

'White light for black days

BARA MILLER is a quietly effective champion of Aboriginal causes

ONCE NOBLES

For the past 25 years, Bara Miller has laboured tirelessly to improve the lot of Aboriginals in remote northern Queensland communities. She has been a key mover in displaced Aboriginals in Ireland, land and has been vocal in highlighting domestic and other social problems in that society.

Calms-based psychologist and researcher has twice married into and has an Aboriginal child. White activists have achieved a lot of respect and affection that 44, enjoys in indigenous communities the state. For several years, director of the state's peak Aboriginal body - the Aboriginal Council - (ACT). Several events have regarded her as one most articulate, if least public, of Aboriginal and Islander

NOVING: The life of Barbara Joyce was seldom born without controversy. She was raised in the coal city of Newcastle, and then studied at the University of Queensland just 12 months before dropping out, effectively to become a full-time activist. (She resumed much later, starting degrees in psychology and sociology.)

Barbara Russell, she was a figure around the university, got out, led for a radical left-wing group. Revitalisation of unity, which was the theme of many churches at the time, 1972 she gave away almost all her assets and black-belted to Canberra she set up the Canberra Community Centre, a centre that is a base for the Aboriginality demonstrations outside Parliament House. In an unrelated drama, she was arrested for holding men not to register for national service. Her first airplane journey was undertaken to a policeman on a Silverwater Jail in Sydney. She was the first woman to be jailed for prescription violations in Australia, or was involved with persuading

the ALP national conference on the Gold Coast in 1975 to vote for an end to Australian economic relations with South Africa. Bob Hawke, then the ACTU chief, was among delegates who were mostly in agreement with the openly spoken but powerfully persuasive lobbyist. Miller later helped organise a campaign against the Portuguese colonial presence in Angola and Mozambique.

Miller moved to Cairns in 1974 to research Aboriginal issues for the aid group International Development Action. She became deeply involved in the plight of an Aboriginal community forced at gunpoint in 1961 to quit its traditional land at Mapoon, 80 kilometres north of Weipa, to make way for bauxite-mining leases. She lobbied hard for the

Aborigines to be allowed to return to Mapoon from the bauxite reserves they had lost, and she lobbied for federal funds to facilitate their return. Miller's campaign was vigorously opposed by the Holt-Petersen government at every stage. Despite being invited to visit Cape York reserves, she was placed under house arrest by a state official upon her arrival. Ultimately she prevailed. Mapoon today is home to a vibrant community of 80 people.

"The Mapoon story taught me a lot about the effect of racism on Aboriginal people," Miller says. "People who had been forced from their land had died in sorrow. It made me determined to remain involved and assist where I could."

While the Mapoon campaign was in full swing, Barbara began living with, and later marrying, Mick Miller, a prominent Cairns Aboriginal leader. Mick had separated from his first wife, Pat

O'Hare, who later became Australia's first Aboriginal magistrate. Barbara helped raise Mick's two daughters - the actor Lydia Miller, and Marilyn, an accomplished dancer - and the couple had a son, Michael, who is now a doctor.

Mick and Barbara Miller were a formidable combination. Together they established the North Queensland Land Council, which fought a series of pitched

battles with the state government and mining companies over land rights. Their home in the leafy Cairns suburb of Edge Hill was a bustling hive of political activity and they scored some notable victories, such as persuading the Dutch company Billiton to forgo its Cape York bauxite leases in the late '70s.

Frequently, however, the counsel and its supporters - which at times included the federal government - found themselves outmanoeuvred by the Holt-Petersen administration. For instance, John Kosciuszko, an aide from the

work continued, albeit in a less activist fashion. In a ground-breaking report commissioned by the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody in 1990, she chronicled an appalling level of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect in remote North Queensland communities. The report detailed how young children and grandchildren were being raped and how many women lived in constant fear of being abducted. It was a sensitive issue which few had previously dared to

tackle. Other major works by Miller include

a comprehensive report funded by the Criminology Research Council on the legal system as it pertains to Aboriginals. Her advice on Aboriginal relations has been sought out by groups ranging from the Wet Tropics Management Authority to the Queensland Police Service. Most recently, she completed an exhaustive study of the tenure of Aboriginal land in Queensland for the ADC.

Meanwhile Barbara is now married to another Aboriginal, Norman Miller, a distant relative of Mick's and a drugs and alcohol counsellor with the Bara Healing Centre in Cairns. Barbara helped Norman kick his own addiction to alcohol.

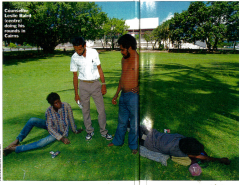
"She helped me understand how it had destroyed my self-esteem and was destroying the self-esteem of Aboriginal

she has felt that her physical safety was at risk.

Arrows fly from both sides, however. Her mother-in-law is reported to be at odds of her wedding and had great difficulty accepting both her Aboriginal son-in-law. "She did not regard herself as racist and was fairly typical of Australians in that sense," Miller says. "She has changed now."

Miller, who has worked as a university lecturer since leaving the ACC in 1981 and now runs her own consultancy, is dismayed at what she claims is a high level of racism - much of it unconscious - in the wider community.

In one survey she undertook for a university thesis, she found that a large majority of Cairns residents regarded Aboriginals as "dirty" and "lazy". She



Barbara Miller: "I feel I have made a contribution."

Norman Miller (right) chats with Myrna Shortless, a member of the local community in Cairns.

people," Norman says. "Aboriginal people trust me. They've never thought of Barbara as just another white person coming along to tell them what to do."

Barbara Miller's life has been so closely intertwined with Aboriginals for so long that she does not always feel comfortable in white society. She has been told by Aboriginal friends and relatives many times that although her skin is white, her heart is black.

"I always seem to have had a tremendous empathy with Aboriginal people," she says. "I think and feel the same way they do, or at least the Aboriginal people I know." She nominates commitment to family and community as the Aboriginal traits she most closely identifies with.

Nonetheless, Miller says her involvement has "not always been a bed of roses." Her high profile has engendered hostility and jealousy among Aboriginals. She was once accused of embezzling ACC funds, but was exonerated by an audit she requested. On odd occasions,

such attitudes make it harder for Aboriginals to break out of a "victim cycle of violence" that prevails in many communities.

Miller is not optimistic about the immediate future. "It is easier to get changes to legislation than changes to the quality of lives," she says. "I have real fears about the situation in relation to domestic violence and other problems. There are lots of programs out there, but they aren't making a lot of headway - I fear it will take generations to resolve."

Response: She adds, however, that the Keating government's claims to the High Court's Mabo decision - the national land rights tribunal and social justice package - is a major step forward.

Miller is now scaling down her involvement with Aboriginal issues. "I feel I have made a contribution," she says. "I no longer believe that the [activist] role in this area is appropriate for non-Aboriginals. I think it is important for their self-determination that they do that themselves." ■