

BITTER RHYME

BRISBANE'S aboriginal poetess, Kath Walker, is one of Australia's most seasoned battlers for aboriginal equality.

FROM JOHN
BOX IN
BRISBANE

Her latest weapon is a book of 30 bare-fisted poems which have as their general theme:

*"We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism,
Black advance, not white ascendance;
Make us equals, not dependants."*

Mrs Walker, 43, and the mother of sons aged 18 and 11, chalked up two firsts with her book: "We Are Going".

It is the first book published by an aboriginal. It broke all sales records for a book of Australian verse. In the first four days after its release Brisbane bookshops sold 700 copies. Already the publishers, Queensland's Jacaranda Press, are working on a second edition.

"Intolerance"

"We Are Going" is a hard-hitting, no-holds-barred book, and because of this many people will not like or approve of it.

Take, for instance, this stanza from "Intolerance":

*"When blacks are banned,
as we know well,
From city cafe and hotel,
The stink of Little Rock we smell."*

Kath Walker, who will come to Melbourne tomorrow to promote the book, was born in Bulimba, Brisbane. She lived most of her young life on Stradbroke Island, off the south coast of Queensland.

At 13 she started work as a

domestic for 2/6 a week. Three years later, she wanted to become a nurse, but was turned down because she was an aboriginal.

When World War II broke out she joined the Army as a switchboard operator. At the end of the war she took a stenography course under a rehabilitation scheme for ex-servicemen and women.

Mrs Walker is Queensland secretary of the Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement League, secretary of the Queensland State Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, executive member of the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League, and member of the Union of Australian Women and the Realist Writers' Group.

When I called on Mrs Walker at her cottage in the Brisbane suburb Buranda, she said: "I don't believe that I'm a poet — but other people have told me I am."

Two of those "other people" were Queensland poets Judith Wright and James Devaney.

Mrs Walker made no bones about the fact that she was once a member of the Communist Party.

"But I discovered that this was not the way. After all, the aboriginals had a TRUE form of Communism thousands of years before the whites came here," she said.

"I don't care about party politics. All I want is advancement for my people.

"I want absolute equality. I

do NOT want my people to be black replicas of the white race.

"One of these days, aboriginals and whites should sit down and have a round table conference on what can be done.

"The first step is to give the Federal Government the control of aboriginals. At the moment, every State in Australia has differing laws on aboriginal rights. We can never be fully integrated until there is one set of rules.

Integrated

"I believe that the aboriginal will be fully integrated within three to four generations — some optimists think it will happen much sooner."

Mrs Walker said that she felt a bond between her fight for aboriginal equality and the American negroes' tussle for civil rights.

"I don't like to say this, but every time I hear of a successful passive protest by American negroes it makes me glad I'm black," she said.

Some of Mrs Walker's poetry seems to jab at Christianity. These lines come from a poem called "Color Bar":

*"The Christianity you hold
so high
Is but a lie,
Justice a cant of hypocrites,
content
With precedent."*

But, she explains, it's not Christianity she's against, but the hypocrisy of practical

Christianity when applied to the aboriginal.

Mrs Walker's mother was committed to a church home when she was 14, where she was tutored in detail on the Bible, but was not taught to read or write.

In "The Dispossessed," she says: "*They brought you Bibles and disease, the liquor and the gun. . .*"

She also has pretty definite views on the late Albert Namatjira: "*Namatjira, they doomed your art, They called you genius, then broke your heart.*"

"But don't get the wrong idea," Mrs Walker said. "I am not anti-white, and I believe that most Australians are NOT anti-aboriginal.

"I love Australia and Australians — black and white.

"All I want is equality. I want my people to have a chance."

The title of Mrs Walker's book, she says, is a "double-header."

"It could mean that the aboriginal is dying out, forgotten and ignored," she said. "Or it could mean that we are advancing. It all depends on what can be done toward integration."

This is how she sums up this thought in the last few lines of the title poem:

*"The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going."*