Short Biography on Dr Wayne Atkinson winner of T.G. Tucker Award, 2017

Background:

Wayne Atkinson is a proud Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrong man. His parents grew up on Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve (1888-1938) but his early years were lived at a place called The Flat, a fringe settlement of bush huts on the Goulburn River at Mooroopna. The Cummeragunja community had gone on strike for independence in 1938. They decided to leave the government controlled reserve with its oppressive white management, and the continued dispossession of the lands that had been allocated to them. They moved across the Murray River into Victoria to seek a better life of justice and racial equality for their people and set up a shanty settlement on the Goulburn River. This was the community where Wayne lived before moving to Echuca on the Murray River with his extended family and grandparents in the early 1950s.

Wayne’s journey has taken him from early school leaver to PhD graduate, a journey grounded in the message from his parents that he was equally capable as the white man. They taught him to never take a backward step from racism and to stand strong for his people’s rights. His family’s proud assertion of Yorta Yorta identity supported his claim to be culturally different but equal.

He became a University lecturer, teaching the next generation of Kooris and non-Kooris about Yorta Yorta culture, about their land rights struggle and their long history of
political activism. He learned to speak strong and clear about the ancestors who inspired him and helped to ground his political views in an Indigenous world view.

The battles he has fought provide a profound insight into the journey back from experiencing the negative effects of colonisation and oppression. First, reconnecting with his ancestors and seeking his tribal heritage as something to give him pride, not shame. Then grounding his Aboriginal identity and becoming one with Indigenous people in Australia and overseas. There was the journey to empowerment and equality, which took him along the academic path to assert the right of Indigenous people to own and teach their history and culture, based on an Indigenous world view.

He was at the front of the cultural renaissance in Victoria in the 1980s when Victorian Kooris asserted their claims for land and their rights to the management and control of their cultural heritage. This was a major victory that saw the reform of existing and antiquated heritage laws. It also culminated in the empowerment of local communities through legislation that recognised prior ownership of cultural heritage and the return of cultural materials to traditional owner groups in Victoria—a model that was emulated in other states.

His personal path connected with Yorta Yorta tribal aspirations. He became the Research Officer for the Yorta Yorta Nations as they pursued their Native Title land rights claim. They had been stripped of their land by the act of settlement, when the British declared Australia ‘terra nullius’ (literally ‘land belonging to no one’), and now they wanted it back. They especially wanted their heartland, the rivers and forests with so many reminders of the thousands of years their ancestors lived there and cared for the land, and so many stories of their family camps and fishing. Land is their heritage, their identity, their history, and also their chance for employment and the same economic prosperity enjoyed by the wider society.

Wayne was a leader throughout the claim process, documenting the depth and breadth of Yorta Yorta connections with their ancestral lands, and communicating with government, lawyers and anthropologists. Dealing with the huge industry that emerged from the Native Title process was a huge learning curve and Wayne was at the forefront of the story. He was at every session as the claim slowly made its way through court after court. The Yorta Yorta people put their case to the Native Title Tribunal, then the Federal Court, and finally to the highest court, the High Court of Australia in Canberra. The Yorta Yorta waited patiently for the Anglo legal system to deliver justice.

The Yorta Yorta land claim took nearly a decade and was unsuccessful on this occasion. This was a huge setback and illustrated yet again the endless barriers to justice. But the process enriched the Yorta Yorta community through bringing them together to give witness – their genealogies, their connection to their lands, and their shared aspirations.
After the promise of land through the legal process was exhausted, the Yorta Yorta regrouped and joined non-government organisations and social justice groups to fight for a National Park to protect their heartland, the Barmah and Millewa Forests. It took eight long years to achieve a positive outcome – a National Park under Yorta Yorta and State Government joint management.

Again Wayne provided inspiring leadership as he did with the Racial Vilification case against right-wing journalist Andrew Bolt in Melbourne in 2011. The case saw a major victory for Indigenous Australians in the court which found Bolt guilty of breaching Racial Discrimination laws.

Wayne continues his work in Education and teaching his Oncountry Learning course now in its 15th Year as a community based education program. He sees education as an empowerment tool for his people and where his contribution to the Indigenous struggle is most valued. The course has elevated the concept of Oncountry learning to new levels and is now a model being adopted by other courses at the University of Melbourne.

See: http://waynera.wordpress.com/