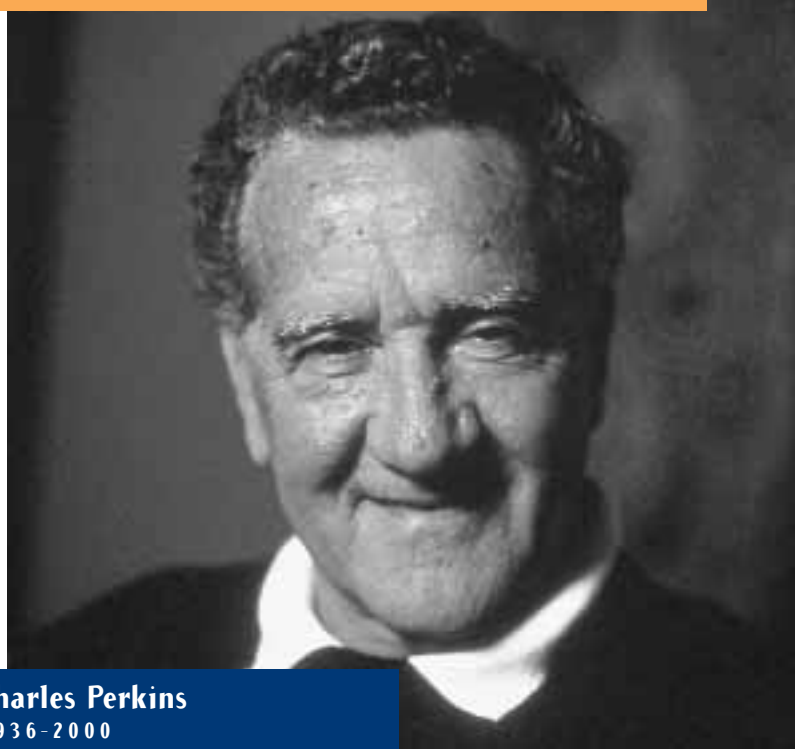


AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

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



Charles Perkins
1936-2000
Aboriginal Activist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 7 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: Charles Perkins

Executive Producers Megan McMurchy, Mark Hamlyn

Director/Producer Robin Hughes **Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1999

Study guide prepared by Kate Raynor © NFSA

Also in Series 7: Jim Cairns, Rosalie Gascoigne, Priscilla Kincaid-Smith, Bill Roycroft, Peter Sculthorpe, Victor Smorgon

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SYNOPSIS

The first Aboriginal Australian to graduate from university, Charles Perkins was also one of the most controversial of Indigenous leaders. As a pioneering Aboriginal spokesman and bureaucrat, his determined and occasionally combative stance and his energetic entrepreneurial and reformist activities, have earned him many enemies as well as admirers.

Perkins's involvement in the Freedom Ride through rural New South Wales in the early 1960s played a crucial role in demonstrating that Aboriginal people could begin to stand up for themselves. His work as a public servant in Canberra brought about many advances for Aboriginal people, but also attracted a great deal of criticism, culminating in his eventual sacking by the Hawke Government. This was followed by an inquiry, which cleared him of the charges that were brought against him. Although he did not return to government administration, he continued to speak out on Aboriginal issues.

This program explores the personal experiences that fuelled his restless energy. It seeks to find the roots of the great anger against white injustice that landed him in so much trouble in the course of a life of exceptional achievement. Perkins gives his own account of his early life in Alice Springs and Adelaide, his youth as a soccer star, his work on behalf of the Aboriginal people and his vision for the future of Australia.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Australian History, Civics and Citizenship, SOSE/HSIE, Indigenous Studies, Contemporary Australian Society, English, Legal/Justice Studies and Politics.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

The Program: Story of a Life

- Did you know anything about Charles Perkins prior to watching this program? If so, has watching this program changed your opinion of him in any way?
- Does your impression of Charles shift over the course of the program?
- Does this program leave you with any questions about Charles?
- The filmmakers intercut shots of Charles responding to questions posed by interviewer, Robin Hughes, with occasional photos and archival footage. Choose four family photos from different periods of your life and use them to construct a series of autobiographical snapshots. Who is in each photo? Who took the photo? Where were you? What was the occasion? What was the mood? Does the photo correspond with your memory of the time? What has happened to the other people (if any) pictured in the photo? How have you changed since then? Do you like the photo? Why/why not?
- Charles shares a number of anecdotes from his life. Choose one of his stories and explain what it tells us about him. Imagine you could tell just one story from your childhood to convey a sense of you and your family. Write this story and then at the end note what you think it reveals about you.
- Choose six adjectives to describe Charles.
- List three qualities you like about Charles.

A Story of Black Australia— 'Second Class is Not Good Enough: Don't Cop Shit When You Don't Have To'

- What is racism? What is prejudice? What is discrimination? Have you ever been the victim of prejudice?
- What is meant by the term 'terra nullius'?
What is meant by a 'black armband view of history'? http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05#ORIGINS
- What is reconciliation? What steps can be taken to achieve it?
- How important are notions such as empowerment, autonomy and self-determination to Charles?
- Research one of the key land rights decisions by the High Court, for example, Mabo or Wik.
- What is the Aboriginal relationship to land? Research some related customary laws and explain their cultural significance.
- Write a report on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Old Parliament House in Canberra.
- Find out all you can about Charles's people, the Arrernte (sometimes also spelt Arrente).
- Charles asks, 'What is an Aboriginal supposed to look like? Aborigines can take many forms'. What are some common (racist?) stereotypes of Aboriginal people?
- Charles claims the creation of ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) served to marginalise Aboriginal affairs. What were his particular concerns? How does ATSIC function?
- What are the key issues facing Aboriginal people today? Using a variety of resources, compile statistics relating to these issues, for example, incarceration rates, infant mortality rates, life expectancy.
- Choose one particular problem confronting Aboriginal communities today, for example, glaucoma, deaths in custody, alcoholism. Imagine you are a politician keen to address this situation. What policy initiatives could you implement that might improve conditions for Aboriginal people in this area? How would you go about developing such policies?

A Story of One Black Life—'You Can't Buy Experience: You've Got To Live It'

- Charles's early days were spent in a police-patrolled compound in Alice Springs. Make a list of the differences between your childhood and what you imagine life in the compound would have been like for a young boy such as Charles.
- Charles describes his mother as a strong, principled person: a fighter who encouraged him to always speak his mind. Her name was Hetti, and she was born around 1900 at Arlturga, east of Alice Springs, to Nellie Ererreke Perkins, an Eastern Arrernte woman, and Burke Perkins, a white miner. Charles cites his mother as the source of his tremendous personal discipline. Who are your role models? Who has had the biggest influence on your life so far?
- Charles's mother, with whom he was very close, sent him away as a young boy because she wanted him to have opportunities she'd never had, 'to get on the road much stronger'. How might Charles' life have been different if he'd never left Alice Springs? Do you think his mother made the right decision?

- While Charles was not one of the Stolen Generations in the sense that he was not forcibly removed from his mother's arms, he did spend his childhood and adolescence institutionalised in a boys' home in Adelaide—a place called St Francis House. His was an unhappy childhood: the only small comfort was the fellowship of other boys, but that too had its limits. He speaks of being chased down the street and called 'nigger', of never being invited to a birthday party or to anyone's home, of never having a girlfriend who would acknowledge his existence in daylight hours. Write a short story describing a situation in which someone feels rejected and marginalised. What sort of effect do you think this kind of treatment would have on the person's attitude to life and their sense of self-worth? Do you think this background makes Charles's achievements all the more remarkable? How do you think an institution such as St Francis House would have wanted Charles to think about his Aboriginality? What does assimilationist mean?
 - What do you know about the Stolen Generations? What reasons were used to justify this cruel and inhumane treatment of Aboriginal families? Several films have been made about this topic, for instance, **Lousy Little Sixpence**, **Stolen Generations**, **Land of the Little Kings**, **Rabbit-Proof Fence**. Watch one of these films to provide context for Charles's hatred of 'the system', what he refers to as his 'burning resentment of white people'. List some of the long-term consequences of this policy.
 - At the age of 15, a priest told Charles that he was too cheeky and disobedient to remain at the boys' home, and he was put out onto the street with his suitcase. Charles says one of his teachers told him he was 'pretty dumb...you haven't got much brains', and suggested he take up a trade as a fitter and turner. Despite hating every moment of his five-year apprenticeship, he completed his training. He rode seven kilometres to and from work at the British Tube Mills each day and lived in a rough boarding house. Imagine you were also living at this boarding house. Describe your impressions of Charles and write an account of some of the other residents.
 - Charles sees his problems as a young adult stemming from two sources: poverty and Aboriginality—'both hurt the same, one heaped on the other'. Is it more difficult for Indigenous people to escape poverty than non-Indigenous people? Find information about the numbers of Aboriginal people living below the poverty line and the sorts of particular problems that poverty poses for Aboriginal communities.
 - Charles's skill as a soccer player sent his life in a new direction. Over the years, sport has provided many opportunities for talented Indigenous individuals to improve their personal circumstances. Aboriginal sporting heroes also perform an important social function, in terms of their impact on the perceptions of the wider community. When charismatic AFL player Michael Long pulled up his football jumper and pointed proudly at his black skin, he created a terrifically potent image. Cathy Freeman's victory at the 2000 Olympics in the 400 metre run was referred to by then-Opposition Leader Kim Beazley as 400 metres of reconciliation. Write a profile of an Aboriginal athlete, detailing his or her background and the obstacles he or she had to confront. How was this sports person portrayed by the media? How prevalent is racism in sport? Do you think Charles would have encountered racism during his years as a professional soccer player?
 - Charles talks of the indignity of a period when Aboriginal people were required to carry passbooks with their fingerprints and references from police and priests just to walk the streets, treated by society as if they were criminals. How does the treatment of Aboriginal people at this time compare with the injustices suffered by black South Africans under apartheid?
 - Charles was happily married to Eileen and they had three children. What do you think he might have been like as a husband and father? Charles's mother was initially against the idea of her son marrying a white woman, but when she met Eileen she liked her. As Charles says, 'She knew Eileen wasn't really like other Australian girls'. What do you think he means by this?
 - Charles suffered terrible kidney disease, necessitating ten-hour sessions of dialysis three times a week. What does this treatment involve? He eventually had a kidney transplant, becoming the longest surviving kidney transplant patient. What can you find out about this procedure?
 - Does it surprise you to hear Charles say that for a long time he was frightened of white people, and that even today they sometimes unsettle him?
 - Why do you think Charles called his autobiography **A Bastard Like Me**?
- ## A Life of Passion and Politics
- What personal qualities does an activist need?
 - Charles was the first Aboriginal person to graduate from university. Why did he choose to study at Sydney University? What personal qualities did Charles need in order to succeed in this pursuit? Why did he feel it was so important to get an education?
 - His first job after graduation was at the newly formed NSW Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs. He saw the four most obvious issues then as: education, employment, housing and health. Choose one of these issues and compare the situation in the 1960s with conditions now. What has changed? How have problems been tackled? Have things improved?
 - Who established the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and in what year? Charles describes this initiative as opening a Pandora's Box. What does he mean by this?
 - Imagine you participated in one of the Freedom Rides. Write an account of your experiences. Can you trace any links between the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the USA and efforts by Australian Aboriginal activists? (Perkins visited America in the mid 1960s and met with Jesse Jackson.)
 - Charles remembers he was often in trouble with the Canberra bureaucracy. What do you think might have led to conflict with his colleagues? He speaks of being aggressive to people he thought were racist and/or stupid. At one point, with three children to support, he was suspended for a year without pay because he called the Western Australian government 'racist and redneck'. Do you think this punishment seems fair, given current standards of political and ministerial conduct?
 - How does Charles characterise his relationship with Gerry Hand?
 - Was Charles for or against national land rights legislation?
 - Charles's turbulent career in Canberra came to an end after he was accused of mismanagement and theft. He was enveloped in scandal, and refers to this as a 'shameful time'. What is 'cronyism'? Charles was eventually exonerated, but it is still a bitter period to reflect on. As he says, 'I used to walk down the streets, and people used to think I was a thief'. Why might Charles have been a political target?

- After the inquiries into his professional conduct, Charles returned with his family to his birthplace, Alice Springs. He speaks of going back to his own country to reclaim his dignity and at this time he underwent tribal initiation, which he explains gave him a sense of focus and inner strength. So-called traditional or tribal cultures are often valorized by the materialistic West for cultural practices that seem to offer participants a greater sense of identity and community than can be found in more secular societies. Why are ceremonies and rites of passage important? Have you done anything significant to commemorate the passage from one period of your life to another?
- Charles says he never relates to the ancestral part of him that is white. His father abandoned the family when Charles was two years old and Charles didn't know he was alive until they met some 30 years later. Imagine you were at this meeting. What might Charles have said to his father? Write a reunion conversation.
- Essay topic: Charles Perkins says, 'We know we cannot live in the past, but the past lives in us'.¹ Discuss.
- Charles speaks of his mixed ancestry and his wife's German roots, noting that their children are 'a great mixture...that's the beauty of Australia. That's what will make Australia great, the merging of all these cultures, all these nationalities and races into something that's truly, uniquely Australian.' Do you agree? What are your roots? What does it mean to you to be Australian?

ENDNOTE

1 www.teachers.ash.org.au/thwaites/perkins.htm

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Books

Bringing Them Home, Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Canberra, 1997

Alex Barton and Marji Hill (eds), **Macmillan Encyclopaedia of Australia's Aboriginal Peoples**, Macmillan, South Yarra, 2000

Rhonda Craven (ed), **Teaching Aboriginal Studies**, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999

Bruce Elder, **Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Mistreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788**, New Holland, Sydney, 1998

Kevin Gilbert (ed), **Inside Black Australia**, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988

David Horton (ed), **Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia**, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994

Charles Perkins, **A Bastard Like Me**, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1975

Charles Perkins, **Welfare and Aboriginal People in Australia: Time For A New Direction**, University of New England, Armidale, 1990

Peter Read, **Charles Perkins: A Biography**, Penguin, Ringwood, revised edition, 2001

Stuart Rintoul, **The Wailing: A National Black Oral History**, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1993

Chip Rowley, **The Destruction of Aboriginal Society**, Penguin, Melbourne, 1972

Anna Rutherford (ed), **Aboriginal Culture Today**, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 1988

Video / DVD / Audio

Blood Brothers: Freedom Ride, Rachel Perkins (director), SBS Television, distributed by NFSA 1993, 55 minutes Charles Perkins reflects on the development of the civil rights movement in Australia. His story is retraced using newsreel footage and dramatic reconstructions.

Charles Perkins, Ken Hannan (director), Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2001, 41 minutes

Aborigines in Australian Society: Charles Perkins Talks with Richard Carleton, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1975 Audio cassette and kit.

Websites

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
www.atsic.gov.au

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
www.aiatsis.gov.au

The Freedom Rides in Australia
<http://freedomride.net>

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice
www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/index.html

National Library of Australia: MS 8047 Papers of Charles Perkins
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms8047>

Parliament of Australia—Parliamentary Library: Indigenous Affairs Resources http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview201617/Indigenousaffairs

University of Sydney—Dr Charles Perkins Memorial Oration: 'On the Human Right to Misery, Mass Incarceration and Early Death', delivered by Noel Pearson, 25 October 2001
<http://sydney.edu.au/koori/documents/oration/oration-2001-noel-pearson.pdf>

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