

Book Reviews

Bruce Abernathy, *From Port to a Power*. Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 1997. Illus. pp. xvi + 182; **Geoff Christian**, *Soaring: The Official History of the West Coast Eagles Football Club's First 10 Years*. The West Coast Eagles, Perth, 1997. Illus. pp. 299.

It is over ten years since the VFL began its national expansion and transformation to the AFL. West Coast Eagles was the first of the modern expansion teams, Port Adelaide is the most recent. During 1997 there have been books published about both clubs. Both publications can be seen as 'insider' works, Christian's is an official history commissioned by the club, Abernathy writes as a former Port Adelaide player. West Coast has been the most successful expansion club to date, having won two premierships, while Port Adelaide has made the most auspicious start having missed the finals by half a game in its first season.

As well as Port Adelaide in the SANFL, Bruce Abernathy played for North Melbourne, Collingwood and Adelaide in the VFL/AFL. Towards the end of his playing career he became a reporter with Channel 7. Presumably Wakefield Press believed that this combination gave Abernathy the qualifications to produce an 'instant' history of Port in time for the opening of its first season in the AFL.

This book covers the period from 1990 which includes the first attempt by Port Adelaide to join the AFL, its eventual acceptance as the second South Australian team and the preparations prior to their first AFL match. It also intermingles Port Adelaide history with Abernathy's sporting biography. The attempt by Port Adelaide under the leadership of Bruce Weber to join the AFL aroused intense feeling in Adelaide. It was seen as treason to the SANFL and its other clubs. The SANFL had operated a player retention fund to keep their best players out of the AFL. The AFL Commissioners encouraged Port's application as a way of recruiting a South Australian team and undermining the SANFL player retention scheme. Port's application dissolved under the pressure of law suits and opposition from some Victorian clubs, but the AFL got its way because the SANFL was forced to create its own AFL club; the Adelaide Crows.

Abernathy's insider status is at its most helpful in showing the depth of Port's feeling when it became isolated as a result of its manoeuvres. It also enabled him to interview the controversial Weber, who eventually lost the support of Port members and left South Australia. Unfortunately,

Abernathy appears to have got very little of substance from his interview. Equally Abernathy has the interesting story of Port Adelaide's eventual admission to the AFL, its new guernsey and name and its first player list. This also benefits from Abernathy's involvement with the club in showing the depth of feeling over the name and colour change and the resentment against the drafting conditions offered to the Power which were the worst offered to any expansion club since the Brisbane Bears.

Despite Abernathy's involvement with the club there are no real insights offered about the development of the club as an AFL team which might have helped explain Port's success in its first year. The book is also not helped by Abernathy's writing style. It is painfully obvious that Abernathy is a television rather than a print journalist. The Port story prior to 1990 has been well told by other writers. I look forward to a deeper and more readable history of Port Adelaide after 1990.

Geoff Christian is a veteran Western Australian print journalist and was the appropriate person to write the official history of the West Coast Eagles. As an official history it does not provide critical analysis but it does provide lots of useful details. The West Coast Eagles' story is the success story of the AFL national expansion and is a narrative that all sports historians will want to read.

Soaring does not deal in any depth with the Western Australian football community's hostility towards Victoria which is an essential part of the background to and the development of the Eagles. It also does not devote a great deal of space to the failure of the Indian Pacific Limited (IPL) float and the consequent failure of private ownership of the Eagles. This, too, is an important part of the West Coast story.

Christian is at his most impressive in his descriptions of the on-field history of the Eagles. He recounts the years of triumph and the role of various players and club officials in their achievement. The book includes comprehensive lists of players and results. There is another story to be told in an unofficial history but in the meantime Geoff Christian has written a book that tells the basic story and tells it well.

Dave Nadel
Monash University