

Charles
Harris

**A STRUGGLE
FOR JUSTICE**

William W. Emilsen

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Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Foreword.....	ix
Introduction.....	1
1. A Real Struggle	9
2. Mission to Aboriginals and Islanders in North Queensland ...	27
3. Urban Aboriginal Mission	39
4. Towards Crystal Creek.....	63
5. Journey throughout the Nation	81
6. National Black Congress	101
7. Turning Vision into Reality	119
8. Building Firm Foundations	135
9. The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope.....	155
10. The Struggle for Justice Continues	203
INDEX	231

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As the years pass, there are fewer and fewer people alive who remember Charles as a boy and young man so it was a special treat to meet Trevor Prior at his home in Ingham, Alexander Ross from Victoria Estate and Ruth Heron from Innisfail who all knew the young Charles.

Before Charles became a Methodist pastor he was a member of the Assemblies of God and trained at the Commonwealth Bible College in Brisbane. For information about this period of Charles' life, I am much indebted to the late Ed Smith from the Gold Coast, the late David Cartledge, Neil Scott and Ingrid Scott from Alphacrucis College, and Andrew Evans and Don Dayman who attended the Commonwealth Bible College at the same time as Charles.

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Mabo Library, Karan Moxham at Nungalingya College, Roger Ford at the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships in Brisbane, Deborah Close at the Townsville Local History Collection, Eileen Dwane at the State Library of Queensland and Christine Gordon, the Uniting Church's Assembly Archivist, in Sydney.

One of the pleasures of writing Charles Harris' story has been the good will offered by so many people—a testimony to Charles himself, I believe. There are too many to name them all but I would like to pay tribute to the following who put me in touch with people who could either help me with my work or pointed me in the right direction: Jacob Cassidy from Ingham, Ian Boudry, Robert Bos, Doug Brandon and John Harrison from Brisbane, John Brown from Canberra, Djiniyini Gondarra and Helen Richmond from Darwin, Shayne Blackman, Moses Nelliman, Alan Randall from Townsville, Samson Lowa from Papua New Guinea, Mark Hutchison, Robert Stringer from Melbourne and the late Jack Frewen–Lord.

The photographs in this book have come from a wide variety of sources. Some have come from family and friends of Charles, others from Uniting Church Assembly and Synod archives, and some from public records. In the process of writing this book I was fortunate to make contact with the distinguished photographer, Ramon Williams, now long retired, who shared some of his valuable photos of Charles taken at the anti-Bicentennial rally on 26 January 1988. As many of the photographs that I collected were damaged, marked or faded, my good friend, Hazel Hogarth, helped restore them.

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Anne Pattel–Gray knew Charles better than most, especially during the time leading up to the March for Justice, Freedom and Hope. She has written on Charles' contribution to Australian Indigenous theology in

several important works. I feel honoured just as I am sure that Charles, himself, would have been to have Anne write the Foreword to his story.

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Foreword

I feel so very honoured to be asked by the author William Emilsen to write the foreword to this book that chronicles the life and achievements of the Rev. Charles Harris. Charles was a man born before his time; he was a pioneer with vision and extraordinary leadership. He believed that life was short and that he had so much he wanted and needed to accomplish for his people.

The Rev. Charles Harris first came into my life when I was aged eleven. He and his wife Dorrie came to visit my mother (Jean Pattel), who was highly respected in the Methodist Church and also in the Aboriginal community, as they knew of her strong Christian stance. My mother was a proud and loyal Methodist come Uniting Church Christian and she raised all her children in the Methodist and Uniting Church tradition.

They soon became family friends and frequent visitors to our home. We referred to them as Uncle Charlie and Auntie Dorrie and our love for them grew with each passing day. Uncle Charlie filled the gap that my father had left after he had deserted our family when I was ten years old. My father left us destitute and extremely vulnerable to the practice and forced removal of families and children under the Queensland Government Aborigine Protection Act. Uncle Charlie was a very important father figure in my life and Auntie Dorrie was like my second mother as mum and she were very close.

At that time Uncle Charlie was a very conservative evangelical Christian and his theology tended to be that of the Pentecostal background. Uncle Charlie was driven to start his own church and asked my mother for her support to establish it. Uncle Charlie started the first Aboriginal Church in Townsville in Far North Queensland. I can remember the little weather board church with its narrow doorways in Garbutt and each Sunday the congregation grew until it was full to the brim. On one particular Sunday Uncle Charlie had just finished preaching hell fire and brim stone putting the fear of God into his congregation when he made an altar call for anyone seeking healing or wanting to accept Jesus

as their Lord and Saviour to approach. Several Aboriginal people went to the front for prayer and the laying on of hands and Uncle Charlie was slaying them in the Spirit and they were going down like flies. This one man, whom Uncle Charlie and two other Christian men were praying for, went down under the Spirit and no sooner did he go down before he started to convulse and froth at the mouth. Uncle Charlie lifted his head and said to the congregation that this man is possessed by a demon and everyone that didn't have a relationship with Jesus should leave because when he drives out the demon it would seek out anyone who did not have God as their Lord and Saviour. Immediately the majority of the congregation ran for the narrow door and began pushing and shoving each other to get out. I recall my twin sister Narelle and I laughing at them because it was such a funny sight to see. Some of these people considered themselves to be, prior to this, holier than thou, but their true colours shone through on this day.

Uncle Charlie and Auntie Dorrie would spend many hours, in the years to come, with my mother and confide in her and seek her counsel on many issues. I recall on one occasion Uncle Charlie had just come from a Crystal Creek church meeting. He was now the Reverend Charles Harris; we were so proud of his accomplishments and he spent several hours with us telling us about his vision to establish the National Black Congress and how this would build ministries amongst our people, for our people and with our people. This was the first time I had encountered the new radicalised Reverend Charles Harris and I was so excited for he was preaching what I firmly believed and our family were so enthralled by his vision. He asked us if we would join and support his ministry and vision and we all agreed that we would take this journey with him and give him all our backing and support.

Over many years Uncle Charlie preached to the broken hearted and the downtrodden Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia and he brought a lot of people to the Lord and many would follow him in a decade's time to become members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

Charles grew to be a great orator preaching to both Black and White Australians, challenging them to step out in faith and to dare to dream and to move out of their comfort zone so as to allow God's will to guide them to a place of equity, justice and peace...where *'the lion and the lamb shall lie down together'* [Isaiah 9:7]. Charles shared his vision and called Christians to work with him to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministries and to establish within the mainstream denominations a church that included empowered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clergy and ministries across Australia.

His dedication and commitment to social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people saw him rise up and forge a road for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians to minister to their own and to the building of a national black church which bridged the divide between us all as Australians.

Charles was an amazing mentor to me. We would spend many hours sharing deep theological discussions and he would teach me different ways to interpret biblical verses while discussing our political situation and oppression. I was an eager student and hungry to learn from this man who had such influence on my Christian walk and who regardless of power or position remained a humble servant of God. His humility was visible to all who knew him and his righteous anger challenged us all. In all the years I knew Charles I never knew him to sit in judgement of anyone, for he firmly believed that we all possessed redemptive qualities.

Charles was a man ahead of his time and a visionary. His visions were brought to reality through the works of many good men and women and I am proud to be one of them. Charles had the ability to embrace both the Christian and secular worlds and bring them together in a way that no other leader has in Australia. The 1988 March for Justice, Freedom and Hope was the pinnacle of his ministry; it showcased his charismatic nature and ability to draw together people from all across Australia - rich and poor, white and black, oppressor and the oppressed, the franchised and disenfranchised peoples of this land. Charles was never given the

recognition that he so deserved in and outside the Church for his incredible vision and leadership.

I am so grateful that God brought this man into my life and I was able to learn from him all about God's will, mercy and grace and to be inspired by him to be a better version of me. There are many stories yet to be told and I hope that one day I will have the opportunity to share more about this amazing dedicated man, as I have very fond memories that will challenge and humour us all.

At the end of the day the Rev. Charles Harris would be betrayed by his own under the guise of Christian obedience. The conservative members of Congress and some state leaders would struggle to take the leadership from him. My mother faithful and loyal to the end stood up and challenged these Christian men and reminding them that it was Charles that brought them to the Lord and if not for him they wouldn't be here at all. Many other Congress leaders, men and women, followed showing their support for Charles. They couldn't understand Charles' prophetic stance and as the President of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress he was compelled by God to hold governments and churches accountable and to highlight the suffering and oppression of his people. Charles would tell me that we are called to proclaim:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Luke 4:18–19 NIV)

For Charles this was the epitome of his ministry to his people.

The national Congress meeting would be the end for Charles as he suffered a massive heartache and his poor health would not allow him to return to take up his rightful place as the founder and President of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Those of us who were faithful to Charles were driven out of Congress and marginalised in our own Uniting Church in Australia.

Charles would share with me over the remaining years how he felt about this betrayal and I would later see the decline of Congress and sadly with the death of the Rev. Charles Harris the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress would slowly wither on the vine.

I hope this book will be the beginning of what I consider to be the long overdue and rightful recognition that the Rev. Charles Harris deserves and is entitled to.

Anne Pattel-Gray Ph.D, D.D.

Introduction

In 2015 the Uniting Church in Australia committed itself to work with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) “to establish a memorial for the Rev. Charles Harris.”¹ It is not clear what Charles would have thought of having a memorial in his name because the one memorial that he most cherished was a thriving Congress committed to serving the Indigenous people of Australia. However, whatever form remembrance may take, it is important that the life of Charles Harris be remembered, understood and celebrated. This not least, because biography has the power to instruct and inspire the present and, as well, refashion the future. As the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard said “Life must be lived forward, but can only be understood backward.” It is my hope that this biography of Charles Harris will signpost, for some decades to come, the possibilities and potential of courageous Indigenous leadership and also shed light on Charles’ hard struggle for justice in Australian race relations.

Charles Harris had not long died when I first read his stirring address to the 1988 Assembly of the Uniting Church. In his capacity as president of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, he began with words of enthusiasm for the growth and achievements of the Congress. These achievements were worthwhile, he told the Assembly, and he thanked God and the Uniting Church for making them possible. Yet, Charles admitted, the past three years had been “strange ones” for members of Congress, years when word and action seemed to have been dislocated, the end result being a frustrated sense of powerlessness. Aboriginal people, he said, felt this sharply as politicians began to recoil in the face of attacks against land rights from mining and right-wing lobby groups. Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church, he further reminded those present, also felt this sense of powerlessness within the congregations and councils of the Uniting Church.

Later in the speech Charles reflected on the debate surrounding the 1988 Bicentenary. “In Adelaide in 1982,” he began, “Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church from various parts of Australia felt immensely

affirmed and supported.” “In the decision on the Bicentennial,” he told the Assembly, the Uniting Church committed itself to take part in these celebrations “only if sufficient progress has been made towards the just claims of Aboriginal people for land rights, freedom to rebuild their society and financial compensation.”² Charles then emphasised what that decision had meant to Aboriginal people:

Here was the Uniting Church at its highest level saying that it would not join in the party if this small part of our membership still suffers. The church promised our experience would determine its action. The church placed our needs above its desires and proper expectation of joyful celebration. The church had given us hope, not by promising us money, but by saying the church’s task was to act by standing alongside the poor, in this case Aboriginal people.

Charles then reflected on the 1985 Assembly when the delegates accepted the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress as a new part of the church’s life: “We felt sure of the church’s real love because of its action.” Then at that same Assembly, Charles observed the Uniting Church “reversing course altogether”:

We heard the 1985 Assembly acknowledge that the substantial steps referred to in the third Assembly had not been achieved. We could feel the tension as the church was caught between standing with Aboriginal people or moving to be with those who would participate in the celebrations. The Assembly decided “to encourage all members of the Uniting Church in Australia to become fully involved in preparing for and in celebrating the Bicentennial.” We felt the church moving away from us. Where it had previously been saying “We will stand with you,” now it said, “We will support you, but we must stand with our people in our celebration.” We know it is the church’s choice where it stands and what it does. However, we cannot deny our crushing disappointment at its choice.

Charles' passionate words at the 1988 Assembly sowed the seeds for this book. Sensing that they captured a significant moment in the early history of the Uniting Church, I wanted to know more about him.

A quick search on the literature revealed very little. There was a scholarship offered in his name and a Diversionary Centre in Townsville named after him but there were only a few articles published by him and, apart from a couple of brief obituaries and promotional pieces in church magazines, almost nothing had been written about him. Outside the Uniting Church, sadly, Charles was a relatively obscure, marginal figure. There was no entry on him in David Horton's recently published two-volume *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (1994), even though it included entries on people still living and, arguably, of lesser historical significance. It would take another twenty years before Thom Blake's biographical snapshot of Charles was published in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.³

With so little known about Charles, in mid-1998 I discussed the idea of writing his biography with Charles' widow, Dorothy. Dorothy happily gave her support to the idea and sent me off with a letter of permission to investigate the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church's archives where I started my research into the life of her late husband. So began the challenging task of turning the idea into reality. With many other commitments at the time, its realisation was painfully slow. In 1999 I published my first article on Charles in the journal *Uniting Church Studies*. It was titled "‘The vision was born in my spirit’: The Origins of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress,"⁴ and dealt with the background to Charles' vision of a National Black Congress. This article was revised and published the following year in a *Mapping the Landscape: Essays In Australian and New Zealand Christianity*, a volume in honour of one of Australia and New Zealand's leading religious historians, Professor Ian Breward.⁵ Ten years later I published a second article titled "The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope, 26 January 1988,"⁶ dealing with Charles' significant leadership in the organisation of the anti-bicentenary march. Then I published a third four years later

(the year before I retired) titled “National Black Congress: Ambivalence and Ambiguity” in *Indigenous Australia and the Unfinished Business of Theology*, edited by my colleague Jione Havea.”⁷ This article covered the first and all-important national conference of Congress. Each of these articles focuses on key historical events in Charles’ later ministry and started to fill in, in broad strokes, the last decade of his life. However, they were essentially history rather than biography; much still needed to be done to foreground Charles himself.

My first attempt to write a biographical sketch on Charles’ life was published in *With Love to the World*,⁸ a quarterly daily devotional guide to the Bible edited by Peter Butler. Though extremely modest in content, it was subsequently added to the Uniting Church’s “Calendar” of significant people in the history of the church⁹ and had the effect of introducing Charles’ story to tens of thousands of people both within Australia and overseas.

When Charles was President of Congress he was very much aware of the importance of writing up “the lives of great Aboriginal Christians.” There were two attempts at doing this. The first was in 1985 when a proposal was put forward at the Aldersgate Conference that “A National History of Aboriginal Church Life” be published. The second was when the Executive of the National Committee of Congress agreed in September 1988 to seek a writer to tell the stories of Aboriginal people of faith and leadership. In this instance Charles wrote to Jill Perkins, a gifted Christian journalist, to see if she was willing to accept the commission. He thought that people like Don Brady, Rachel Lacy, Jean Phillips, Lazarus Lami Lami, Burrumarra, and Philip Magulnir among many others should be included in the book.¹⁰ Charles saw biography as an important way of commemorating the lives of significant Aboriginal leaders. Sadly, neither project was taken up but the intention behind both is very clear. Charles wanted “to show the struggle of Aboriginal Christian leaders”—tell their names, their lives and evaluate their deeds.¹¹

In the writing of this biography I have been conscious of the need to address four questions: first, there is the question relating to how much

my own voice intrudes into the narrative. As a non-Indigenous person I wanted readers to have confidence that what I have written about Charles is trustworthy and helps them to know and understand him better.

Second, there is the question of my own relationship with Charles. Like Charles I grew up in north Queensland. I attended state schools in Cairns, Bowen and on the Atherton Tablelands. Aboriginal kids were my playmates. Aboriginal people were my mentors, friends and neighbours. But more than a set of a parallel experiences is needed by a biographer. As Henry Reynolds says of Marilyn Lake's approach in her biography of Faith Bandler, there is an "imperative for both insight and empathy, to see the world through the eyes of the central character while appreciating the ancillary roles played by family, friends and other contemporaries."¹² For over twenty years I have 'lived' with 'Charlie.' That spread of time, I trust, has given me both the intimacy and the critical distance to write what I would like to think is a compassionate biography of him.

Thirdly, there was the gnawing question of whether there were sufficient sources to write a successful biography. For a good part of Charles' life, especially from his childhood to the early years of his adult life, I have had to work with limited material—traces and fragments. Ironically, once Charles emerged as a leader in the late 1960s, first in the Methodist Church and then in the Uniting Church, there is an abundance of source material. Inevitably, I have concentrated my attention on those parts of his life where there is adequate source material. This has meant that *Charles Harris: A Struggle for Justice* is neither a traditional biography nor an exhaustive one in the sense of an equal exploration of all the stages of Charles' life in their fullness. Nor does it deal with the small details of his daily life or probe deeply into his private affairs and family networks. Rather, it is what the American–Canadian historian Natalie Davis calls a "reticent biography,"¹³ a biography that primarily looks at one's subject from a certain angle.

Most people, at least on the surface, do not seem to have a coherent pattern to their lives. People change their professions and sometimes lose their jobs. Their passions and achievements fluctuate. They are

not obsessed by a particular question or driven by a particular desire. For Charles it was different. There is an intensifying shape to his adult life that is totally committed to seeking justice for Indigenous people, especially those who were really marginalised. This is the angle that I have tried to explore.

Fourthly, and most perplexing of all, was the question of how I dealt with the written evidence, particularly Charles' own writings, on which this work is substantially based. Charles found writing a challenge. This is evident from a few of his hand-written letters in the Commission for Mission archives in Sydney. His spoken English was a lot stronger than his written English and where these have been transcribed they are easily identified as coming from Charles. So, too, are the extempore addresses that Charles gave and were recorded. However, it is very clear that much of the material that came out under Charles' name while he was the leader of the Congress was written by others or, at the very least, edited with Charles' permission. In puzzling over the authorship of Charles' writings, I wrote to Bernard Clarke who worked closely alongside him for seven years as Congress consultant. Clarke's reply is instructive and to a large extent has helped me to identify the deeper focus on justice in Charles' thinking. Clarke writes:

I saw my role as helping him [Charles] to achieve his objective [Aboriginal Christians taking control of their destiny]. We developed a way to work together—either of us might have an idea, which we would discuss together. Charles would think about it, talk to those he trusted like Bill Hollingsworth, [or] until they clashed over land rights it might be Rev. Cedric Jacobs or Djiniyini, or it might be Gary Foley in Melbourne or especially one of his mentors in Brisbane, Pastor Don Brady...The thing is he canvassed widely and not just in the Churches. When he was ready we would talk together and I would write up his proposal, his theological conclusions or his reports to UAICC. Charles would take this away and often change quite a lot. I would rewrite it until he felt it was what

he wanted to say...I would write for Charles, but only on the basis of constant two way conversations—on my part not to impose my ideas, but to help Charles to address the context he was trying to create in the Congress. Our two way conversations were not always amicable. I would warn Charles of the attitudes in the UAICC conveyed to me by members who opposed his approach. He would take me to task for the attitudes of some key Uniting Church leaders.¹⁴

In the mid-1980s when I was researching the influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Christian missionaries in India I read several biographies of Indian Christian “freedom fighters” like the educationalist Susil Kumar Rudra (1861–1925), the social reformer Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922), the Gandhian social activist Amrit Kaur (1889–1964) and the founder of a Christian movement for emancipation, Kali Charan Banerjee (1847–1902). These biographies served a public function. They showed the important role that some Christian leaders had played in India’s struggle for independence. It is my hope that *Charles Harris A Struggle for Justice* will serve a similar role. May it not only help Australians remember and celebrate the life of one of Australia’s most significant Christian leaders and pioneers of an independent Aboriginal church but may it also be an inspiration to others, black and white, to continue in the struggle for justice and equality. If it achieves those ends, then it will indeed be an acceptable memorial for the one who was “Born in poverty, lived with anger, [and was] motivated by radical, revolutionary love and compassion.”¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Minutes 15.22.06 “Memorial for Rev Charles Harris,” *Minutes of the 14th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Perth 12–18 July 2015.
- 2 For references to Charles’ report see the *Minutes and Reports of the Fifth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988), 122–130.
- 3 Thom Blake, “Harris, Charles Enoch (1931–1993),” Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://abd.anu.edu.au/biography/harris-charles-enoach-18183/text29753>, published online 2017 (accessed online 10 May 2019).
- 4 William W. Emilsen, “‘The vision was born in my spirit’: The Origins of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress,” *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (August 1999): 33–52.
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- 6 William W. Emilsen, “The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope, 26 January 1988,” *Uniting Church Studies* Vol. 16, No. 2 (December 2010): 45–72.
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- 8 William W. Emilsen, “Charles Harris,” *With Love to the World*, Vol. 13, No. 5, (14 November 2011–12 February 2012): 8–9.
- 9 See “A Calendar of Other Commemorations,” on the Uniting Church Assembly’s webpage under “Worship Resources and Publications,” <https://assembly.uca.org.au/cudw/worship-resources-and-publications?start=10>.
- 10 Charles Harris to Jill Perkins, 16 November 1988, MLMSS 9024 37 (41), Aboriginal Stories/Autobiographies, ML.
- 11 Agenda for the Aldersgate Conference, 1-7 November 1985, Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress records, ca. 1966–1990, MLMSS 9024 11 (41), Aldersgate, ML.
- 12 Henry Reynolds, “Faith Bandler and the Politics of Race,” in *Contesting Australian History: Essays in Honour of Marilyn Lake*, ed. Joy Damousi and Judith Smart (Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2019), 153.
- 13 Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*, ed. Michael Wolfe (Early Modern Studies 4) (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2010), 75.
- 14 Bernard Clarke to William W. Emilsen, 21 November 2018.
- 15 T[ino] S[yaylor], Charles Harris, 1989, UAICC Box 18, Personnel Files, Folder 4 Charles Harris, Eskdale.

1. A Real Struggle

Not long before Charles Harris died on 7 May 1993, he began to record his life story on cassette. His voice is weak and he is obviously far from well. He was so thin at the time that his Townsville family and friends thought that the slightest gust of wind might blow him over. Yet, there is a passionate urgency in his voice summed up in the title that he intended for his memoir: “A Real Struggle for Survival.” Sadly, the memoir was never completed, but in the half dozen pages (some four thousand words) that have survived, the word “struggle” dominates. He says of his childhood: “It was a definite fight and a real struggle” for his parents to survive economically. Later, when he worked with “leaders of the white church” he was constantly aware of “the struggle...to maintain [his] aboriginality”. Then there was the disappointing “struggle for land rights” in the 1980s. There were times, too, when Charles had to “struggle” with his own “community being divided against itself” and against him. Although he suffered a major heart attack in Taiwan in January 1989 and never fully recovered, he continued to be passionately committed to the ongoing “struggle for survival of the longest living culture in the world”:

...the struggle continues. To struggle to survive, to have your aboriginality intact, and the spirituality that goes with that aboriginality when there is constant erosion happening around and about you by western values, western customs, western ideals, it's a real struggle and a real fight for survival and you might not notice it but it's happening all the time.¹

In retirement Charles continued the struggle. With a group of Aboriginal people from the Lismore area, he set up the “Black Power Analysing Task Force,” noting: “My last breath will be given over to the struggle for my people. I will only retire when I am six foot under in a box.”²

Struggle, struggling, fighting against the odds, battling to survive, this is how Charles framed his story, especially in the last decade of his life. There are almost certainly other important themes that could

be highlighted from Charles Harris' life but his identification of "real struggle for survival" as a key to understanding his life and that of his people cannot be denied, nor underestimated.

Enoch Charles Edward Harris was born on 8 July 1931 at Victoria Plantation, a small town of about 500 people dominated by a large sugar mill, 5km east of Ingham, in the Hinchinbrook Shire in tropical north Queensland. He was the fourth in a family of eight children, four boys and four girls.³ His father, George (also known as Ebu/Ebo Harris or Golgay Harris⁴) was of Torres Strait and Spanish descent. He was born on 18 June 1892 in the village of Akater on Murray Island (Mer), a small volcanic island in the eastern Torres Strait. In May 1921 Golgay, a seaman apparently married, along with a number of other young Murray Islander men, was removed from Murray Island to Palm Island situated 65 kilometres north-west of Townsville, a place of incarceration with a fearsome and frightening reputation for generations of Indigenous Queenslanders. The men were brought before the Murray Island Court in January 1921 on a charge of "carnally knowing by forcible means" a South Sea Islander woman. The extent of Golgay's involvement in the crime is not known because, apart from the Murray Island Register of removal, there is no corroborating evidence, but Murriss and Torres Strait Islanders, writes historian Joanne Watson, author of the illuminating *Palm Island: Through a Long Lens* (2010), "were shipped to the island 'like cattle' and by the truckloads, some following sentencing by white courts, others after release from prison, or from reserves where they had refused to show deference to white authorities."⁵ Golgay died on 13 June 1972 in Townsville, aged 78.

On Palm Island George met Charles' mother, Allie (or Ally) Wyles,⁶ who was born in the Cardwell/Ingham area on 18 March 1904 and described in government sources as a "H/C [half-caste]. Kanaka"—"H/C" indicating that one of her parents was a white person.⁷ There is some discrepancy here, however, because in Thom Blake's entry on Charles Harris in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and in various oral sources closely connected with her family, Allie is described as being

of Aboriginal and Malay ancestry.⁸ George's death certificate indicates that Allie was also known as Alice Conroy, but it appears that the name Conroy may have come from her close association with the Conroy family in Ingham around 1922.⁹ During this time Allie fell pregnant with Charles' eldest brother, Victor (b. 14 January 1923), whose father was George Formosa, a Maltese. She, too, was caught in the "dragnet" and sent to Palm Island towards the end of 1922 for the "crime" of having a child to a white man.¹⁰

Ebu Harris married Allie on Palm Island on 23 April 1923 and raised Victor as his own son. She was nineteen. He was twenty-five years older than her. The precise date for when Golgay and Allie were given authorisation to leave Palm Island by the government is not known. We do know, however, that they and their children were granted exemption certificates in May 1930 from the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*.¹¹ This gave them the freedom to leave the island with their family and to settle in the Halifax and Ingham areas. Ebu and Allie had obviously proved to the Chief Protector's satisfaction that they were capable of surviving in the outside world. However, with high unemployment, general opposition to Torres Strait Islanders in the sugar industry¹² and poverty looming on the horizon with the Great Depression (1929–1932), it must have been extraordinarily difficult for Charles' parents to manage with a young and expanding family.

Despite adversity, Golgay worked hard for a number of employers in the localities of Palm Creek, Lucinda and Victoria Estate and kept his family together during the Depression. When Charles was a boy, they lived in a simple dwelling on Four Mile Road, probably a cane worker's hut, situated on the edge of a sugar cane farm, not too distant from the red brick All Souls Anglican Memorial Church built in memory of eleven residents of Victoria Estate who died in service or were killed in action during World War One. The house is no longer standing but Charles remembered it as a "tin shack" with hessian bags separating the boys' room from the girls' room, and the floor made of split pine logs with airy cracks between them that quickly swallowed any coin that was

inadvertently dropped. Charles' father worked as a labourer on Girgenti's cane farm and, like many working class children of the time, his older brother, Victor, joined him after leaving primary school to help support the family. With the work in the sugar cane industry being seasonal, there were times when the family, like many others in the district, were dependent on government rations for sugar, flour and other essential items. Ebu was a keen gardener and supplemented his meagre and spasmodic wages with growing sweet potato, pumpkin, English potato, mangoes and other fruits, and eggs from a small chook run.¹³ Alexander Ross, a neighbour who lived opposite the Harris' house on Four-Mile Road, remembers the family well and how the house was surrounded with gardens and fruit trees.¹⁴ Charles' mother also contributed to the family's income; Maud Kittle, an octogenarian from Ingham, remembers Mrs Harris doing washing for her mother to bring in extra money.¹⁵

Both Charles' parents were devout Pentecostal believers and were well-connected with the close Torres Strait Island and South Sea Island community in Cordelia and Halifax which included the Lammon, Backo and Saylor families. The family remembers "Pop" being involved in Open Air Services and Rita Heron (nee Henaway), a contemporary of Charles, remembers his parents as "respected and Godly people."¹⁶ In his short memoir Charles recalls the strict religious practices of his mother and father and cherished "those days of discipline, of strict discipline" when he was taught how to dress smartly and conduct himself properly in public. Although his mother was totally illiterate and his father could only just write, Charles credited his mother and father for setting him on the path of Christian discipleship and becoming a pastor.¹⁷ Allie died on 22 August 1954 in Townsville. Her funeral service was held at the Assemblies of God Church at Sturt Street, West End, Townsville.¹⁸

Charles was enrolled at the Victoria Plantation State School in February 1937.¹⁹ Joseph Penprase was the principal (1924–1941). There were two buildings, the "littlies" were taught in the smaller one, the older children were taught by two teachers in the larger building. The average attendance at Victoria Plantation in the 1930s and 1940s was about

90 pupils. Charles' older brother, Victor, and sisters, Beryl and Nina (Joyce), and a younger brother, Philip, also attended the school.²⁰ He and his siblings walked four kilometres to and from school, along rough unsealed roads, through cane fields and past the Victoria Estate sugar mill, then reputedly one of the largest in the southern hemisphere.



Victoria Estate Plantation State School (1940). Charles is in the front row on the far left

In grade three Charles contracted tetanus and almost died. His illness precipitated a move for the Harris family in 1940 to Rowes Bay on the perimeter of Townsville²¹ where Charles could be close to hospital facilities and proper medical treatment. They lived there in a simple corrugated iron hut until the end of the Second World War surrounded by a lot of other Aboriginal families, including the O'Neills, the Quinns and the Stanleys.²² According to notices in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* there was a significant "coloured community" residing at Rowes Bay in the 1940s and the local council was forever threatening to demolish their camp.

Charles' last three years of primary school (1940–1942) were at the Belgian Gardens State School in Townsville. At that time the Pacific War was drawing close to the region so the Australian Government advised civilians to evacuate. Many people did leave and many schools in Townsville were closed. Belgian Gardens State School, however, remained partially open but by 1942 the average attendance at the school dived from over 170 to the mid-twenties in the first two quarters of 1942. It was not possible for the Harris family and many others to leave, so the remaining teachers, parents and older children, dug a jigsaw maze of slit trenches at the school for protection from bombing. In February the 101 Anti-tank Battery camped in the school grounds and an Army medical hospital occupied the whole of the main building and half of the second one. Only the two senior grades attended school. The rest of the children, including Charles, were sent home and placed on a correspondence teaching program. They only had to go to school once a week to have their work corrected and to collect new assignments.

If school pupils can be divided between school haters and school lovers, then Charles, unlike his elder sister Beryl, definitely belonged to the former category. In an interview he gave to Han Spykerboer, editor of *Trinity Occasional Papers*, in 1983, he said that he went to school until he was thirteen but “didn't learn much”;²³ he was, he said with some of the pride of a self-made man to the Indigenous media personality, Mick Thaiday, a “grade six dropout,”²⁴ though it was not unusual at that time in north Queensland for working class children to leave school early. Charlie Roberts, a classmate of Charles at Victoria Estate, who also left school in Grade 5, recalls “there was plenty of work” in those post-Depression days.²⁵

Charles' memories of school are sketchy, sometimes faulty and almost certainly coloured by later experiences of racism and deep feelings of anger about racism in the education system. He mentions nothing of the difficulties of World War II, the wartime restrictions, evacuation plans, the regular air raid drills, the “bomb blast” piles of logs erected two metres apart and filled with sand, the split trenches in the school grounds, long-

range bombers constantly taking off from and arriving back at Garbutt air base nearby, the closure of school because of the threat of invasion or the internment of large numbers of Italian-born immigrants. He says in his short life story that school was “segregated” but it is not entirely clear what he means by this because class photographs from the 1930s and 40s in the centenary history of both schools reveal the presence of other Indigenous children besides the Harris children. Even Charles, himself, in his life story, remembers children from another Indigenous family who attended the same school as he did.²⁶ By any measure, the Victoria Estate School was quite exceptional in its diversity. People like Principal Penprase who defended the Italian community during the War were frequently called “white dagoes.” Penprase admired Italian enterprise, their willingness to work, their openness to people of other cultures; he even learnt Italian in order to teach newly-arrived children who had little or no English.²⁷ Jean Dalliston, a teacher at Victoria Estate in the early 1940s, wrote to her mother saying how wonderful teaching at the school was. The classes seemed to her, a “league of nations” consisting of Italians, Maltese, Aussies and Aboriginals.²⁸ Thelma Lane, daughter of Principal Kenneth McLeod who followed Penprase, recalled the “multicultural nature of the school.”²⁹

Charles’ sister, Beryl, also had a positive story about Victoria Plantation School. Her two best friends were Italians, Joylene Cardno and Pasquala Morselli. Only on one occasion when she was called an “Abyssinian” by an Italian boy (at that time there was trouble between Italy and Abyssinia), did she ever experience a hint of racism and even then, her Italian friend, Pasquala, leaped to her defence, calling the boy a “wog.”³⁰ In her reminiscences for the school centenary, Beryl wrote that she had nothing but wonderful memories of her time at Victoria Plantation State School and counted it a “tremendous blessing” to have gone there because the school had made such a positive contribution to her life.³¹

Beryl’s recollections of school are very different to those of her younger brother. Her detailed and clear-sighted reminiscences in the Victoria Plantation State School Centenary History are sprinkled with the names