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STUDYGUIDE

# Kabbarli

## MEETING DAISY BATES

**I**MAGINE THAT THE WOMAN IN centre photograph on the right was coming to talk to your class.

First, write down any impressions you have of her – such as what she was like, what she did, where, who she worked with, how she felt about her work, why she did it, when she was active.

Then list some of the questions you would want to ask her.

Some questions I would like to ask her are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The woman you have just wondered about is Daisy Bates, who worked among Aboriginal people from the early 1900s to her death in 1951.

- ‘Strait-laced do-gooder.’
- ‘Pioneer anthropologist.’
- ‘True friend to the Aborigines.’
- ‘Eccentric recluse.’
- ‘Spreader of untruths about Aboriginal life.’

These are some of the contradictory judgements that have been made about her. Obviously, she was, and still is, a controversial person in Australian history.

So what do we make of this person?

The film *Kabbarli* presents a view of Daisy Bates that we can explore to help understand the various judgements of her, but even more importantly, to see how biographies can be constructed. You can then apply this structure to any other biography, and to any that you write yourself.

## CURRICULUM SIGNPOST

This film will be useful in:

### HISTORY

- critically analysing important people and events in the past
- exploring our culture and identity
- analysing representations of people and issues
- understanding aspects of Aboriginal culture and identity

### ENGLISH

- creating a biography  
To do this we need to study at least five different sets of information about a person:
  - 1 The basic facts about the person
  - 2 The person’s view of herself, who she was, what she did and what it meant to her
  - 3 How others saw her
  - 4 The times in which she lived
  - 5 Our values and attitudes today, and how these shape our judgement of a person

In doing this for Daisy Bates we will look at both what the film says about her, and what other sources exist to help us gather information and make judgements.

## WATCHING THE FILM *KABBARLI*

Watch the film *Kabbarli*, and discuss it using this guide to help you summarise some of the key information and ideas in the film, and the short biographical sketch of Bates to help you understand the context.

## BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF DAISY BATES

Daisy Bates was a young Irishwoman who came to Australia in 1883. She

married a drover, Jack Bates, in 1885 and they had a son in 1886.

In the early 1890s she left her family and travelled to England. She acquired skills that enabled her to work as a journalist.

She returned to Australia at the turn of the century and was briefly re-united with her husband and son. She left them soon after to travel to the Kimberley area of Western Australia to investigate claims of European atrocities against Aboriginal people. Her report was a ‘whitewash’ but she became passionately interested in Aboriginal languages and culture.

In 1904 Daisy Bates was appointed by the Western Australian government to study the languages and customs of Western Australian Aborigines. She spent 6 years, travelling extensively around the vast Western Australian frontier and prepared a manuscript for publication entitled: *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*. (The manuscript was rejected for publication and was not published until 1985, 35 years after her death).

In 1910, Daisy fled white society and she set up a camp at Eucla, on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain. Here, she continued her ethnographic investigation of the life and customs of Western Australian Aborigines. Around this time Daisy Bates also became a welfare worker and cared for the Aboriginal people who were suffering cultural and physical dislocation as a result of the European colonisation of their land. She moved to Ooldea in 1919, where she stayed for the next sixteen years – and where we are first introduced to her in the film. This was the period when the transcontinental railway had been built, exposing many Aboriginal people to Europeans for the first time.

Ernestine Hill, the well-known journalist and writer, came to see her in 1932, and











JUSTIN SZ AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION

like fencing them into a sort of native zoo. (Pages 55-56)

On the positive side [of the debate about her abilities as an anthropologist] are her genuine additions to knowledge about the Aborigines of the west and her innovative methods of discovering this knowledge. (Page 65)

Finally, the questions remain: why did Daisy Bates choose a life of privation and discomfort? Was it ambition to make a name for herself? Was it genuine liking and concern for the Aboriginal people? Was it an abiding curiosity to find out more about them? After spending much of the last twelve years studying her papers and everything written about her, and interviewing a few very old people who had met her, I have to confess I cannot answer these questions. I believe that it was a mixture of all these suggested motives that kept her at her self-imposed task. (Page 65)

(Isobel White, 'Daisy Bates: Legend and Reality' in Julie Marcus ed, *First In Their Field. Women and Anthropology*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993)

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She came to the Stone Age to learn, giving in return. She was neither teacher, missionary, nor nurse, but all three as the need arose . . . All she owned, her personal income with all she could earn, was given to meet the needs of her people, to lighten their miseries, providing, defending, crusading, advising, explaining white man's law to the primitive,

tribal law to the white, playing with the children, caring for the sick, comforting the dying. (Page 7)

Sixty of her ninety years were spent in Australia, which became her own dearly beloved country, her home ground. Even so, she was never typically Australian. She was obsessed with the Victorian vista of a boundless, deathless Empire on which the sun would never set. The well-spring of all her sacrifice and devotion was to be found in the clichés of England's greatness, in kind hearts and coronets, in the White Man's Burden, in her adoration of the divine right of kings. Royal grace and favour were the mainspring of her ideals, the one reward she wished for through the arid years. (Pages 11-12)

(Ernestine Hill, *Kabbarli. A Personal Memoir of Daisy Bates*. Angus and Robertson, 1973)

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Though applauded for the self-sacrifice of her welfare work, Daisy Bates had no illusion about her own motives, which she privately identified with those that had previously impelled her to enjoy such sports as hockey, tennis and fox hunting.

She wrote some 270 newspaper articles about Aboriginal life, valuably sensitive accounts of cultures customarily presented in the press as unintelligibly bizarre. However, her repeated, emphatic assertions concerning Aboriginal cannibalism aroused much controversy. She strongly opposed miscegenation; her

belief that Aboriginal full-bloods would become extinct unless segregated from Europeans was proved wrong by the population statistics of the years following the Passing. Nevertheless her widely read defeatist views helped prod governments into action in medicine and child care.

R.V.S.Wright, *Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1891-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne

- 1 What do the critics stress? Why do they find Bates such a hateful figure?
- 2 Do you think those criticisms are fair?
- 3 What do the supporters stress? Why do they find Bates such an admirable figure?
- 4 Do you think that praise is fair?
- 5 Why is Daisy Bates such a controversial figure in Australian History now?
- 6 What is your opinion and evaluation of her?
- 7 Do you think the film *Kabbarli* is a good representation of her life, and of the controversy and divided opinion that surrounds her now?

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