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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: \_\_\_\_\_

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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







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*I have never made servants or attendants of them. I have waited upon the sick and the old, and carried their burdens, fed the blind and the babies, sewed for the women and buried the dead – only in the quiet hours gleaning, gathering, learning . . . knowing how soon it would be too late.*

*My work, as always, was confined to attendance upon the sick and feeble, the very old, and the very young. For the full-grown healthy male natives I had neither rations nor blankets. I encouraged their hunting-crafts and the subsistence upon their own foods, which were to the natives plentiful in good seasons, nourishing and suitable.*

(Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines*, John Murray, London, 1966)

### **C: SOME CRITICS OF DAISY BATES**

Daisy Bates: [wrote] *The Passing of the Aborigines*, the title of which reflects her conviction that the Aborigines were a dying race. It is this view (which led to her paternalistic and condescending behaviour towards Aboriginal communities) and her unsubstantiated accounts of cannibalism amongst indigenous communities which have made her unpopular.

(Extract from *Frontier*, [www.abc.net.au/frontier/glossary.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/frontier/glossary.htm))

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Her book, *The Passing of the Aborigines*, published in 1938, by its very title was [seen as] evidence from someone who knew them that the race was finished. In more sinister ways the book implicitly conformed that no-one could be blamed for this. (Page 148)

A developed capacity for self-delusion was her defence against the unbearable, whether it was the orphanage, the fact of being born to the wrong class, or her husbands and her child . . . In her own way she loved the Aborigines, but she loved them when they served her needs and played the role she had designed for them. (Page 169)

(Richard Hall, *Black Armband Days*, Vintage, Sydney, 1998)

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The people she writes about are represented as barely human, and certainly not as deserving any recognisable rights, justice or citizenship, in their own country, which Bates in her writing claims for England and Empire. Yet while these concepts are distressingly absent, there is much in her writing which dwells on her own selflessness, her sense of duty, and her devotion to the welfare of the Indigenous population. (Page 52)

The tragedy is that [her] book sold well, overseas as well as in Australia, and was accepted as an authoritative and accurate account of the state of the Aborigines: that the race was dying, that they were cannibals and baby killers, that those of mixed descent were a horror who could not fit anywhere, and that those who were 'fully Aboriginal' should be kept isolated and segregated to prevent any more products of mixed unions, were all baseless and destructive assumptions promoted through Bates's book. (Page 58)

With Daisy Bates, the more I have read of her work, the more I have read about her, the stronger the antipathy I have felt. I have disliked her, and the image of herself that she promoted, so much, I have felt that it might be better not to work on her, she has, after all, questioned as an anthropologist and exposed as a racist and a liar. There is no need to write about her or to become involved in the continued exposure of her work; it might be better to let her sink like a stone.' (Page 59)

Ann Standish, 'Devoted Service to a Dying Race?': Daisy Bates and *The Passing of the Aborigines*, in Joy Damousi and Katharine Ellinghaus (eds), *Citizenship, Women and Social Justice*, History Department, The University of Melbourne, 1999)

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What [Daisy Bates] is remembered for . . . is her philanthropic dedication to various groups of tribal Aborigines

dispossessed of their land and cultural continuities and decimated by white diseases. She devoted nearly fifty years to nursing and feeding these people and recording their lives and deaths . . . Onto the figure of Bates as sacrificial mother could be displaced white Australian guilt for the colonialist crimes of dispossession and genocide. Her martyrdom, then and now, precluded the need for apologies or reconciliations, or even acknowledgement of responsibility for more than a century of systematic, if often unofficial, discrimination . . . The images of Aboriginal people [in her book] as hopelessly dependent, 'irredeemably primitive and moribund', coupled with the outrageously inaccurate but seductively sensationalist portrait of a race of infanticides and cannibals . . . make up what one academic has called 'the most destructive book written on Aborigines'. (Pages 1-2)

Rowena Mohr, 'Neo-colonialist Hagiography and the Making of an Australian Legend: Daisy Bates', *Lateral*, Issue 2 1999

### **D: SOME MORE SYMPATHETIC ASSESSMENTS**

I believe that in her writing about the Aborigines of Western Australia she told the truth about her findings, though later in life, when she was living in South Australia, she sometimes exaggerated in order to make her articles saleable to the newspapers (thus earning money she badly needed for her own survival). Moreover she was untruthful about her own past life because she was consumed by ambition for upward mobility in a world that had not been kind to her. (Pages 47-48)

She always regarded miscegenation [the mixing of the races] as unspeakably horrible and believed, as did many of her contemporaries, that 'half-castes' shared bad traits of both races and the good traits of neither. She was not afraid to say so, providing a reason for the dislike and disdain she inspired in those Aborigines who were forming political organisations in the 1920s and 1930s. There is no doubt that she had the welfare of the full-descent people at heart even though she advocated ill-considered measures that today sound



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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