

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 11

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



TED EGAN

SINGER, SONGWRITER



TED EGAN (1932 -)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of Australian Biography (Series 11) 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.

SYNOPSIS

Ted Egan's career has ranged from working with remote Aboriginal communities to songwriter, historian, entertainer and the Northern Territory's top job of Administrator.

Born in 1932, Ted planned to travel to Brazil after high school but he never got further than Darwin, instead joining the public service and local sports teams, becoming coach of a Tiwi Island footy team.

Working mainly in remote areas for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, he became a patrol officer, reserve superintendent, teacher and district officer.

He resigned to start the *Ted Egan Show* in Alice Springs which went for over 25 years.

An author and songwriter, Ted's songs reflect his love of the distinctive Northern Territory humour and characters.

In this interview, Ted reflects on his adventurous life in remote settlements, the inequalities between black and white Australians, the dilemmas of holding power over the communities in which he worked, his changing sensibilities about land rights, a mid-life crisis and career change to pub singer and how a beer carton player came to hold the Northern Territory's highest position.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media, Australian History, SOSE/HSIE, Indigenous Studies, Political Studies, Environmental Studies and Music.

Growing Up

Although Ted Egan is associated closely in the public eye as a tough 'bushie' and outback entertainer who rose to the position of Administrator of the Northern Territory, his early years throughout the Great Depression of the 1930s, and World War Two and the early post-war years during the 1940s, were spent in the northern Melbourne working class suburb of Coburg.

- The program begins with some advice Ted's mother gave him: 'Keep sweet with the cook, and be a good listener'. Discuss in class what you think this means. Do you think it reflects out of date, old-fashioned values or virtues, or might the advice be good for young people growing up today?
- Following from the previous activity, plan and write a short fiction story about the trials and tribulations of growing up, titled 'Keep Sweet with the Cook, and Be a Good Listener'. Will the story be a comedy, a tale about a hard-earned lesson in life?
- Listen again to the anecdote Ted narrates about the shame he felt when his mother had to iron other people's clothes to earn money for the family during the Depression years. In pairs or small groups, work together to plan and draft a scene, or a set of short drama scenes, drawn in any way you think suitable, from this situation. Rehearse a script reading and re-draft as required, then either present the reading or enact the drama to the class.
- Drawing on Ted's memories of American and New Zealand troops in Melbourne during World War Two, carry out further relevant historical research then prepare a double-page magazine spread about life in Melbourne during those years. Use a desktop publishing program to format your presentation, with headlines, text columns, illustrations and captions. Some of your work may be fictionalised; for example, you may wish to include mock interviews with Melbournian locals, or visiting military personnel.
- In your own words write a short historical commentary about the American Marines military hymn referred to satirically by Ted during the program. Do you think Americans would have been offended by the version sung by Australians during the war? Do you think young Australian women would have been offended? Do you think the Australian male attitude expressed in the tune is fair and reasonable? Include a comment on the connection with Australia the song still has today, in the sports field. (See 'Halls of Montezuma' website reference.)
- Find out what it was like to be a 'paper boy', selling the afternoon newspaper (*The Herald*) in the streets of Melbourne (or Sydney, or any other Australian city or large town of some decades ago), then plot and write a story about 'An afternoon in the life of a *Herald* boy (or girl)'.

Darwin, a 'racial fruit salad'

In 1947 Ted left school, and for a while worked at a sheep station in Queensland before eventually landing in Darwin. In 1950 he stowed away with a cousin on a ship bound for Fremantle, ran out of money, returned to Melbourne then arrived back in Darwin, where his long-term career and life in the Northern Territory really began. By this time it is clear that his character and adventurous nature as someone willing to 'have a go', to take a chance, were well formed.

- In order to place Darwin into a geographical context, especially for those who do not live in the region nor are familiar with it, on poster display paper draw a map of the 'top end' of the Northern Territory, ensuring that you include the Tiwi Islands (Bathurst Island and Melville Island), with information about climate, current population statistics, and local Islander languages, communities and ethnic groupings. (See 'Tiwi Islands' website reference.)
- What kind of town was Darwin around the mid-20th century? Was it a wild, uncivilised 'cowboy' town? What was Darwin's purpose, its reasons for existence? Who did it service? What were its business, manufacturing and trading interests? What was its population, and was it growing in comparison with the figures from previous decades? What was its racial and ethnic mix? Was it multicultural? Was it a place of many spoken languages? Was there a large discrepancy of numbers between male and female? In pairs or small groups, carry out some research on what Darwin was like at the time Ted arrived there, then create a poster or website display of text and illustration designed to give a viewing audience a 'feel' for the place, the times, the people and the culture, and whether it has changed or developed in various ways over the past half-century.
- Examine the words of the song about Darwin that Ted sings during the program ('There's every race and colour that ever walked the earth...'). Discuss in class what the song implies about Darwin and the people who live there. Is it simplistic, stereotyped, accurate? Do you think the words are a serious commentary, or meant to be taken lightly? Comment on whether it is purely a white male's viewpoint or not. What role does 'grog' and heavy drinking play in the song? If you were a non-drinker, a woman, an Aboriginal, would life in Darwin be 'an endless barbeque'?
- In 1952, when he was 20, Ted was asked to start an Australian Rules football team of Tiwi Islander Aboriginals in Darwin, and later helped to form teams on Bathurst Island. What is the extent and the cultural importance of football in the general region? In pairs or small groups, carry out research then present a written and illustrated project about this question, including details about the major seasonal football competition played among Darwin and Tiwi Island teams. For example, what are the names of the teams, what are their colours and emblems

Racial laws in the Northern Territory

At the time Ted Egan arrived in the Northern Territory, and for many years after, Indigenous Australians in the Territory were subject to Federal Government control through the Native Affairs Branch. One aspect of the policy of the day was to assimilate 'mixed-blood' Aboriginals into the white European community, often by removing children from their Indigenous mothers and from their Indigenous communities. This was one of the controversial Australian Indigenous issues that eventually led to the *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997.

- Draw a map of the Northern Territory and islands, showing the locations where Ted worked as a patrol officer with the Native Affairs Branch. The places you should mark and label on the map, referred to during the program, are: Maningrida, Borroloola, Groote Eylandt, Yuendumu, Yirrkala. To place these locations into geographical context, include Darwin and Alice Springs on the map.
- Carry out some research then write a short descriptive commentary about the Indigenous communities in at least two of the five locations referred to.
- From the program, and from further research you may wish to carry out, compile an account of the laws and regulations that affected the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory during the 1950s and 1960s. (You may wish to look closely at the Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance Act of 1953. This did not refer to Aboriginal people specifically by name or race, yet its aims were to place controls over the movements of Aboriginal people within and around the Territory. See website references to Racial Laws.)
- Research and write an article of 500-700 words about the legal powers, the authority and the type of work carried out by Northern Territory patrol officers such as Ted, from the 1950s to the 1970s. Design your article for a popular-style magazine, ensuring it is formatted with headings, columns and if possible, illustrations and captions. Include a discussion as to the attitudes of the Indigenous populace towards patrol officers. For example, were they tolerated, welcomed, respected, endured, disliked, ignored?
- Noting the anecdote Ted tells during the program about Bob Secretary, and drawing on other research you have carried out, plan and write a short fiction story about one or more Aboriginal person affected by the Northern Territory race laws. Consider characters, plot events, themes and settings. Will you write the story in the first person, and if so, whose viewpoint will you take?
- In your own words, write a selective biography in 450-500 words of the life of Sir Paul Hasluck (referred to in the program by Ted), concentrating on the work he did as Federal Minister for Territories, 1951-1963, in particular assessing the role he played in administering the lives and welfare of the Indigenous people of the Northern Territory. (See 'Paul Hasluck' in website references.)
- Of his experiences as a patrol officer at Yuendumu, Ted says, 'I was God. And I'm not happy when I say it because I did wield such power'. Examine this sequence of the program, then construct a set of connected personal diary entries as though you were someone in Ted's position, wrestling with his conscience over the issues he had to confront, solve or resolve.

Who owns the land?

As a District Welfare Officer (DWO) during the 1960s, Ted was a government employee, assisting in administering tracts of Crown Land for the Aboriginal populace. Working among Aboriginal people, though, and learning about their traditional links to the land, he became convinced that the official governmental perception of native land control was flawed. Should Aboriginal people have a say in deciding the rules of land usage?

- In pairs, research and write a commentary in 400-500 words about the situation in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the activities of the Nabalco multinational mining company in the Yirrkala district of the Northern Territory, the efforts of the local Indigenous Yolngu people to claim native title of the land, and the role played by the Methodist church, which ran the Yirrkala mission, and the Australian Government, which managed the land and controlled leasing arrangements. Include maps of the district where applicable. (See 'Yirrkala and Nabalco' in website references.)
- Examine the sequence during the program that includes Ted's comments about feeling 'disenchanted with his own people', in his capacity as a DWO at Yirrkala, and the extract from *Pain For This Land*. Drawing on this sequence, and from your research for the previous activity, work in pairs or small groups to devise and draft a short, fictional drama scenario about the differences in perspective towards land ownership and what it means to people. Consider the range of characters, and their attitudes and beliefs, the thematic possibilities, conflicts and tensions, settings and plot events. Rehearse a script reading, revise if necessary, then perform a reading or an enactment to the class. An alternative may be to prepare and produce the drama purely for sound, and to record it for your school's intranet. (Note that *Pain For This Land* is included in *The Yirrkala Film Project*; see Film and TV references.)
- During the program Ted refers to Dr H.C. ('Nugget') Coombs, chairman of the 1968-formed Council of Aboriginal Affairs. Research, plan and write a commentary about Coombs and the work and influence of the Council, in 500-600 words.
- Plan and construct a poster display about the message and meaning of Ted's song, *Gurindji Blues*, looking at the events surrounding the long-term strike of Aboriginal workers at Wave Hill Station. (See 'Gurindji and Lord Vestey', in website references.)

The Ted Egan Show

In 1973 Ted left both his marriage and his employment with the Council of Aboriginal Affairs, and eventually set up his long-running *Ted Egan Outback Show* ('tall tales and outback songs') before being appointed the Northern Territory's 18th Administrator in 2003, for a four-year term.

- Ted refers to the end of his marriage to Rae, and to his resignation from the Public Service, as a 'classic mid-life change'. Discuss in class what you think this is, what might bring it about, and the possible results of it, both positive and negative. (You may wish to interpret and explain his comments about his marriage, that, '... I did the walking. She didn't'.)
- Write a fiction short story about someone undergoing a mid-life change. Will it be a serious drama or a comedy? Will it be presented from a character's first-person viewpoint or not?
- Find out more about the *Ted Egan Outback Show*, then devise a promotional travel magazine advertisement about it, aimed at tourists. (Alternatively, devise and record a short radio promotion about the show.)
- Carry out research on Ted's term as the Northern Territory Administrator, and why he sometimes found himself criticised in the role. Was he an effective and successful Administrator? Was he constrained by his official position? Write two letters to the local newspaper editor, one praising him, the other criticising him.
- Drawing on the program and from any further biographical research you have done, how would you characterise Ted Egan's qualities, achievements and life? Would you consider him to be a role model for younger people? Discuss what you learnt or gained an understanding and appreciation of, from viewing the program.

Media Studies

Carry out the following activities:

- Locate and listen to the words of Ted's song, *The Drover's Boy*, referred to in the program. In small groups, plan a script and scene-by-scene outline for a short film based in any way suitable on the song's historical background and content. You may wish to include a detailed storyboard of text and illustrations of camera shots for an important scene for the film.
- Discuss and write notes on the purpose and the effect of the use of archival film and photographs throughout the program. Do they enhance our understanding of Ted's life, and of any of the issues raised, or are they visual distractions? Provide examples from the program.
- Write a review of the program in 300-400 words for a popular magazine or website aimed at young teenagers.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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H.C. Coombs:

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._C._Coombs

The Drover's Boy film project, never completed:

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Ted Egan:

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www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s1167093.htm

Gurindji and Lord Vestey:

http://www.nfsa.gov.au/digitallearning/mabo/lr_19.shtml

Paul Hasluck:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Hasluck

Land rights in the Northern Territory:

<http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-104.html>

Halls of Montezuma:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marines%27_Hymn

Racial laws in the Northern Territory:

http://www.adc.nt.gov.au/discrimination/what_is_discrimination.html

<http://www.stolengenerations.info/>

<http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item.asp?sdID=62>

Tiwi Islands:

<http://www.landdevcorp.nt.gov.au/news/nt-government-and-land-development-corporation-trying-encourage-foreign-investment-tiwi-islands>

Yirrkala and Nabalco:

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A Film Australia National Interest Program

Director/Producer: Rod Freedman

Writer/Interviewer: Robin Hughes

Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn

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