

Discovering Hidden Beauty

by Jean K. Carman

with Bev Polzin, Australia Yearly Meeting Secretary

I first met Jean Carman in Brisbane last September, as she was celebrating her 90th birthday; one of her ways of celebrating was to take a journey in a hot air balloon. I think it was in her eighties that she took up playing the harp when her eyesight was failing!

Jean is certainly seen here as the pioneer in extracting dyes from eucalypts. I think she may have been in her 60s when she started this. Her husband, a chemist, gave her some hints about how to conduct such experiments.

She was profiled in a book published last year called Friends of the Forest, a Queensland publication. Jean says that Brooklyn Botanic Gardens library has a copy of her book, Dye-making with Eucalypts.

Jean Carman is a member of Queensland Regional Meeting.

—Bev Polzin

During 1968 my husband and I came to Brisbane to live. I tried to find a church which would give me the same friendship and spiritual support that I had received from the church that we attended in Victoria. A few years later a friend took me to a meeting for worship at the Religious Society of Friends. There I felt a sense of freedom and a peaceful atmosphere in which I could think through my problems. I happily accepted the Quaker way of living and I took part in street marches and rallies for peace.

I quietly carried on with my research with the eucalypt dyes and I completed the diploma of Visual Arts at the Kelvin Grove College of Adult Education.

Eucalypts are native to Australia, Papua/New Guinea and islands north. Dyes are extracted mainly from the leaves. I have used the wood and the bark and the flowers, too, which always give shades of red. It is a color range similar to what the aboriginal people have shown in their dyes. The colors range from red to grey to black, but the colors are basically the colors of the earth.

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I have used the dyes in pictures, screen printing, block printing, tie-dyeing. I began with dyeing wool, which I used for knitting and weaving. Later I extended it to dyeing cotton and silk (silk has been particularly beautiful.) I have used the traditional 'mordants' to give a greater range of color.

In 1991 I was offered the AM Award, member of the General Division of the Order of Australia, for Service to the Arts through the study of natural eucalypt dyes, and to the community. [BP: This is an Australian government award to honor people who have excelled in some way in the civilian sphere; it is seen as *very* prestigious.]

I received a letter from an old friend in which she said that she had been asked to write a letter of recommendation for me to receive an Award. She had written the letter but in it she stated that she did not think I would accept the Award as I was a Quaker, as Quakers did not accept such awards. I don't think that earlier Quakers would ever accept an honor for anything one had done, especially an award for something in the arts, which was not considered of serious value. There is a general non-valuing of the arts among Quakers.

For a time I felt like rejecting the Award. But during the years that I had spent extracting the natural dyes from 300 different species of eucalypts, I had build up a kind of spiritual relationship with them. I was discovering the hidden beauty, something new and beautiful about them. This I called "the Hidden Beauty of Australia. Later I began to apply that idea to other things in the world around me and to the people living in it.

So I accepted the Award, feeling that in so doing I was honouring the eucalypts. But there were other Quakers who did not agree with me.

That was the beginning of my drift away from Quakers. The world of colour, beauty, music, art, drama and the spoken word became more important to me. In it I found my real self. In a world of like-minded people I was able to develop skills and creativity by taking part in these activities. My God is with me in these gifts the world has given to me and these gifts have assisted me in my journey towards blindness.

I have hardly ever used the Award, but at Kerry Holland's Portrait Exhibition, I am proudly and thankfully allowing "AM" to be placed beside my name under her portrait of me done with paints made from the eucalypt dyes.

From the foundation of Quakers, members have been deeply concerned with social problems, victims of persecution, poverty and injustice. Even now when they are more liberal in their thinking, I have felt the distinction. Quakers are now accepting awards, but still only for social involvement.

But I now have support for my belief about the value of the arts. For some time music has been taught as a therapy in the universities. Other branches of the arts are being used as avenues of healing in many mental and nerve-related illnesses. Painting, sculpture, pottery and other crafts

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are very valuable right through to old age. All these activities help in the healing of the body and mind. I must also include beauty, colour and the gift of laughter. There is also the imagery and the inspiration of the spoken word.

As my body has aged and my sight diminished, I am experiencing the value of these God-given gifts in my journey towards blindness, especially colour and music.

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