

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Elizabeth Durack**

1915-2000

Artist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 6 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Elizabeth Durack**

**Directors/Producers** Robin Hughes, Linda Kruger

**Executive Producers** Sharon Connolly, Megan McMurchy

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1997 © Film Australia

Also in Series 6: Eva Burrows, Bruce Dawe, Margaret Fulton,  
Jimmy Little, B.A. Santamaria.

## A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

Film Australia Sales, PO Box 46 Lindfield NSW 2070

Tel 02 9413 8634 Fax 02 9416 9401 Email [sales@filmaust.com.au](mailto:sales@filmaust.com.au)

[www.filmaust.com.au](http://www.filmaust.com.au)

## SYNOPSIS

In 1997 the art world was shocked by the announcement from Western Australian artist Elizabeth Durack, that she and Aboriginal artist, Eddie Burrup, whose work had recently begun to appear in art galleries and exhibitions of Aboriginal art, were one and the same person. How could a woman in her eighties, stereotyped as 'a relic of old colonialism', have the audacity to appropriate Aboriginal culture in such a way?

In this fascinating interview, Elizabeth Durack talks of a life of reconciliation: of her family with Aboriginal families growing up in the Kimberley region, of a tragic past with a more hopeful future, of her dual roles as single mother and professional artist in the mid 20th century, and ultimately of her two personas, Elizabeth and Eddie.

Durack's astonishing life forces us to question not only the nature of Aboriginality, but also of identity itself.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Visual Arts, Aboriginal Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, Society and Culture, Beliefs and Values, Personal Development, and Community and Family Studies.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A little history pertaining to subjects mentioned in this program will help you gain more understanding from it.

### The Durack Family

Durack is an immediately recognised and important name in West Australian history, especially since the release of the film, **Kings in Grass Castles**, adapted from Mary Durack's best selling novel of the same name. Mary and Elizabeth were sisters. Their grandfather, Patrick, came from County Clare, Ireland, in 1853. He is best known as an early pioneering pastoralist in the Kimberley region during the late 19th century. His sons and daughters carried on the tradition, building an empire comprising millions of hectares. The family were highly instrumental in opening up the land of the north of Western Australia and to a lesser extent the Northern Territory, establishing remote stations in hostile country. However, the empire collapsed and they went from being among the first of Australia's important cattle kings to losing everything they had.

- On a map of Australia, mark some of the important journeys for the family and the stations they established (landmarks in bold). This will give you an idea of the enormity of their undertakings.
- In the early 1870s, they left their home in **Goulburn, New South Wales** to seek out vast grazing lands north of the Darling River. They drove cattle and horses for more than 1600 kilometres.
- On the red plains country around **Quilpie, south west Queensland** they pegged out claims totalling 44,000 square kilometres and built homes of mud and cane grass. Later, they became rich selling the land to incoming settlers.
- In 1884, a severe drought forced the Duracks to drive their cattle across country to the **Ord River**. They drove 7250 head of cattle plus horses for 3000 miles. The journey took three years. Here they pegged further claims, built up their cattle numbers and added to their fortunes.

- Mark on the map and research **Thylungra Station, Ivanhoe Station** and **Argyle Downs Station**.

### The Duracks and Aboriginal People

History has very little to say about Aboriginal people's mistreatment at the hands of dynastic families.

- Why might this be?
- What roles would Aboriginal people have fulfilled on the stations?
- What unfair treatment do you believe took place in these remote areas? Would it happen today? Bring evidence to your opinion.
- What do you think about the massacre of Aboriginal people reported in **Kings in Grass Castles**? It was perpetrated in the name of Durack land hunger (and with the complicity of Durack's own sons).
- Why are stories of atrocities to Aboriginal people beginning to emerge? What sources reveal these events?
- Discuss the notion that the Duracks' wealth pivoted on their misappropriation of Aboriginal land. Could such an empire be built today, co-existing with legislation on native title?

## ALL HER SELVES

This study guide encourages you to explore the impact of various influences in Elizabeth Durack's life and consider her subsequent actions in light of these factors. It asks you to speculate on the reasons Elizabeth Durack saw part of herself as Eddie Burrup. People's unique identity comes from both the way they see themselves, and their perception of the views other people have of them.

### Elizabeth's Relationship with Aboriginal People

Elizabeth Durack's feeling for the Aboriginal community and her personal interaction with them was special—certainly of a much greater depth than we'd assume from the daughter of a pastoralist family whose reputation of contact with Aboriginal people was more than tarnished.

#### Activity

Look at the following incidents or quotations and decide what they tell you about Elizabeth's dealings with Aboriginal people. In each instance, describe how you believe Elizabeth felt about herself and explore possible reasons.

- Her life up north with her sister Mary, where they ran a Durack property '...for months on our complete own. Just two girls with Aboriginals there.'
- During that same time period up north, she remembers '...we became sisters to the [Aboriginal] women, and their children were our children'.
- As Elizabeth speaks of this 'inter-family', the camera pans over three photos—Aboriginal stockmen around the Durack homestead, an Aboriginal family with her and sister Mary, and finally two Aboriginal boys sitting either side of her.
- Geoffrey Chunuma was the little boy model for many of Elizabeth's early sketches. Now a lead witness for the Miriwoong Kadjerong land claim, Elizabeth regards him as her classificatory son and he calls her Mum. Find the meaning of 'classificatory' in terms of the Aboriginal relationship system. Why is there irony in this situation?

- Old Jubul and Old Roger lived in a bush camp where Elizabeth had her studio. They showed her lots of 'renewal practices and river magic'. Note the extreme importance with which Elizabeth regards this part of her life.
- Elizabeth's response to Old Jenny's words, 'Come on missus, me and you two fella, we go look our pretty flower now', when they were on the road going to Lake Mackay.
- Reactions of 'urban Aboriginals in Sydney', where they 'raised an objection' to Elizabeth's fraudulent posing as Eddie Burrup.
- Add to your map, the landmarks **Lake Mackay**, **Warburton Range** and **Moolaboola**, the Aboriginal station.

### Elizabeth's Bloodline— Being Part of the Durack Family

Elizabeth was 'a Durack', and part of their amazing story.

#### Activity

Look at the following aspects of the interview with Robin Hughes. In each case, decide how Elizabeth's life was influenced by being from such a well known and often infamous family. Do not take your evidence solely from what Elizabeth says, but be aware of intangibles such as tone of voice, questions avoided by talking around the point and body language. For each situation listed, discuss how you think she might have felt.

- Her appearance. She was in her eighties at the time of the interview. Look at her choice of clothes, her hairstyle and makeup.
- When Elizabeth is asked how she juggled her 'Aboriginal experience... [with] being a member of the Durack family', she refers to her brother, Reg's ideas 'because he follows all the political trends...'. However, she touches on the current push for reconciliation and makes clear her disagreement with her brother. He says the Aboriginal people were reconciled to working on the stations. She says it was more resignation.
- What is the meaning of 'reconciliation' and is it different from 'resignation'? Does the context in which you use each word make a difference?
- Has the word 'reconciliation' become such a label that we no longer understand the necessary ingredients for harmony? Bring evidence to your answer.
- Explore the components necessary for harmony between any races or groups.
- The expectation that Elizabeth would live off her inheritance, her revelation that she didn't inherit any money.
- Elizabeth's statement that she was 'tired of being...stereotyped as a relic of old colonialism...a daughter of a murderer'.

### Elizabeth, the Artist

Before launching into this section, look at some of Elizabeth Durack's paintings. There are several books with plates of her work. As you answer each set of questions, look at her canvasses from that period. Her work as a painter and illustrator has been widely acclaimed. At the beginning of the interview, she speaks about her 'first moment of intense seeing'—her childhood encounter with a big frog. She says, 'It was a sort of empathetic feeling between us.'

- What possible reasons could there be for a child to feel at one with a tree frog?

This 'feeling with' people, particularly Aboriginal people, was to inform much of Elizabeth's life and art. Her externalisation of personal identity, this innate ability to mirror the world around her, not objectively but seen through her own special filter is strong in all her work, particularly the later work. Such self-revelation brings vulnerability.

- How might such vulnerability affect a person's life?
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages this creative gift brings. Many situations provided stimulus material for Elizabeth's creativity. But a 'desperately unhappy love affair, early, in the north' seems to have affected her whole life. She had committed to go to London but didn't want to leave when the time came. Once abroad, she missed Australia desperately so she returned. But she came back to emptiness—her lover was killed in a motor car accident.
- What other losses did Elizabeth experience in her life?
- Why does she identify her personal loss with Aboriginal people's loss—a 'shared loss'?
- What has been the Aboriginal people's loss?
- What symbols of loss and remnants can you see in Elizabeth's paintings, especially the later ones?

Elizabeth recalls a time when the plane took off from the Warburton Range. She saw an aerial view of a whirlwind dismantling an Aboriginal makeshift house made from canvas over a bent tree.

- Why does 'the rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world' seem so apt a thought for the destruction Elizabeth sees?

The paintings in the series of the same name as the quotation were first exhibited in May-June 1974 at the University of Western Australia.

- Look at these plates and discuss the predominant mood that emerges.
- Is there any significance in the idea that it was a woman the artist observed from the plane?

This theme of disintegration and change went through all Elizabeth's work of the 70s and 80s. Again, her life's direction seems inextricably linked with the fate of Aboriginal people. Her art became 'morphological'.

- What does this word mean?
- In view of her intense involvement with Aboriginal people, discuss the dynamics operating in her life that could have led to such integration of forms within her art.
- How do you think Elizabeth felt about her family's treatment of Aboriginal people? Name these emotions. In what ways do they come through her paintings?

- View several plates of Elizabeth's work from this time. Decide how they differ from her earlier work.

She signed the paintings from this period 'Eddie Burrup'.

- If this was simply a nom de plume, how is it any different from signing her early illustrations with the name (perhaps of Aboriginal derivative), 'Kookaburra'?

The persona (or mask) of an Aboriginal male was 'a device' that gave Elizabeth more energy and 'liberated [her] as an artist'. She actually states that her painting from this period 'would not have worked through Elizabeth Durack'.

- From what was Elizabeth freed as a woman and a Durack when she adopted the pseudonym?
- Do you believe that the Aboriginal 'way of seeing' was inside Elizabeth as she painted those works she signed as Eddie Burrup?
- What does the concept of 'artist as channel' (for either Elizabeth or Eddie) add to your understanding of the creative process?
- How important is the emergent artistic freedom when Elizabeth Durack paints as Eddie Burrup and why is this so?
- Artistically, what could Eddie have done that Elizabeth could not?

Before she died in May 2000, Elizabeth was planning an international exhibition of her 'Eddie Burrup' paintings for later that year. She had spoken extensively to London art gallery owner, Rebecca Hosack, about the show and re-opening the debate on crossing cultural barriers. Hosack is adamant that Elizabeth 'absolutely did not impersonate an Aboriginal painter', because she hasn't used 'Aboriginal iconography'.

- What determines an artwork's inclusion in the category 'Aboriginal'?
- With so much overlap of category in today's world, is it still important to systematise art work into genres?

By its very nature, creativity takes society forward by pushing boundaries. Categories overlap, groups are no longer exclusive.

- What other fields of creativity can you think of where the old rigours of grouping according to type no longer apply?
- Is this a healthy progression?
- Who do categories serve?
- Are labels helpful or dangerous?

In the **Australian Biography** interview, Elizabeth admits that there is deception with her adoption of the name Eddie Burrup, but she 'did not mean to; it was woollier than that'.

- How important is it to look at a person's intention when making a judgement?
- Debate whether Elizabeth's actions were fraudulent, or simply a necessity for an artist fleeing externally imposed restrictions.
- Is it acceptable for anyone other than an Australian Aboriginal person to paint Aboriginal themes?

## CONCLUSION

As an Australian, Elizabeth Durack has contributed to our understanding of life: ultimately through her paintings. Her confrontation of her own life's challenges, and her ability to see these as parallel to Aboriginal people's sadness at the passing of their old life, has enriched the experience of every person who sees her work.

## REFERENCES

- Birth of our Nation  
[www.thecouriermail.com.au/extras/federation/CMFedSWTullys.htm](http://www.thecouriermail.com.au/extras/federation/CMFedSWTullys.htm)
- Walkabout—Lake Argyle Village  
[www.walkabout.com.au/theage/fairfax/locations/WALakeArgyleVillage.shtml](http://www.walkabout.com.au/theage/fairfax/locations/WALakeArgyleVillage.shtml)
- The University of Western Australia Art Collection  
[www.arts.uwa.edu.au/LW/waywewere/durak.html](http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/LW/waywewere/durak.html)
- Review of **Kings in Grass Castles** (Mary Durack)  
[www.greenleft.org.au/back/1998/313/313p27.htm](http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/1998/313/313p27.htm)
- ABC Online AM-Controversial artist Elizabeth Durack dies  
[www.abc.net.au/am/S131252.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/am/S131252.htm)