her family in a weather-worn two story terrace. She invited us inside and we walked into a room with linoed floor, spare furniture and with no globe in the gathering darkness. Mrs Langford, a large woman with smooth attractive features muttered quietly about the lights failing. A log glowed in the next room. (McGregor 9)

Pearl pays tribute to her mother, Ruby Langford Ginibi, whose hard work and resourcefulness enabled her to attend the ball, “But if it hadn’t been for Mum I wouldn’t have made the ball. She made my dress, bubble nylon over taffeta” (McGregor 9). Langford Ginibi refuses to be recast as the fairy godmother, whose magic wand achieved the desired outcome. She insists that the evening was made possible by the combined effort of the whole family; their determination prevailing over limiting circumstances,

My husband is a labourer. We aren't well off. Pearl left Leichhardt Junior Girls High in second year because she felt she wanted to help me by working. Two of the younger boys do paper runs after school. I did Pearl's hair because we couldn't afford to go to a hairdresser [...] I borrowed the long white gloves and the fur stole for her. We got it together bit by bit. It wasn't easy but where there is a will there's a way. (McGregor 9)

By refusing the fairy-tale interpretation of her circumstances Langford Ginibi draws attention to Aboriginal priorities such as togetherness, sharing and the celebration of resilience. Pearl concurs,

Last week was so exciting, with Mum finishing my dress and then on the night she did my hair, my sister Dianne's and another friend who was here too. What a night! But it was worth it though, wasn't it? Mum's been showing the Sun-Herald clipping everywhere she goes. (McGregor 9)

Ruby Langford Ginibi made her pride in Pearl widely known. She circulated the newspaper clipping everywhere she went, and later she framed and hung a copy of the photo "on the lounge room wall with two boomerangs at the top" (Ginibi *Don't Take Your Love to Town* 147). Readers of *Don't Take Your Love to Town* soon understand that this pride was a counterpoint to profound loss. Just over a year after Pearl danced with the Prime Minister she was tragically killed when she was knocked down by a van involved in a traffic accident in Redfern. Only eight months later, Langford Ginibi's eldest son Bill suffered an epileptic fit and drowned whilst washing his jeans in the bath tub. The Prime Minister's public recognition of Pearl's beauty and poise, captured by the *Sun-Herald* photographer at the FAA debutante ball, thus encapsulates a moment of family triumph before the impact of grief and its ongoing consequences.



Pearl reflects on her Cinderella experience,

Courtesy Sun-Herald

Ruby Langford Ginibi recounts her preparations for another debutante ball in *All My Mob*. Twenty-four years after the FAA ball at the Sydney Town Hall, Auntie Ruby made preparations for the debut of her two granddaughters and was “floating around on cloud nine” in anticipation of the family gathering (Ginibi *All My Mob*125). This pleasure was contextualised by awareness that “there’s been a lot of water under the bridge over the last twenty four years” (Ginibi *All My Mob*125). Langford Ginibi refers here to the untimely death of three of her children, including the father of one of the debutantes, David. For Langford Ginibi, the ‘coming out’ of her granddaughters Roberta and Jaymi at an Aboriginal debutante ball continued an important family and community tradition. Seeing the girls dressed up in their glamorous gowns, waiting in excited anticipation for the pleasures of the night, Auntie Ruby reflected, “I didn’t think my cup of life could ever have been so full as it was at that moment” (Ginibi *All My Mob*128). The highlight of the ball, the presentation of the debutantes, represented both family continuity and community survival. Ruby Langford describes the impact of this moment,

Then my two granddaughters got called out: ‘Roberta Mitchell from Bundjalung’ and ‘Jaymi Harris from Bundjalung’. My old heart swelled with pride and tears ran unashamedly down my cheeks as the old tribal names were called: Wiradjuri, Umbago, Gamalori [sic] and so on. They went until the whole forty debs were standing in a circle and then they waltzed away. (Ginibi *All My Mob*130)

The Aboriginal debutante ball again provided an important occasion for communal celebration of Aboriginal survival in NSW. The primary focus for Langford Ginibi, however, is not upon the past. The debutante ball offers significant hope for the future. She remarks upon the impressive personal qualities evident in this gathering of Koori youth, “I was so overwhelmed by their courtesy, politeness and sincerity. With these qualities in our young Kooris, there is hope for a better future for us all. What do ya reckon?” (Ginibi *All My Mob*130-1) Auntie Ruby closes this account by addressing the reader directly and involving them in her recollection of the past and assessment of the future.

“What do ya reckon?” It is an important question. Auntie Ruby envisaged that her writing would facilitate a dialogue between herself and non-Indigenous readers. She hoped to educate us about Indigenous life and priorities. As I paused to think about my first reading of *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, I realised that I needed to reckon with my narrow reading of the FAA debutante ball. Now that I am a bit more “edumacated”, to use Auntie Ruby’s words, I am increasingly aware of the riches offered in books like *Don’t Take your Love to Town* and *All My Mob*. What do you reckon?

NOTES

¹ For example, the establishment of Aboriginal branches of the Country Women’s Association of NSW from 1956-1962 enabled cross racial social mixing in six rural towns around NSW. See Jennifer Jones, “More Than Tea and Scones: Cross-Racial Collaboration in the Country Women’s Association of New South Wales and the Ethos of Country-mindedness,” *History Australia* 6.2 (2009): 41.1-41.9

² Our Civic Roundman, “Appeal on Hall Ban,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* 1966. 8

³ Letter from Bernice Bradford, ‘Wonga’ Nubba NSW to State Secretary 5th July 1967, Aboriginal branches and Associations folder, CWA of NSW Archives Potts Point, Sydney.

⁴ Letter from Mrs Draper "Stonehenge" c/o Lucknow PO via Orange to State Secretary, 25th June 1967, Aboriginal branches and Associations folder, CWA of NSW Archives Potts Point, Sydney.

⁵ Letter from CWA General Secretary Wanda Baltzer to Mrs Draper "Stonehenge" c/o Lucknow PO via Orange, 29th June 1967, Aboriginal branches and Associations folder, CWA of NSW Archives Potts Point, Sydney.

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