Theatres of power: Tent boxing circa 1910–1970

Richard Broome

Eighteen years ago I first journeyed into Aboriginal history through a study of sport and racism in the context of Aboriginal participation in boxing. I interviewed over twenty Aboriginal boxers and some white managers, in three capital cities and on several reserves, and researched the sporting press from the 1930s. My research, which came to focus on the professional ring career of Aboriginal boxers who produced a highly disproportionate fifteen per cent of Australian professional champions since 1930, was published in 1980 in volume four of this journal. In this article I included just one paragraph on the Aboriginal experience of boxing tents, despite gathering many oral memories. I argued somewhat hurriedly; that tent boxing was a 'tough life' for Aboriginal boxers, full of hard work and with the potential for physical damage. While former Aboriginal boxers looked back on a 'free, matey and prestigious life in the tents...in the long run it was a debilitating life'.

These words mirrored the views of Peter Corris, who in one chapter of his history of boxing in Australia, *Lords of the Ring*, argued that 'tent boxing shows were places of exploitation and abuse'. Corris claimed that some fighters were badly mismatched by the tent boxers, and some fought too long in the tents. He believed tent boxing could be dangerous because of the demand for action to satisfy paying customers. Besides, the work was hard, often entailed long hours, and the boxers were managed by strict contracts which favoured the tent owners. Tent boxing was, he believed, the hard end of a tough game.

While Corris is to some extent correct in these views, it is a more complex story than this. Fifteen years on, I wish to recant my views expressed above, and oppose Corris's grim version of life in the tents. Through teaching, researching and reading Aboriginal history since 1980, reading the works of English Historian E.P. Thompson, and also listening to my colleagues in women's history, I have developed a stronger sense of power from below and the agency held by Aboriginal historical actors.

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This awareness of Aboriginal agency has led to new and deeper readings of those original twenty interviews (and some recent follow-up interviews), for neither Corris nor I had explored the internal power dynamics of the boxing tents. I will now focus on those relationships, exploring boxing tents as places of cross-cultural drama and performance. By seeing the tents as theatres, and the boxers as performers acting out mostly predetermined scripts, the tent fighters are placed in the active rather than the passive mode. This suggests more complex readings of their actions. I will now argue, that Aboriginal tent fighters were part of a multi-layered theatre of power in which they were not only victims of white power and racial discourse, but also agents and manipulators of that power and discourse. Although these performances of power by Aboriginal men might be transitory and subsequently overlaid by experiences of injustice and discrimination in reserves, country towns and other situations, these transitory tent performances contributed positively to the fashioning of Aboriginal self-esteem and identity in a difficult cross-cultural world. Tent boxing produced heroes and an heroic edge to Aboriginal community history.  

Life in the tents

Tent boxing emerged around 1900 with the rise of boxing as a legal sport. Boxing of the bare-knuckle variety had flourished in Australia but was illegal throughout the nineteenth century. With the adoption of gloved contests and the Queensberry Rules in the 1880s, a qualified acceptance of boxing in clubs and private schools emerged. By 1900 boxing stadia in Australian capital cities attracted committed fans. Audiences grew with the efforts of modern entrepreneurs like John Wren and Hugh D. McIntosh except that the 'decent' people and Protestant churchgoers largely stayed away. The huge publicity surrounding the racially-based Burns–Johnson fight in Sydney in 1908 for the heavyweight championship of the world heralded the 'golden age' of Australian boxing, which with few checks, lasted until the 1950s. Boxing troupes in travelling tents flourished in this era.

Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe was not the first to operate but it became the longest serving and best known. Sharman, one of twelve children of a Narellan timber cutter, became a successful boxer in the Riverina area winning all but one of about 80 fights before the near death of an opponent Jack Carter, at Wagga in November 1911, steered him into boxing tent promotion at the age of twenty-one. At least a dozen other significant troupes operated over the next half century: most notably those of Roy Bell,
Johnny Shields, Tom O'Malley, Les McNabb and Smally Higgins in the early years and from the 1940s, Harry Johns, Bill Leach, Snowy Beryl and Mrs Ellison, Major Wilson, Sandy and Selby Moore, and Harry Paulsen in Tasmania. Tents operated in the West as well, one early promoter being Mickey Flynn, with whom Albert Facey boxed in 1914. Facey toured with Flynn into South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Arthur Corunna and Jack Davis earned money as tent boxers during the 1920s and the hungry thirties respectively in south-west Western Australia. Many others, such as that run by George Primmer in the Warrnambool area, had a brief and more localised lifespan.

The more permanent, well-known troupes travelled from southern Australia in summer to north Queensland in winter and back again, following the annual calendar of 500 country agricultural shows, carnivals and rodeos which spanned all but the Christmas season. They sometimes stopped in towns where there was no show but which promised an audience mustered from the surrounding district. This was called by the showmen, 'still-towning'. A half-a-dozen troupes ranged the countryside at any one time. As Jimmy Sharman II or 'Young Jimmy' as he was known around the shows, recalled: 'There was so many shows, there, like we all used to work together, like each one had their own territory and you'd never trespass, so therefore you know, you used to help each other when you possibly could and we used to like to see that all the shows had boxing troupes to keep the game alive'. The accompanying map, compiled with the assistance of Jimmy Sharman II sets out the seasonal route of his boxing troupe in the 1950s. In any one year, Sharman's troupe visited about 100 shows in successive regions throughout the year. Within each region the randomness of the show dates meant there was often a mad dash from one part of the region to another—mostly at night—to set up for the next show. Most were one day affairs. The troupes were popular and much sought after by the agricultural show committees. As Sharman II added: 'all you needed was a merry-go-round, a knock-em down, and a boxing troupe and you had a show'.

The troupes were an important nursery for both boxers and fans. The showmen, especially Sharman, would spot likely fighters for the city stadium promoters and encourage the sport by featuring boxing stars in the troupe. Aboriginal Australian professional champions Ron Richards, Jack Hassen and George Bracken had their first fights in the tents as did white Australian champions Billy Grime, Mickey Miller and Jackie Green. However, many Aboriginal youths, young men, even ex-champions, joined the boxing troupes simply to earn a quid, and engage in an exciting life. Jerry

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* Jimmy Sharman II interview, Sydney, 23 August 1978. Sharman II denotes Jimmy Sharman, son of the Jimmy Sharman who began a boxing tent in about 1910. Sharman II worked the tents from the mid 1950s until the closure of Sharman's line-up in 1971.
* Ibid.
* Ring Digest, April 1952.
THE SEASONS OF JIMMY SHARMAN'S TENT TROUPE IN THE 1950s*

* Compiled from Show dates in the Outdoor Showman 1954 - 55 and with the assistance of Jimmy Sharman
Jerome and 'Black Paddy', who both fought in Sharman's tent during and just after the First World War, were among the first Aboriginal tent boxers and hundreds followed over two generations. Many also sought to escape the poverty and discrimination then experienced by most Aboriginal people in country towns and on Aboriginal reserves.14 Each of the troupes had six to ten boxers. From the 1930s about half of them were Aboriginal fighters.15 Some joined when they were 16 or 17, others when older. 'Banjo' (Henry) Clarke from Framlingham near Warrnambool, claimed he joined Harry Johns' troupe when fifteen years old. He recalled of his decision: 'You just go. If you can use your dukes [fists] you just go, you know and they test you out in a big shed in the yard. If you can fight they say "righto you'll do, you'll do" or he would say to someone "learn a bit more so you will be able to join me"—this was in his backyard in Melbourne'.16 Others might be recruited in country towns or met there by pre-arrangement as the troupe moved through. Some stuck at it a week, most a whole season, and many stayed for two or three years.

Most found it a hard life for the boxers were 'usefuls' as well. Their itinerary incorporated stops at dozens of towns. At each stop the equipment would have to be unloaded from the truck, often in quick time, so that the tent, line-up board and ticket-booth could be ready for a show that night. This process was repeated again and again. As George Bracken, Australian lightweight champion recalled of his time with the Sharmans in the 1950s: 'most of the time you were travelling, all the time you know, you'd do a show in one place one night and that night you'd pull down the tent and it wouldn't be until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and next time you wouldn't get there till lunchtime and you'd have to pitch the tent up again to open that night. That night you'd have to pull it down again and go somewhere else...with a hamburger in your hand'.17 Jimmy Sharman II recalled that they might not sleep much for days when doing 'one-night stands'.18

Their living conditions were spartan but varied—as were the memories about them. Boxers in some troupes slept under a blanket in the sawdust of the tent floor. However, others snoozed in a fitted-out van, and Paulsen and Sharman's boxers slept on fold-up iron beds. Most tent bosses slept and ate with the men, but Harry Johns was noted for seeking the comfort of nearby hotel accommodation.19 Leo White, a white Australian light-heavyweight champion of the early 1950s who boxed briefly in the tents, doubted whether tent fighters had three good meals a day.20 Certainly Ern McQuillan, a leading professional boxing trainer who knew Sharman well, stated 'the tucker they eat you wouldn't eat yourself. I wouldn't eat it. I've been out and seen

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15 Alan Moore interview, Brisbane, 29 August 1978; Sharman interview.
17 George Bracken interview, Sydney, 23 August 1978.
18 Sharman interview.
them. Billy Primmer, a white boxer from Warrnambool who travelled to Bendigo with one troupe in the 1940s, recalled that the tent boss 'treated them [his boxers] like dogs. He'd go down the street and buy a bag of pies, they wouldn't even be hot pies and this was when I was up there and I seen it with my own eyes. He would just go around and say "catch Jack" and he would throw 'em at them. You either caught them or dropped them on the ground. That was their meal, and that was the way he used to treat them.' However, Alick Jackomos who travelled with a number of tents for years, said the bigger ones had their own cooks and that the troupses of Sharman, Roy Bell, Harry Paulsen and Sandy and Selby Moore provided good stews and steaks, but few desserts. He admitted that pies might be given when on the road or during the pressure of setting up. None of these memories recall differential treatment between black and white boxers in food, accommodation or even wages (see below).

The life of a tent boxer was one of travel punctuated by intense activity. They travelled a third of the week, pitched and took down the equipment, and fought in the tents on average several days a week. At country shows there were between three and eight sessions or 'houses' over the day and evening, while at the big city shows there were ten to twelve 'houses' each day. Each 'house' contained three fights or two fights and a wrestle. A number of boxers remembered fighting three to five times a day, more at the city shows. Billy Primmer recalled that he and his brother had 35 fights between them over three days at the Bendigo Show. Tent promoter, Jimmy Sharman II, gave a much more conservative estimate in 1978, claiming: 'Sometimes they'd do a couple of fights a day, sometimes a fight a week, all depends on the itinerary of the shows but the capital [city] shows they'd always have two or three fights a day...the more fights they had the better they liked it. They liked to be seen in action.'

It is unclear how much tent fighters were paid as some interviewees were either vague or cagey on this matter. Their wages were probably similar to the basic wage of the time (about £3–£4 in the 1930s, £5–£7 in the 1940s and £10–£13 in the 1950s), but there were of course no sick or holiday payments. Some tent boxers who fought around 1950 said they received £1 a day, others £1 a fight. The latter is unlikely for the average boxer, given the prize money and expenses the showmen had to pay. Several white boxers claimed Aboriginal boxers were paid less than other fighters. Billy Primmer stated that while he got £3 a fight in the 1940s the Aboriginal troupe members received £1. There may have been a differential of skill or bargaining skills involved in this case or the fact that Primmer was a casual fighting only those shows in the Warrnambool region. However, Bobby Sinn, an Australian featherweight titleholder in the 1950s claimed he received £50 a day while Elley Bennett, also an Australian champion, received only £10 a day. Sinn, who did not identify as being of Aboriginal descent, was probably a harder bargainer, and also his term with the tents was as a casual star-performer. He said Alfie Sands a main event Aboriginal fighter received £1.0.0 per day.

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21 Ern McQuillan interview, Sydney, 29 August 1978.
24 Sharman interview.
26 Primmer interview.
27 Bobby Sinn [Wills] interview, Brisbane, 1 September 1978.
However, Alan Moore who took over his father's (Selby Moore) tent in the early 1960s believed the payments which included keep, board (such as it was), travel and gear, were reasonable. Certainly, the Moores used to pay their boxers out of season, which was quite unusual. Alick Jackomos, a Greek Australian wrestler in the tents of the 1940s, and who has been within the Victorian Aboriginal community since marrying into it in the 1940s, believes payments to boxers were made on their level of skill and their bargaining skills rather than their ethnicity.

However, while some showmen were fair in the treatment of tent boxers, others were full of tricks to reduce payments to a pittance, or even to nothing. One ploy was to tell a young boxer he could not be paid to fight as he was an amateur. Instead, the promoter promised to write to Merv Williams, the Sporting Globe's boxing editor, and have him featured in the paper to help his career instead. But such news was rarely published. The boxers were controlled by a tight contract, and a 'good behaviour bond' of £50. They breached it if they fell sick, were injured or drank to excess, and had expenses deducted from any wages owing. The general practice regarding wages was that all payments were held by the boss until the end of the tour—only the stars were treated differently. This practice ensured the boxers did not leave during the tour and it was a paternal effort to get them to save. Leo White recalled Sharman I continually urging his boxers to save. His son, Jimmy Sharman II, stated they gave the boxers pocket money on request but held the rest so they would not 'finish up broke.' Indeed, he claimed that his father (Jimmy Sharman I) paid the balance to some young Aboriginal boxers in front of the youth's parents upon his being returned home at the end of the tour. However, boxers felt this system could be abused by the owners. 'Banjo' Clarke recalled:

Jimmy Sharman would pay you well, but old Johnsy, Oh [Harry Johns] he got out the book and he'd say, oh well we pulled up at this such and such a place, and we bought dinner there and dinner here, and we bought you this and that and in the end you know, instead of him owing you money, you owed him money. When you are miles away from home you won't leave him, you have to stick with him to get back home.

Alick Jackomos agreed that deductions could be easily inflated. Also, if it was claimed a boxer broke his contract, or did so, he would not receive any of these withheld payments.

Jimmy Sharman I had a wide reputation of being a 'straight shooter', but also of being a tough disciplinarian who rarely drank and who would not tolerate much 'boozing' in his boxers. Those who drank to excess or played up in other ways were sacked. However, Billy Primmer who travelled with the tents on only a few occasions

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28 Moore interview.
29 Jackomos follow-up interview 1994 and research on the Sporting Globe's boxing columns.
30 Corris, Lords of the Ring, p. 86.
31 White and Sharman interviews, and follow-up interview with Sharman 3 January 1996.
32 'Banjo' Clarke interview.
33 Alick Jackomos interview, Melbourne, 28 November 1979.
34 Corris, Lords of the Ring, p. 84.
Erwin 'Tiger' Williams (the Black Bomber) playing at Sylvia Paulsen's 25th birthday celebrations, Launceston, 1954 (Sylvia Paulsen, Launceston).
HARRY JOHNS' Line-up Board, Dimboola Regatta early 1950s. From left to right: Harry Johns, Monty Faye, Danny Marks (from Dimboola, who also fought as 'Johnny Wilson' the Maori), Alick Jackmos, and three unknown Aboriginal fighters (Alick Jackmos, Melbourne).
recalled one incident over money in which Sharman I appears to be less than honourable. At Bendigo in the 1940s, Primmer claimed Sharman I sought to pay him and his brother, half of the £3 a fight agreed on for their 35 fights. However, Sharman's main fighter, Aboriginal boxer Erwin 'Tiger' Williams (the 'Black Bomber'), a friend of the Primmers, 'took Jimmy by the throat and shook him and shook him—and said he wouldn't work for him again if he didn't pay. Anyhow, it finished up we got paid'. Primmer claimed that Sharman's son, Jimmy II, was less hard-nosed adding: 'I have worked for him'. George Bracken agreed Sharman was hard, but claimed you had to be in business, especially given that some of the tent boxers were 'no-hopers'. Alick Jackomos who had years of experience in a number of tents, believed the Sharmans paid their boxers fairly and looked after any ill or homesick boxers, even paying their fares home in genuine cases. On a score of ten, Jackomos ranked the Moore's tent at 10, Sharman's at 9 and Harry Johns at 5. Buster Weir, an Aboriginal tent boxer of the 1950s and Iris Gardiner, then 'Tiger' Williams's wife who travelled with him for some years, both agreed pay and conditions were fair. Nobody forced the boxers to go, they added, Aboriginal youths and men became troupe boxers of their own free will.

Differing opinions are held about this boss or that boss, but there is no dispute about who was the boss. The troupe owners had the power of bosses, but also the authority of 'fathers' and managers. They acted as daily guardians of the boxers under their care for months on end, mostly out of concern for the needs of their business. The boxers slept in, ate in, and fought in their tents, obeyed their rules, and asked them for pocket money to see a show or attend a dance. If the boxers aspired to fight in the city stadiums they relied on the tent owners, especially if it was Sharman I, to put in a good word for them with the matchmakers and promoters. The boxers both respected and feared these men, and depended on them like fathers when hundreds of kilometres from home. Some of this relationship stuck years later. Jimmy Sharman II said when he visited the Mereeba Rodeo in 1978, more than thirty former Aboriginal boxers of a decade or more earlier, visited him for a yarn. 'They'd make sure they'd come to see me when they were sober...it goes to show they've got some respect for you'. These Mereeba meetings with Sharman continued over the years to recent times.

Despite the arduous life and the indifferent financial returns, most Aboriginal boxers basically enjoyed their several years spent in the tents. The experience provided them with some earnings, much excitement and camaraderie among the boxers: black and white. Alan Moore, son of tent owner Selby Moore and a tent boxer himself, recalled he and the other boxers would go shooting, catch bush tucker and do mad stunts together, such as surfing a tyre pulled behind a car. Others stressed the 'educational' value of travelling beyond one's 'beat'. 'Banjo' Clarke recalled 'travelling around to a lot of different towns, meeting a lot of good blokes and locals—they would look after you, take you to their homes and things like that'. 'Banjo' never ventured
beyond Victoria in the 1940s, but others travelled interstate and stayed for years. 'Muscles' (Ray) Clarke of Framlingham recalled of the early 1950s: 'After we'd finish our session and that, we went out and had a drink amongst ourselves and with people we got to know around the tents. We'd drink in their houses and in the pubs. Or go to one of the houses and a girl would say "would you like to dance" and we would go to the dance hall. So you had a pretty good social life.' "Muscles' Clarke remembered courting a white girl whom he considered marrying. The tent boxers were part of the travelling show people's community, were popular among the local Aboriginal community, and to an extent among the white rural working class as they provided new conversation about town and were young, dashing, adventurous types.

For the boxers, tent boxing was a stage in their getting of wisdom and in the making of their manhood. They challenged or were challenged on a daily basis. As Jimmy Sharman II chuckled, 'Shiner' Austin, a young Warrnambool boxer with the tents, just wanted to get a 'cauliflower ear' caused by the breaking of the cartilage membrane of the outer ear. He would beg opponents to 'hit me on the ear' and eventually achieved his aim—and his ideal of manhood.41 Boxing to these young men was about status and power, as well as a good life. Indeed, power lay at the very heart of the experience for all the participants in the boxing tent world—although the bosses and boxers also valued the money they made. There were three arenas of that power: the line-up board; the pitch outside the tent; and the fighting mat.

On the line-up board

Another show was mounted. It had been marked on the calendar for a year and once the town was reached, the sleepy fighters were roused out of the truck, and the tent, line-up board and ticket booth raised. Prior publicity in the local paper and show posters had promised the troupe's imminent arrival. Shopkeepers had been given free tickets for placing posters of the troupe in their windows. One piece in the Warrnambool Standard of 11 November 1948 announced the annual Koroit Show 'featuring Sharman's Boxing Troupe headed by the KO King, "the Black Bomber". £10 paid to any man a show who can fight "The Bomber" 5 rounds'. Rex Talo, light-heavyweight and heavyweight champ of Samoa would be there, as well as Tom Saga a middleweight, and Sam Motu, welterweight amateur champ of Samoa—now turned pro. The locals knew what to expect, for this ritual was part of their calendar too—only the cast might vary from show to annual show.

By afternoon, after the crowd had built up, it was showtime. The troupe mounted the platform outside the tent and as the bell jangled or the drum was beaten, the boxers chorused 'hey, hey, hey'. Soon people were expectantly drawn to the pitch, the area outside the tent. Boys pushed for a good view. Up there on the line-up board were familiar yet dangerous sights. Here were men oozing quiet aggression, dressed in gaudy coloured boxing shorts under tattier grey or maroon gowns (until the 1930s they wore ankle to waist boxing tights and long-sleeved tops called 'combinations'). Bare chests, plump pectorals and chest hair, might be glimpsed as they strutted and posed. Behind them were large banners, painted canvas backdrops ablaze with the name of the troupe,

41 'Muscles' (Ray) Clarke interview, Framlingham, 16 August 1978.
42 Sharman interview.
and painted images of great fighters who had performed in the tent or other universal champs. Words heralded their deeds. The drum kept its rhythmic beat. Signs announced a 2/- or 3/- entrance fee and Rud Kee, of Sharman's troupe, or another ticket seller, fingered the rolls of gaudy coloured tickets.

The troupe was introduced by the boss of the tent. Perhaps first the star, who might be an Aboriginal Australian champion—either Jerry Jerome, Ron Richards, Jack Hassen, Elley Bennett, Dave Sands, Ritchie Sands, and George Bracken—or perhaps a white Australian champ, such as Mickey Miller, 'Kid Young' (Leo White) or others. To see a champ close-up, thrilled the crowd in the years before television and the existence of highly illustrated sporting publications. There were also state champions and main event fighters such as the Aboriginal men: Alfie Clay, Teddy 'Rainbow' (McGinness), the five other Sands brothers—Clem, George, Ritchie and Russel—the Grogan brothers, Harry and Clarrie, Arthur Larrigo, and Jackie Ryan [Blow]. There were also promising 'prelim boys'—such as 'Shiner' or 'Nulla' Austin—and any one of scores more Aboriginal fighters sufficiently talented to take on most locals at country shows. Usually almost half on the line-up board were Aboriginal fighters. As 'Banjo' Clarke stated:

'It was the easiest thing in the world for an Aborigine to get into a boxing troupe. They would grab them before they'd grab a white bloke. They were a drawcard. You know, you see Aboriginals on the Board and then a lot of people would come in to see the Aboriginals fight. You see most of the troupes they all got Aboriginals. They thought they were better fighters and they were wild looking blokes up on the Board.'

Other racial/ethnic groups were there too: Islanders, Phillipinos and Maoris. Three of Sharman's long standing regulars were Tommy Otari, a Queenslander of Islander extraction dubbed 'The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel'; Rud Kee of Chinese descent who worked with the troupe in various capacities for 35 years; and Erwin 'Tiger' Williams from Woodenbong Reserve in northern New South Wales, known as 'the Black Bomber'. Such a mix of boxers was calculatingly designed to create a reaction in white supremacist rural towns and capital cities. Racial competition gained an instant response to minds steeped in evolutionary frames of the 'survival of the fittest' and of Social Darwinist racial hierarchies.

The boom of the drum, the brilliance of the banners and backdrops, the gaudy outfits of the boxers, and the promise of action, all attracted the attention of the crowd. The boxers also focussed the gaze of the crowd, male and female, on their bodies. Boxers are especially schooled in body language, rehearsing time-honoured moves as they do before mirrors, carefully crafting their bodies into a pose identical to those of boxers in the glass-framed photographs around the walls of the gymnasiums—figures frozen as on a Grecian urn in poses of fists and jaws, leading feet and shoulders, heads tilted, and

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44 Ryan was a non-identifier when I interviewed him claiming Maori descent and did not appear in my earlier article as Aboriginal, but his son shortly afterwards came out proudly as being of Aboriginal descent, Courier Mail, 22 July 1979.
45 'Banjo' Clarke interview.
46 Much work is to be done on racial ideas in twentieth century Australia, but see Andrew Markus, Governing Savages, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990, chap. 3; and the surveys conducted in the 1960s by Lorna Lippman in Words or Blows. Racial Attitudes in Australia, Penguin, Ringwood, 1973, especially chap. 12.
eyes fixed on the camera. It is the boxers’ stare that is memorable—the direct eye contact they use before the bell to assert dominance over their opponent. As Henry Collins a boxer from Cherbourg put it: ‘as soon as you go up and they introduce you to the man. You look a man straight in the eye like that. If your eye drops you know he’s got you but if his eye drops you know you’ve got him’.

Day after day the tent boxers acted these roles of masculinity and dominance. Day after day the novices in the troupe learned to assume the postures of power as they transformed themselves from shy Aboriginal youths to tent boxers. Day after day they performed in the theatre of power that was tent boxing. Up there on the line-up-board they felt the power of the boxer’s role, looking down as they did from on high over the crowd that was being gullied by their performance and the words of the bosses. They assumed some of the power of the boxing greats featured on the painted backdrops. The boss extolled their ring virtues and proclaimed them ‘a great little fighter’ or ‘pound for pound the best around’. To young men, especially Aboriginal men from deprived and controlled backgrounds, these were moments of power that developed their self-esteem and shaped their identity.

Occasionally the performance faltered. Alan Moore recalled a time in his father’s tent in the late 1950s:

When fighters come on they normally take their dressing gowns off and strip down and the body’s a big deal with them you know. A big chest, it’s like a little black bantam rooster...so this one particular bloke, he was sort of like a little bantam rooster, he’d strut around, well I know I used to do that. I’d take my gear off and walk around, I’d leer at people you know do all these shitty things. And this bloke started there off with his gown like that and all the people started laughing and he looked down and he had no trousers on! Straight back outside—and you imagine what it’s been like, everyone piddling themselves, all the women laughing, so Dad said when they all calmed down, not a bad fighter, but a little absent-minded.

It was at this point that the power of the troupe boss was displayed as he began to work and direct the crowd. At country shows where the crowds were lighter, the showman boss had to do some ‘draggin’, by patter and gesture to draw in the crowd. All tent bosses were renowned as spruikers. Sharman also used song. His regular drawcard, Erwin Williams, would confuse his image as ‘the Black Bomber’ by playing guitar and singing ‘Paper Doll’, ‘Ned Kelly’ and the like. A Maori boxer might do a more threatening haka. After songs, dance, the noise of bells and drums, and perhaps an exhibition spar or shadow boxing on the Board, the showman would work the crowd further with wise cracks and spiel. As ‘Banjo’ Clarke recalled and photographic evidence supports: ‘No matter what they were doin’, even watching the ring events in the arena, they would all come and stand around the boxing tent and listen to the cheek that was goin’ on and see one another gettin’ pushed around.’

The boss’s eyes would scan the crowd and he would cry out: ‘who’ll take a glove? Who’ll take a glove? You’re a pretty

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46 Henry Collins interview, Cherbourg, 6 January 1979.
47 Moore interview.
48 ‘Banjo’ Clarke interview.
hefty-looking customer. What about coming inside? Bowl my man over in three rounds and I'll give you a "fiver". If my man cannot stop you in three I'll give you two pounds!"49

The line-up board and the pitch

Much of what transpired next had been carefully planned by the wily showman, rehearsed by his boxers, and acted out time and again on the dusty showgrounds of endless country shows. As he called out challenges: 'Are you a woodcutter or something? Come up here!', a gee would step forward. He was a member of the troupe who had arrived in town the day before, or he was a local lined up by the showman through contacts, to work with the troupe for a fee. The skills of the gee gave an air of truth to what was about to take place and drew on the rivalry of local boxer versus the intruders into the local community's space. The gee drew on the opposites of native versus stranger, country versus the city, of amateur versus professional. At other times there might be a mock dispute between two gees in the crowd and the showmen would invite them to 'step inside' to settle the matter. All this made the crowd begin to yell with excitement. Sometimes the gee would pose as a more exotic opposition. Jackie Ryan, a Queensland feather and lightweight champion of the 1950s, and of Aboriginal and French descent, sometimes toured as a gee posing as a 'Greek boxing champion'. He would yell 'Greek' (words taught him by Alick Jackomos), from the crowd so effectively, that he was often invited to the local Greek restaurant after the show.50 Alick Jackomos did a similar routine as a wrestler. Following these negotiations the gee would mount the Board. The first bout, for the first 'house' of the day, was arranged.

There were always unplanned challenges from the pitch by local youths or men intent on trying themselves out. It was a badge of manhood (or evidence of drinking in the nearby beer tent) to take on a troupe boxer. To be able to brag for months that you took on a tent boxer and stayed on your feet—or won—or that you went three rounds with an Australian champ or the 'Black Bomber', was the stuff of which local reputations could be made. And besides, there was promise of money—a week's basic wage if you won and more than half that if you stayed on your feet. There never seemed to be a shortage of young men 'to have a go', especially when showmen like Sharman encouraged locals to settle grudges in the tents, a practice that was 'particularly dangerous' remarked Peter Corris.51 Up they would go onto the Boardwalk to be barracked or given cheek by their mates. There never seemed to be a shortage of a paying crowd either, as photographic evidence and oral history affirms, for by now the audience was stirred up and fingering the entrance fee in their pockets.

The other rivalry that was drawn upon by the showmen was racial. This was inevitable as hierarchies of dominance in Australia at this time were racial as well as based on class and gender. Race infused all aspects of boxing. The sporting press was embedded with stereotypes of Aboriginal boxers, who allegedly did not train because they were inherently lazy and inconsistent, who went 'walkabout', who could not handle money, who were of dubious intelligence, who had no heart, who were lovab
but unreliable. For instance, it was an agreed practice in the game, that where possible you matched black against white. It was claimed that two Aborigines would not fight hard as they were mates. Even some Aboriginal boxers agreed with that proposition despite the evidence of 'ding-dong' all-black battles to the contrary. Ern McQuillan, the Sydney trainer of Jack Hassen, Tony Mundine and many other Aboriginal fighters, stated in 1978: 'I've run a lot of fights, I used to be match-maker at the Sydney Stadium for years, and I've never put two Aboriginals together, they don't try as hard, but put them with a white man, you know, they show out more, plenty of fire'.

Eddie Gibbons, a Warrnambool matchmaker of the 1940s told me: 'if you've got two niggers playing, you never get a good game out of two niggers'. The play on racial opposites was the reason why the tent operators were so keen to employ Aborigines first, when many other employers at that time hired them last. The presence of Aboriginal boxers made it easier to fill the tents with a white audience perhaps wishing to see them beaten. Mavis Thorpe Clark claimed that while Doug (later Sir Doug) Nicholls, the Northcote football star, was with Sharman's tent in 1931, 'he had more bouts than any other member of the troupe. Everyone wanted to challenge the Aborigine—sometimes just with the intention of downing "a cheeky nigger". Fight after fight; as long as the crowds filled the tent, no let-up'. And the racial competition worked both ways. The Sporting Globe in July 1949 commented that when Sharman's troupe arrived in Charters Towers 'there was a queue of colored boys clamouring for fights against his boxers'.

Yet racial feeling in boxing could be a complex and ambivalent emotion. Most tent bosses hired Australian and state champions—some of whom were Aboriginal fighters—to box exhibitions on tour. During the 1950s Australian titleholders Dave Sands, Elley Bennett, Jack Hassen, Russell Sands, Bobby Sinn, George Bracken and Harry Grogan all toured for a time in the tents as did state champions Alfie Clay, Jackie Ryan, the Sands brothers and others. These boxers, in particular Dave Sands and George Bracken, were genuinely idolised by most Australians. Sands could stop traffic when on a training run in Sydney, until his tragic death in a road accident in August 1952 ended his career on the eve of a world title chance. George Bracken, with movie star looks, received many proposals of marriage from white Australian women, while men admired his boxing skills developed by trainer Leo White. Thus, Aboriginal tent boxers could induce mixed feelings in their audiences.

Such ambivalence was not only accorded the stars. Alan Moore, who inherited his father's (Selby) and uncle's (Sandy) tent in the 1960s, revealed more complexities in the scripting of tent boxing performances when he recalled of the staging of bouts:

Yes, they loved them, loved them, but there was only one way to do it and some of the promoters around Australia don't sort of think along those lines. You shouldn't

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52 See Broome, 'Professional Aboriginal Boxers, pp. 63–66. See also interviews with retired sporting journalists Merv Williams, Melbourne, 29 July 1977 and Ray Mitchell (by telephone) Sydney, 21 August 1978.

53 McQuillan interview.

54 Eddie Gibbons interview, Warrnambool, 15 August 1978.


57 Bracken interview.
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have two Aboriginals fighting if possible, because (people like Dad you know he was a superstar at this) two boongs fighting really don't give a bugger who wins, well subconsciously, whether they're doing it consciously or not doesn't matter... We used to have a white guy the bad buy and a little dark bloke the good guy, quiet and unassuming. The Australians love the underdog.

[Why did you always pick the white guy to be the rough bad guy? I asked]

Because the Aboriginal blokes used to be nice quiet little fellows, not all of them, but the majority of them were nice quiet unassuming little blokes, not loud-mouthed and so on... The crowd loved them not knowing that it was not true as could be, but very, very entertaining, extremely entertaining. 58

Aboriginal tent boxers were simultaneously victims and agents of prevailing racial stereotypes. They were hired because they were dark-skinned and 'wild looking blokes' who would elicit stereotypical responses in the white crowds, who would pay to see them fight and hopefully be beaten. Yet the scripts of the tent theatre allowed them to challenge, manipulate and parody the dominant racial discourse. Aboriginal tent boxers were sometimes good guys and heroes in the dramas acted out on the Board as on the mat. They were also a cohesive part of the mixed race team of the boxing troupe—admired by their bosses, matey with the other boxers. Thus race was transcended by the magnetism of the boxers' own masculinity which impressed the audience, and also by the power of the scripts that constructed often admirable roles for them as gees and troupe boxers.

Many people it seems were taken in by this theatre of tent boxing judging by the crowds and the number of tents that plied the show routes over sixty years. These shows appealed as much to women as to men. Alan Moore estimated forty per cent of the audience inside were women, Alick Jackomos recalled it could be fifty percent, and Jimmy Sharman II said there were 'heaps' of women. Photographic evidence of crowds outside the tents reveal a significant proportion of female onlookers. Children were there too—especially boys—some of whom successfully sneaked under the flaps of the tent—despite patrols—as the crowd surged in. Only the decent people who considered the tents too low to be patronised were absent. 'Banjo' Clarke remembered that the banter and challenges between the Board and the pitch would 'get all the crowd stirred up and they'd be racin' to get into the tent. He'd [the showman] con them in just like that. Mass hysterical like, you know—they were conned right in like sheep. Once one started headin' for the gate the rest would follow'. 59 And so it went for five or more sessions each show day. Some of the crowd would return session after session so engrossing was the performance. And with each session the Aboriginal boxers felt part of this performance of power—the power of conning, the power of showmanship, and the power of leather laid on flesh.

Once inside the tent the crowd jostled for position. As the fighting began, they began to yell; and push; and shove. Leo White exclaimed in amazement thirty years later, how professional men, businessmen and others 'would go mad in there... they would be screaming and roaring and all that... I'd see a man like who had a lot of blood

58 Moore interview.
pressure, and he'd be jumping up and screaming and roaring and shaking. The atmosphere inside the tent was intense as the crowd pressed in and around the fighters. Boxers sometimes felt the thud of an umbrella on their shoulder as it was wielded by an over-excited fan. Alick Jackomos recalled having his back ripped open in Tasmania by a nail-file wielded by an over-zealous female onlooker. The crowd yelled, their nostrils tantalized by sawdust mingled with sweat, as they and the boxers worked themselves into a lather of activity and emotion. There was nothing quite like it for both boxers and audience.

On the mat

The fighting took place not in a ring with ropes, but on a mat, and not always in a tent, but sometimes behind a hessian fence. Only a few tent owners, such as Harry Paulsen who operated in Tasmania, and Les Renalf, bothered to erect a proper ring. The mat was 22 feet (almost 7m) square (at least in Sharman's tent), with plenty of sawdust underneath. It formed a great training ground said Jimmy Sharman II, 'because you just had to go in and fight, you couldn't back-pedal or run around and try and bounce off the ropes, you just had to stand up and fight and that's how, early in the piece, that's how you learn.' The boss was the referee and he also kept time for the three, three minute rounds.

When two troupe boxers were fighting—one of them being a gee—there were great antics that had been rehearsed and performed many times. The boxers were able to catch a punch on the glove near the face and make it look as if a blow was taken, they could slip and roll with a punch, feign grogginess and wobblly knees, do a somersault after a seemingly big blow and take a dive onto the mat. As Red Mitchell, a South Australian titleholder who worked in the tents during the interwar years with many a gee, recalled:

We used to tear into each other, throwing terrific punches. Many of them were open-handers, landing on the shoulders, time was wasted as one was sent sprawling among the crowd—there were no ropes—and everyone was too excited to note that a round was cut short. I've been down in the sawdust more often than I have on the canvas, but no one would be hurt. But don't mistake me; we gave the crowd good value for money.

Similar staging happened with a local boxer who agreed to be a gee, although the moves may not be as well rehearsed. Alan Moore said that the referee, who was also the tent boss, would talk to the boxers when in the clinches to help the gee work along. All this action further extended the agency of the boxers as they manipulated, conned, and played to the audience.

Things were tougher for the tent boxers when they were up against a smart-fisted local intent on making his reputation by beating a tent boxer. Again, they might be in for a hot time if their opponent had been drinking and was aggressive, although their

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60 White interview.
61 Jackomos follow-up interview.
62 Sharman interview.
63 White and Clarke interviews.
64 Australian Ring, December 1961.
skills might be impaired. These were known in the game as 'takes'. These opponents were made more formidable by the working rule that the locals had to win, at least early in the day, to encourage more locals to come forward at the next 'house'. To save face, the local challenger had only to be 'on their feet' by the final bell, in order not to lose. Thus the local—tough as he might be for the troupe boxer—was nursed along by the boss-referee. The boss whispered in his tent boxer's ear, in words 'Banjo' Clarke remembered: "take it easy" (looking up at the clock), "take it easy this round" (he would whisper), "let him hit you, then go down, go down" (he would whisper), and sometimes you don't feel like going down." Occasionally the local became even more aggressive if the tent boxer feigned gogginess or went to the canvas, and so the local came in for 'the kill'. It was then that the boxer's performance could be a punishing one.

Still holding 'the party line' in 1978, Jimmy Sharman II told me all the fights were 'fair dinkum'. However, my informants who boxed in the tents admitted otherwise. Jimmy Sharman II, interviewed by me more recently, admitted as much obliquely, adding that to say more would give the game away. However, some fights could become 'fair dinkum'. Even pretend show fights had an element of danger as some punches failed to be slipped and were taken full on. Stan Lowe of Warrnambool, who had over 300 amateur fights said: 'I had about three or four fights in the tents. I didn't like tent fighting. If you are not there to be fair dinkum, you get hurt a lot easier'. 'Banjo' Clarke, his uncle, agreed, chipping in: 'You are there to put on an act, and when you are putting on an act you can't fight properly'.

Most dangerous of all was that tent boxers rarely fought opponents of exactly the same weight and size. At times they opposed men much heavier than themselves. Jackie Ryan, a lightweight (62 kg), recalled having to fight a big pearl diver in North Queensland who weighted about 90 kgs. Ryan, the Queensland champion, intended to flatten him in several scientific punches to avoid trouble, but Sharman told Ryan, the diver had to win the fight. When Ryan protested, Sharman said, 'You want to get back to Brisbane don't you?' So Ryan had to cop it for two rounds. 'I'd have to catch his big right handers two feet out from my body and try to take the impact'. On other occasions a fight got out of hand as both boxers became 'fair dinkum'. At Balmoral in the Western District of Victoria, 'Banjo' Clarke was fighting a local man, who urged on by the crowd, became very aggressive. Clarke responded in kind but was told to take it easy by Harry Johns' tent manager. However, as Clarke came under more pressure, a tent boxer stepped in, took over as referee, and said 'fight it'. Clarke recalled: 'Jesus what a brawl...The two of us got in a clinch and we fell on the ground and he started punching me on the ground. And I got stuck in, I got on top and I was into him. And the people they nearly tore the tent down when I won. They were that savage'.

While Jimmy Sharman II believed tent boxing 'made them men', George Bracken believed some of the troupe boxers were used up in the tents:

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5 Jackomos interview.
6 'Banjo' Clarke interview.
7 Stan Lowe and 'Banjo' Clarke joint interview, Warrnambool, 14 August 1978.
8 Ryan interview.
9 'Banjo' Clarke interview.
I can remember three or four fellows that were in trouble at the time when I was with them, they ended up punchy you know, nice fellows too, you know, but they ended up punchy, and got on the grog, mainly because they didn't have a bit of finesse to make them good enough to slip into Stadium fights or anything like that, but they were just kept there as knockabouts.  

Although some were damaged by years in the tents it was a good experience for Bracken. He learned how to slip a punch and 'it showed you what could happen if you didn't have your head screwed on right'.  

Fortunately most tent boxers came and went after only a few seasons. But Erwin Williams, 'the Black Bomber', a main event fighter in the Melbourne Stadium in his early years, stayed for twenty years in the tents. Although Billy Primmer believed he was a 'little knocked around', Alick Jackomos, a tent wrestler with Sharman, is emphatic that the 'Bomber' was never knocked out, nor did he ever see him knocked to the ground. Both the Bomber's wife at the time, and tent boxer, Buster Weir, agreed that he was never knocked about. All of them confirmed that Williams was a skilled stadium main event fighter who could look after himself. Jackomos and others maintained that the tent promoters looked after their stars.  

Although Sharman and others had a reputation for avoiding damage to their regular and star fighters, some became 'punchy' from a career in boxing of which tent-fighting was but a part. Peter Corris states there were no deaths in Sharman's tents during thousands of fights but ascribes this to good luck rather than good management. Alick Jackomos could not recall any major injuries during his time in various tents in the 1940s and 1950s, but saw innumerable cut eyes, cauliflower ears, and admitted a few may have taken too many punches.  

After the bell  
The tent performances all but ended in 1971, when new boxing laws were introduced in New South Wales which limited boxers to one fight a week following a medical clearance, and made a month's lay-off mandatory after a knock-out. Sharman's tent was closed down by Jimmy Sharman II in 1971 after sixty years of performing in the business. His son, Jimmy Sharman III, later staged performances, but in the theatre world. Other tents folded after the demise of Sharman's troupe except for Fred Brophy's tent which still thrives in outback areas of the North after emerging just at the time the others met their demise. It was almost inevitable that the world of television entertainment, the rise of competing leisure pursuits, and greater sophistication through education, would have led to the demise of most of the tents in any case. The boxing

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20 Bracken interview.  
21 Bracken interview.  
22 Primmer interview, Jackomos follow-up interview, Gardiner and Weir interviews.  
23 Corris, Lords of the Ring, pp. 84–85.  
24 Jackomos follow-up interview.  
tents were part of the old world of English popular sports and pastimes that was being marginalized by modern spectator professionalized sport from the late nineteenth century onwards. What then did Aboriginal men get out of tent boxing?

Aboriginal tent boxers inevitably had a mixed experience. They, like all tent boxers, experienced spartan conditions under paternalistic bosses who kept them under tight control—even to the point of managing their wages. There is some evidence that they were paid less than white troupe boxers but whether through racism or lack of assertiveness on their part is unclear. And unlike white tent boxers, they were caught up in a racist discourse that shaped the fights they had, their opponents, and the very outcomes of those fights. Yet there was a strong camaraderie between the tent boxers themselves no matter what their background. And none of the boxers referred to many racial incidents in the tents during their interviews with me. Certainly their performances could work against the racial discourse. Some of them were stars who were lauded by all the audience, and some were posed as the 'good guys' in inter-racial bouts. Tent boxing—and Aboriginal sporting activities in general—created racial ambivalence, at a time when such ambivalence existed in few other social contexts in Australian society.

Tent boxing offered young Aboriginal men the chance to travel, to meet other Aboriginal and white Australians, and to experience the capital cities. As 'Banjo' Clarke commented: 'I think it gave me confidence. To be able to talk to people'. It also placed potentially more cash in their pockets than they might have earned at home. Most liked the experience, the travel, the mateship in the tents, the friends made en route. Many even had some degree of affection for the boss which is the usual case in paternal relationships. It was an experience they said they would repeat. They had much the same feelings as soldiers do about war—it was a hard, even dangerous life, but one of intensity and mateship. Also, they contested whites on more or less even ground, and when they beat them they felt triumphant. As Henry Collins remarked of boxing whites in non-tent tournaments at Kingaroy in Queensland: 'I felt good when I knocked white blokes out. I felt good. I knew I was boss in the boxing ring'.

Above all, the nature of tent boxing as a performance in which they were key players is crucial to understanding their experience. Aboriginal tent boxers were an active and indispensable part of a confidence-trick that made them feel superior to the white audience being gulled. They also became heroes to their own people, who turned out to see them on the line-up board or who claimed a connection to them. Jimmy Sharman I stated in 1946: 'in Queensland, where we strike most Aboriginal fighters, it became a joke the way they all claimed relationship to Jerry Jerome'. And they remained heroes to those who listened to their yarns of the tour when they returned home and for years afterwards. In this way boxing formed part of an Aboriginal rendering of their post-white contact history. As performers, Aboriginal tent boxers travelled the country and played roles which reshaped their existing self-image as

77 'Banjo' Clarke interview.
78 Collins interview.
79 Sporting Globe, 30 March 1946.
victims, into something more positive. In these performances they crafted their bodies into that of the fighter. They covered themselves in silken shorts and flashy robes, and paraded the Board to the beat of drums, as men to be reckoned with. From that came—if they escaped damage on the mat—a sense of themselves that was different to the image they had developed back on the mission or in the fringe camp. As Peter Berger has written: 'identity is not something "given", but is bestowed in acts of social recognition'.* These Aboriginal men were recognized by themselves and others, both black and white, as someone: they were boxers! This role was reaffirmed every time they donned their robes, mounted the line-up board, stepped onto the mat and shaped up. To a degree, through memory and stories, they have carried that image of themselves evermore.

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Richard Broome teaches Aboriginal and Australian history at La Trobe University. He is the author of numerous articles and five books, including Aboriginal Australians (1981, 1994) and with Alick Jackamos, Sideshow Alley (in press). He is currently writing a history of Koori people in Victoria.

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