

## *Fighting Hard: The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League*

by Richard Broome

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Few are better equipped to write the history of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League than Richard Broome who has written the ground-breaking *Aboriginal Australians* (four editions), *Aboriginal Victorians* and, with Corinne Manning, a biography of Alick Jackomos. Broome has a knowledge and understanding of those who people this story and of their aspirations and hopes. His interest in and respect for them as fighters is evident as he charts the fascinating story of the League, which began as a coalition powered initially by white branches and morphed into the longest continually operating Indigenous organisation in Australia.

In *Fighting Hard*, Broome relates the history of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in three parts. The first part identifies early Aboriginal political activity from the vision of Billibellary, a Woiwurrung leader, whose homelands were in the vicinity the Yarra River. In 1843, Billibellary shared with Protector William Thomas his dream of finding a way for his people to maintain their culture and traditions while also becoming agriculturalists so they could remain on some of their own land. This vision was passed on to William Barak, Billibellary's son, and from him to Shadrach James, thence to William Cooper and then Doug Nicholls. Adopting an expression coined by American philosopher Jonathan Lear, who was reflecting on how the Crow Native Americans faced a similar challenge to their world, Broome describes the 'radical hope' which Billibellary and those who came after him expressed as they sought to maintain the core of their culture while finding a way in the white man's world. An early

key chapter in this section, 'Rocket testing launches the League', skilfully sets out the political situation in post-war Australia which enabled the formation of the reformist, activist League in 1957.

The second part, 'A duet in white and black', charts the history of the League as a black and white coalition. At its height during the years 1957 to 1969 membership climbed to 3,000, at least 98 per cent of whom were non-Indigenous Australians. During these 13 years the 46 branches raised much-needed money for Aboriginal hostels, holiday programs for Aboriginal children, educational support and much else. The League's first four guiding principles concerning citizens' rights, standard of living, education and equal pay focused on the achievement of equality with white Australians. The fifth principle, that all remaining reserves be retained for individual or communal ownership, articulated a right to land which Broome shows us was expressed from the early days of contact between colonists and the Woiwurrung people. The League's emphasis in the 1950s and early 1960s was on creating opportunities for a disadvantaged people to gain access to decent housing, schools and jobs so that they could enjoy the opportunities afforded to other Australians. At the time these goals were generally described as being an expression of the assimilation policy. Later the term assimilation becomes a pejorative one in that it implies that to gain these opportunities people would have to relinquish their sense of themselves as a people.

The last part of the book, 'A radical hope realised – Aboriginal community control', concerns the Aboriginal struggle to gain and maintain power in the League which, in the early 1970s, became an Aboriginal community organisation. This part describes an idealistic and a painful journey for aspiring leaders with limited educational opportunities but big ideas. They were thrust into challenging roles running a large, complex organisation which was constantly being challenged by governments wishing to dictate its priorities and practices.

Broome has great talent as a storyteller. The chapters concerning the efficient and energetic establishment of the League in 1957 and the dramatic accounts of the 1969–1970 transformation, from a multi-racial coalition with 60 branches of mainly white folk to an Aboriginal run body, draw us along. Ideas are thrashed out and the future seems open to many possibilities.

This book also brings to light the lives and contributions of many people who have worked in the League at different times through its half-century of life. From the original talented and hard-working quartet of Doug Nicholls, Stan Davey, Gordon Bryant and Doris Blackburn to Aboriginal leaders who have been less written about such as Harry Penrith, Reg Blow, Mollie Dyer,

Eleanor Harding and many others, we meet people of commitment and talent. The Victorian Koorie community will value having biographical introductions to so many of their leaders together in one book.

Broome has written this book for at least two audiences: Aboriginal Victorians, many of whom will have been involved with the League in one way or another; and non-Indigenous readers, many of whom will have worked in the League during its years as a multi-racial coalition. He employs the concept of 'radical hope' as a unifying thread which links Billibellary's vision in 1843 to the Aboriginal activists who came after him. In some places this linking device works: '[Bill] Onus very much adhered to the "radical hope" of his forefathers – to be both in the new world, and of an Aboriginal one'. In other places, for example where Broome is describing Aboriginal balls and 'Belle of the Ball' contests, the application of the concept of 'radical hope' seems stretched. The balls may have been distinctly Aboriginal affairs but this is far from Billibellary's original idea. Readers who were active in the early League working for Aboriginal access to better housing, education and jobs may wish for acknowledgement that gains in these areas were preconditions for the later goal of maintaining Aboriginal culture. 'Radical hope' is also invoked to describe the League being beholden to Aboriginal ways while relying on mainstream funding until it could 'find economic independence'. This is another overstretch in the service of a unifying idea for the book which evades the reality of the League's continued dependence on government funding.

*Fighting Hard: The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League* is a meticulously researched, well-written history of a unique Australian organisation. It is understandable that Broome shows such awareness of his Aboriginal readers. This is the first full account of the mother of Victorian Aboriginal organisations. It is also a very good read.

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