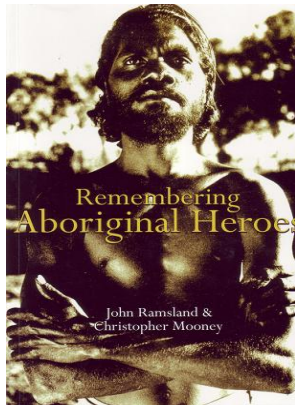


*Remembering Aboriginal Heroes: Struggle, Identity and the Media* by John Ramsland & Christopher Mooney. Brolga Publishing: Melbourne, 2006, pp. 376. AUD \$25 Paperback, ISBN: 9781920785857.



If biography is the art of studying individual lives in their context of their times, *Remembering Aboriginal Heroes* is for the most part, a remarkable biographical achievement. Essentially the book tells the stories of prominent Aborigines whose lives were affected by the Australian Government's policy of assimilation in the 1950s: artists, singers, actors, a boxer, a soldier, a preacher and an activist.

Each of the subjects, no matter how outwardly successful they appeared to be, suffered racism (notably with Dave Sands, and to a lesser extent, Doug Nicholls, in the sporting field), discrimination, unfair treatment, and exploitation. Harold Blair, the tenor, for example, while under contract to the ABC was forced to sing so often on a rigorous tour that his voice was damaged. Those who moved beyond their chosen careers in the arts, sport, the army, politics or the church found the process of assimilation difficult and, sometimes, impossible.

At times, they were beaten down by the forces of fate. Robert Tudwali, the actor from *Jeddah*, began his career as the Australian film industry went into decline with the advent of television. Reg Saunders, the first Aborigine to become a commissioned officer in the Australian Army, though a mighty warrior in war, found it difficult to cope with the boredom of peacetime service. All the Aborigines whose stories are told came from the 'stolen generation' period, though not all were 'stolen'. Those who lived on missions and in children's homes had their health ruined by an atrocious diet of white sugar, white bread, brains and tripe: a recipe for diabetes.

Because the authors were partly concerned with how Aborigines were reflected in the media, for much of their narrative they have relied, perhaps too much, on analyses of press reports. Nevertheless, they demonstrate how important films, both feature and documentary, were in portraying Aboriginal culture and in protesting about horrendous living conditions in some Aboriginal communities. The core of the book is its ongoing theme of how important Aboriginal culture was for helping the book's subjects surmount the challenges they faced in mid-century Australian society.

The opening and closing chapters give biographies of important Aborigines who flourished before and after the 1950s. Of the biographies of contemporary Aborigines, one of them, the poet and educator, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, chronologically speaking, would have more properly fitted in the main text.

There are some minor errors. Two different dates are recorded on the same page for Albert Namatjira's death. One would have liked to have seen more details of Burnum Burnum's life after he changed his name from Harry Penrith. The Jimmy Little biography is a bit repetitive. The book has a rich collection of photographs, some uncaptioned, sadly, and there is one missed footnote. The book also lacks an index and bibliography, thus reducing its usefulness for students and scholars.

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