



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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expand his connections with Aboriginal families along the east coast and develop an understanding of the Malay language. After the war, travelling as a wrestler with tent boxing troupes provided an outlet for the restlessness resulting from war service and a continuation of the male camaraderie he'd grown used to. It was a hard life but I suspect that like many Aboriginal men of his generation he was "easy-going" in the best sense, able to bear physical hardship, and with a greater interest in people and connections than material comforts. Eventually Alick worked with Pastor Doug Nicholls and played important roles in the development of the first Aboriginal organisations in Victoria.

Broome and Manning make it clear that wrestling was an important part of Alick's life for many years and they relate some absurdly funny tales of Alick's role as a gee (a member of the boxing troupe who pretends to be a member of the public). In one prearranged script, boxing tent owner Selby Moore disqualified Alick during a bout and refused to pay him. Alick made a fuss, and, speaking in broken English, found a policeman and brought him back to the tent to plead his case. A crowd gathered and Moore said, "He's rough and he's dirty, the Greek, and I don't want him near the tent. I'm disqualifying him. You people don't want him near the tent do you?". Inflamed by a sense of natural justice of course the crowd did, and trouped into the tent to see Alick wrestle for another sold-out house.

Alick left school at the age of 12 and his intelligence actualised in an inexhaustible interest in people. The negative consequence of his lack of formal education, and qualifications, as Broome and Manning show, was that Alick was somewhat adrift in the latter stages of his career, in the newer, more rigid, impersonal bureaucracies of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. One aspect of Alick's intelligence was his recall of facts, faces and families. This provided the impetus to his copying and recording of historical photographs and later, the undertaking of major genealogical projects on behalf of Victorian Koories in the 1980s. Professor Colin Tatz noted that the genealogies, notwithstanding the complexity of the family structures, and Alick's lack of formal educational qualifications, were done "in a thoroughly professional way". The results of this research are now stored in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Alick wasn't one of those angry, disappointed non-Aboriginal people who use Aboriginal people to ventriloquise their own resentments. And despite his long involvement with Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal politics one never had the sense of the political operator when meeting him: there was no furtive sizing-up, or evaluation on the basis of some imputed political alignment, or fragment of gossip;

when you met Alick you met him as a human being. With this in mind it's disappointing, if understandable, that Alick's motives in carrying out this research were misunderstood or misrepresented by some Koories.

Most people who knew Alick in a professional capacity would have been surprised at the affinity he had with the citizens of the tiny Muslim nation of Brunei Darussalam. Broome and Manning relate that while travelling in England Alick struck up a conversation with a Brunei family, calling on the Malay language he had learnt some 30 years before in the Australian Army. A private and important friendship developed with this Brunei family and their relatives, and in the latter part of his life he visited regularly. As you would expect, the Islam that Alick related to was an Islam that mirrored his own philosophy of brotherhood. Brunei played an important role for Alick in his final illness and Broome and Manning describe how Alick, when he knew the end was coming, prepared himself for that transition by making solitary journeys throughout Brunei, often into the forests. This is a particularly poignant section of the biography as it describes a gregarious man with a passion for people and life making his final farewells.

In a fine passage Broome and Manning write that for Alick life "was a journey to oneness". There was certainly an element of genius in Alick's ability to untangle and identify the essential connections and commonalities under the diversities of individual temperament, race, religion and culture. For those who never had the chance to meet Alick, Broome and Manning recreate the remarkable life and personality of an exemplary Australian. As intercultural and racial connection becomes more the norm, and to an extent, inevitable, the complexities of identity and genealogy should be a matter of acceptance and celebration rather than denial. *A Man of All Tribes* is a timely production that provides us with more generous perspectives for thinking about the nature of identity and what it means to be Australian.

## ABORIGINAL VICTORIANS: A HISTORY SINCE 1800

Richard Broome

Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2005, xxv+467pp, ISBN 1741145694

Reviewed by Lynette Russell

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Over the past few years we have witnessed a vociferous and often vitriolic set of debates around the Indigenous histories of Australia. These have been popularly labelled the "history wars". These "wars" have emerged broadly along political lines, with "black armband"

views of the past seen to represent a left-wing (or politically correct) version of historical events, while “white blindfold” views are the perceived domain of the conservative or right-wing lobby. The prime proponent of this conservative view has been Keith Windshuttle. The source of most of these debates being a number of articles published in the magazine *Quadrant* and his privately published 2003 book *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* (see also his “Doctored evidence and invented incidents in Aboriginal historiography” – Windshuttle, 2003). In response, many distinguished historians have entered this contestation including Lyndall Ryan, Henry Reynolds and Bain Attwood. In my opinion, the debate is most succinctly and effectively dealt with in Attwood’s latest book, *Telling the truth about Aboriginal history* (Attwood, 2005).

The public nature of this debate and its perceived national importance has been fuelled by interventions by Prime Minister John Howard expressing a desire for heroic narratives of mateship and notions of a “fair go”. It was therefore with little surprise that in the Prime Minister’s Australia Day Speech of 2006, he declared that:

the time has also come for root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools, both in terms of the numbers learning and the way it is taught. For many years, it’s been the case that fewer than one-in-four senior secondary students in Australia take a history subject. And only a fraction of this study relates to Australian history. Real concerns also surround the teaching of Australian history in lower secondary and primary schools. Too often history has fallen victim in an ever more crowded curriculum to subjects deemed more ‘relevant’ to today. Too often, it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of ‘themes’ and ‘issues’. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated (Howard, 2006).

The question of teaching history, its methods, themes and substance has been of concern to many, particularly as some high schools are no longer teaching Australian or Indigenous history at the senior levels. It is therefore, a great delight to be able to review and consider Richard Broome’s latest book *Aboriginal Victorians* in light of these concerns.

Broome is well-known as a meticulous archival researcher, who regularly produces empirically rich historical analyses, of which *Aboriginal Victorians* is no exception. Although I have a personal preference for the author to establish and consider their own subject position and relationship to their material, in the case

of this book, and its target audience, it would seem that the approach taken is appropriate. Importantly, perhaps, it also enables the book to fulfill one of the Prime Minister’s requests to produce histories that attempt objectivity and narrative rather than themes and issues.

This book is set to stand the test of time and become an important book for teachers and students alike. The overall structure of the book is chronological with some significant themes woven through. The primary theme would be of “survival”. As Broome notes, literally in his first words, some people have “expressed surprise that “there were any Aboriginal people left in Victoria”” (p. xi). While such invisibility seems bizarre and incomprehensible to anyone familiar with the Koorie community it does suggest that there remains a perception that black skin equals Aboriginal while white skin equals invisibility. Broome sets out to document how the communities, as they stand today, came about and emerged from the history of colonialism. He reveals the complex ways that Aboriginal people and communities accommodated the newcomers and how many families incorporated non-Aboriginal Australians into their families, and kin networks.

The book begins with an exploration of the time before European colonisation and blends Aboriginal oral tradition with recent archaeological research. Although of necessity it presents a homogenised view based on an artificial geo-political region, it is nonetheless a useful overview. I wish I had this at my disposal when a few years ago a Year 12 high school teacher asked me for a general discussion of Victoria Aboriginal life and I discovered that none existed in a form suitable for a general or student audience.

The time before the “whites” is followed by “Meeting Strangers” the first chapter of a section appropriately called “Wild Times: 1800–1850”. This section looks variously at the early contact/colonial period in which the city (town) of Melbourne began and was for many years filled with “large numbers” (p. 15). As such this was one of the places where intense and occasionally conflict ridden interactions took place. Not surprising over a century later this same place became the site of Aboriginal activism and political action (Chapter 14).

Importantly Broome neither glosses over, nor over-plays the racial violence in colonial Victoria. He adds new insights to the period of conflict, showing that these were highly regional and highly specific. Often the conflict was the result of idiosyncratic cross-cultural interactions which differed substantially from place-to-place. One cannot help but feel this book has the empirical rigidity to withstand the attacks of the right who call for more documentation and less speculation about matters of violence and massacre. Yet *Aboriginal Victorians* also shows what was at times horrific levels of death, disease and destruction.

The section of the book that deals with the period after 1850, is entitled "Transformations: 1850–1886". This period was a time of great flux and fluidity, a time when Aboriginal people, whose population was by now horrendously decimated, were variously ignored and neglected, incarcerated on missions and reserves and promised a place of their own being acknowledged as a free and autonomous people. It was also a time of broken promises and outright lies. Key characters dominate this period, emerging as leaders and Broome evokes a real sense of their personalities with an evocative writing style. William Barak and Billibellary, for example, both come across as men who negotiated a long and politically fraught struggle. Perhaps most distressing of all is that this continuing struggle would be recognised by both men as existing through to the present.

The mission period of isolation and "protection" resulted in an entirely unpredictable and unexpected outcome. Within the reserve and mission system Aboriginal people were able to expand their kinship ties as they developed familial relationships with new groups of people. The result of this is well-documented by Broome who explores with sophistication the emergence of what he calls "New Communities". Although the mission period was in many ways genocidal there are many interesting things to emerge in this period, and even the relevant legislation of the time reveals the complexity and perhaps even ambivalence of the authorities' responses. Tragically, as Broome shows, by the late nineteenth century government legislation, particularly the 1886 and 1890 Acts had a devastating effect of Aboriginal families. Life under the Acts is shown by Broome to have been extremely harsh. Yet the obvious hope, optimism and determination to survive as a people comes through the historical record and the remembered stories.

The last section of the book is dedicated to what Broome terms an Aboriginal "Renaissance" which he documents occurring from 1970 onwards. This section deals with issues of autonomy and identity. On the former Broome is exemplary, he presents the development of the many Aboriginal organisations and services; the extra-ordinary moments such as when the freehold title to Lake Tyers and Framlingham Reserves were handed to the communities; some of the innovative economic initiatives many have undertaken (such as the boomerang factory of Belgrave and various art shops) and perhaps most importantly of all the emergence of a group of Aboriginal people who had university training and education. Perhaps less successful is the latter section on the issue of identity. It is difficult to imagine a more fraught topic for a "white" historian to attempt to document. And although I have no quibble with what Broome has written, I felt it did not go far enough. Being Aboriginal or Koori is not necessarily quite as rigid as Broome seems to suggest. It can be shifting, fluid and even at times ambivalent as some have observed

(e.g. Minchinton in his web-based art-text project *Void: Kellerberrin walking*). None of which detract from the experience of identifying in a particular way.

As is usual for an Allen and Unwin publication the production values are high and there seem to be few typographical or printing errors. However, if the book goes to a second edition (as I am sure it will), Richard and Christina Frankland's names should be spelt correctly. Overall this is an excellent exploration of an important area of Australian history. It will be a valuable tool for teachers of Indigenous histories at school and university level. I shall certainly be recommending my students read it as I know of no other place they could get all that detailed information in an accessible and engaging form.

#### References

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## INDIGENOUS EDUCATION AND THE ADVENTURE OF INSIGHT: LEARNING AND TEACHING IN INDIGENOUS CLASSROOMS

Neil Harrison

Post Pressed, Flaxton, 2004, x+219pp, ISBN 1876682590

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In this book Harrison has given a comprehensive, personal account of his journey as a teacher and researcher in Indigenous education over an extensive period, 1978–2001. Highlighted is the slippery nature of positioning oneself as a practitioner embracing the challenges of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations.