

Making a Difference: Fifty Years of Indigenous Programs at Monash University, 1964–2014

by Rani Kerin

xii + 158pp., Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, 2016,
ISBN: 9781925377248 (pbk), \$29.95.

Review by Russell McGregor
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Rani Kerin recounts the story of Australia's oldest university unit devoted to research into contemporary Aboriginal issues. Founded by political scientist Colin Tatz at Monash University in 1964, the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs (CRAA) has since undergone innumerable name changes, overhauls, physical moves, faculty moves, crises, contractions and expansions. It still survives. Indeed, it thrives, now under the name Monash Indigenous Studies Centre (it was the Monash Indigenous Centre when the research for this book was completed). There is also an associated support unit, the Yulendj Indigenous Engagement Unit, to which Kerin devotes part of her text, although her main focus is the CRAA in its various iterations.

Many of the figures who feature prominently in the book are leading scholars of Aboriginal studies, such as Colin Tatz, Eve Fesl, Colin Bourke and Lynette Russell, all of whom were directors of the CRAA (or one of its successors) for substantial periods of time. Kerin explains how each director stamped his or her own character on the centre and moulded its programs – with varying degrees of success – according to their own priorities. It was Bourke, for example, who began the Aboriginalisation of the centre's staff, while Fesl flagged the strengthening politics of identity by renaming it the Koori Research Centre.

Some of the most interesting sketches, however, are of the less famous figures who helped build strong Indigenous programs at Monash. The remarkable Isaac Brown, for example, was the first director of the Monash Orientation Scheme for Aborigines (MOSA), forerunner to today's Yulendj unit. Born in Darwin, of Iwaidja and Torres Strait Islander ancestry, Brown was, among other things, a speech pathologist who spoke with an accent that sounded like the product of the English

public school system. As his colleague Merle Ricklefs recalled, Brown's 'impeccable, polished, middle-class accent' was a tremendous asset when the two ventured into the corporate world in search of funding for MOSA. They soon secured major commitments from Coles Myer, BP, Telecom, BHP and other leading corporations.

This is a history of an institution, commissioned by that institution. Perhaps inevitably, as Kerin herself acknowledges in her introduction, her appraisal of the institution is mostly positive. It is, nonetheless, astute and engaging. As in her other books, Kerin writes lucidly, communicating with her readers with an admirable directness and immediacy. Her narrative of the centre's 50-year history is set in the context of broader changes in Aboriginal affairs over that period, although the contextualisation could have been more comprehensive in places. Nonetheless, Kerin generally strikes an appropriate balance between the history of the institution and the history of its encompassing society. Indeed, balance is the keynote of this appraisal of a centre that was no stranger to dispute and dissension.

Kerin's book recounts the many controversies in which the centre was embroiled, both internally and with other bodies within Monash University, over the past 50 years. However, her account conveys little sense of the savagery with which university politics are normally conducted. Perhaps Monash was different in this regard – though that stretches credulity to the limit, particularly in view of the cast of characters who parade through this book. Perhaps the university archives on which she relies tell of temperate debates and discussions, glossing over personal rancour and belligerence. Or, perhaps, Kerin ranked the jostling and bickering of academics less noteworthy than their collective efforts to make a difference to Indigenous lives.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 41, 2017*,
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2017 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.