

Book Reviews

A Croweater Treble

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Fos Williams and Michelangelo Rucci, *Dynasty: A Legend, A Family and the Port Adelaide Football Club*. Adelaide, Peacock Publishing, 1999. pb, pp. 344, \$24.95

Peter Cornwall and John Wood, *Pride of the Bay: The Story of Glenelg Football Club*. Adelaide, Graphic Print Group, 1999. hb, pp. 368, \$40

Jeff Pash, *The Pash Papers: Australian Rules Football in South Australia 1950-1964*. Adelaide, Pioneer Books. hb, pp.285, \$30

The Adelaide Crows did not win three AFL premierships in a row in 1999 but the release of three major South Australian football histories at the end of that season was an important publishing milestone.

Two of these, *Dynasty*, and *Pride of the Bay* are good solid books. The third, *The Pash Papers* could become an Australian sporting classic. The first two are histories written by journalists. The third, written by an educationist (and 1939 Magarey Medallist) and a sports journalist for the now defunct Adelaide afternoon newspaper, *The News*, is incidental history and sports literature.

You can and you can't judge *Dynasty* by its cover. A collage made up of 24 separate images gives a clue to its celebratory tone. On a good day it could represent the fridge door of an obsessed Port Adelaide fan. On a bad day it could be the aftermath of the post-breakfast stomach rumblings of the same fan's dog.

Of course, they don't have many bad days at the Port, and precious few in the 50 years since Foster Williams was appointed coach in 1949. Port Power, coached by elder son Mark, was involved in the AFL finals for the first time in 1999, and the Magpies, coached by Stephen Williams, won their 36th South Australian premiership. Twenty-three of those have come in the last half-century.

It is not surprising that this book is a local publishing success story. The first print run of 5,000 copies sold out in a fortnight and 1,500 diehard supporters queuing to have their books signed by the Williams family — Fos, Mark, Stephen and Jenny (one of South Australia's greatest sportswomen) — at the official launch was a sign of Port fanaticism. The queue began on the first-floor of the Alberton Oval clubrooms, swept down the stairs, across the carpark and a block down the street. It took me half an hour to get my book signed and I was part of the "who's who" of SA football who only had to move 10 metres. Those down

the road waited about four hours.

This is an example of what makes Port *special* although precise definitions are often elusive. Port fans generally say "Port's Port" and leave it at that. It is almost as though it is all they know and all they need to know.

My view is that Port's *specialness* demands deeper analysis. It may be historical — it was the alternative site for the city in the days of the colony's first governor, John Hindmarsh; it may be geographical — the "Port" factor, as a first point of embarkation for new migrants; it may be social class — working class battlers with a chip on their shoulder; it may be philosophical — too many premierships are never enough; it may be religious — Port players are secular saints or heroes righting the wrongs of western suburbs deprivation; it may be urban development — the Port has a visibly powerful built form from which a *self-contained sense of community* has developed. It is probably not one but all of these things which provides a framework on which Fos Williams built his (and his family's) success.

Dynasty doesn't fully engage this topic. Fundamentally the book is Fos Williams' and the Williams family story mixed with club history. Fos is credited with dual authorship with *Advertiser* chief football writer Michelangelo Rucci, himself Port to his bootstraps. This creates a problem in that the book cannot decide whether it is biography or autobiography. Rucci, a first rate journalist, at times seems overawed by his chief subject. As a result the main claim is that Fos Williams established the Port tradition in his era and this has been continued by John Cahill, with Mark and Stephen leading the club into the next millenium.

Williams' life and the sporting success of his family nevertheless makes engrossing reading and Rucci has structured the book well to keep the tale rolling along at a lively pace. The bulky paperback has a pleasing internal design with the story told in 15 chapters. The first eight are devoted to Fos's leadership, and the remainder to the family, Port's bid for the AFL, plus material on the leading players (both club and State) of Fos's era. There is a lot of history here and anecdotes featuring half-forgotten heroes such as Lloyd Zucker, Ted Whelan, Roger Clift, Dick Russell, Rex Johns and Dave Boyd but I will mention just two, the first concerning Boyd and the second, Jack Oatey.

An attack on Boyd by West Adelaide captain and centre half back Brian Faehse just before half time in the 1954 grand final sparked the worst melee on the Adelaide Oval for a generation. That grand final win over West Adelaide by 3 points was the first of the Magpies' six premierships in succession, three more of which followed narrow victories over West by margins of 16 points (1956), 2 points (1958) and 10 points when coached by Geof Motley (1959). Jack Oatey was on the receiving end of the 1958 and 1959 losses and one of the most interesting statistical tables in the book is the head-to-head coaching record of

Williams and arch-rival Oatey which shows Williams holding a 42 wins to 39 advantage.

Williams and Oatey had different ideas about skills although Williams' emphasis on tackling, smothering and pressuring cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, he was aware of Oatey's "new game" being prepared with the Sturt Football Club. Rucci suggests that Williams had greater respect for Oatey than vice-versa. When Sturt gained the ascendancy in the late 1960s Williams' and Oatey's grand final record in opposition was three wins apiece.

The last of Fos Williams' nine premierships was over Sturt in 1965 but after a twelve year hiatus John Cahill added ten between 1977 and 1995, and Stephen Williams has coached three Magpie premierships in four seasons since 1996. There is a saying that love it or hate it you have to respect Port Adelaide. The Williams and Port story, crafted by Rucci, probably exhausts respect. Chapters titled "Myths, Tradition, Power and Glory", "The Club they Love to Hate" and "The Vision", on the scurrilous AFL bid in 1990, may be great for one-eyed Port fans but left me feeling like I'd been sitting in a front bar with a Magpie supporter poking me in the chest while having to endure a recitation of the 36 flag years. You cannot ignore Port supporters or this book.

By contrast following the Glenelg Football Club has been both a depressing and a frustrating experience for most of its 78 years. Twenty years ago Bill Mandle probably had in mind a book of this type when he wrote of 'a place for good straight sports history'.¹ For a club which had a nightmarish start in South Australian league football ranks — 56 consecutive losses in its first four seasons — and which has captured just four premierships since 1921, it is a substantial account.

Advertiser sub-editor Peter Cornwall and the late John Wood are listed as authors with Wood having done much of the research and writing on the period up to 1939, and Cornwall covering the last 60 years and co-ordinating the entire project.

Pride of the Bay is a well designed, thorough, chronological playing history of a club which has produced some of the greatest players in Australian football history. It does not skimp in its coverage of any period and gives fair and balanced judgements, not only on home-grown players, but imported coaches and leaders. The highlight of the story of the pre-war years is Bruce McGregor's success in lifting the Tigers from sixth place in 1933 to their first premiership in 1934. The big omission is explaining why they dropped to the bottom of the table the following year. The climax of the later period are rightly the magnificent grand final victory in 1973 (the last at Adelaide Oval) and the twin premiership successes of 1985-86. The down-side is the pain of many near-misses. Cornwall has also conducted an exhaustive range of interviews and these provide a rich

sub-thread giving clues to the character of the club.

The greatest pleasure in reading the book lies in the vignettes, not only on the stars of yesteryear but also the “might-have-beens”.

In the early section Wood brings to life figures such as Jim Handby, “Blue” Johnston and Mel Brock, reworking material from his previous book, *SA Greats: The History of the Magarey Medal* (1988), although the man who emerges most as a standout hero was the club’s first great full-forward Jack Owens, who booted 827 goals in 177 games. In the post-war years and succeeding decades we hear about Allan Crabb, Colin Churchett, Neil Davies and Colin Richens through Peter Marker, Fred and Wayne Phillis, Graham Cornes, Peter Carey, and Paul Weston to Stephen Kernahan, Chris McDermott, Tony McGuinness, David Marshall, and on to Nick Chigwidden. It is pleasing that characters such as Stan Wickham and Daryl Rady get guernseys as well.

It might seem odd to think of former Collingwood star and Sturt triple-Magarey Medallist Len Fitzgerald as a “might-have-been” but he remains in that category as an early 1960s coach. A man ahead of his time he must have chafed at seeing what Jack Oatey was able to achieve with Sturt or several years later wished he had Neil Kerley’s Bay players at his disposal.

One of the most moving stories in the book, and indicative of the author’s thoughtful approach, is of another “might-have-been”, a player who died young. Rob Hargrave, a contemporary of the Phillis brothers, was a powerfully built 188cm full-forward who kicked 100 goals for Glenelg’s colts in 1964 and more than 100 goals for the thirds and seconds combined in 1965. He was a league certainty with an outstanding career predicted when he died of leukemia aged eighteen just a month before the 1966 season.

Neil Kerley’s move to Glenelg in 1967 heralded a professional approach and made the club competitive. The frustrating years at the club were the brilliant sides of the Kerley era which produced just one premiership. Graham Cornes, one of the stellar players of that time, played in just that premiership as well as seven losing grand finals. Fortunately, he came back to coach the club to its mid-1980s successes.

Every book has some weaknesses. One is that the ghost of Wood sits a little heavily over the text with too much direct quoting, particularly from newspaper sources. Wood was a meticulous researcher who established a model which John Lysikatos in *True Blue* (the history of the Sturt Football Club edited by Cornwall) and Cornwall here, have followed. Too much detail is given of matches season by season, instead of looking at features which characterise major eras. These are not mere cut and paste histories but the prime functions of the historian are to select and interpret. A second criticism is that there is little analysis of the club’s management and administration. A football club is always much more

than the players who take the field in the team's colours. Off-field organisation or conversely the power plays of rival factions have much to do with on-field success.

A friend who has followed the Bays since the late 1930s says that the club's consistent failures in his youth undermined his self-confidence as a young adult. This book may provide balance. It also reveals that there is more to a football club than winning premierships.

Picking up *The Pash Papers* for the first time it looks and feels good. In flicking through the pages (even before reading) the splendid layout conveys an impression of generosity of spirit, of great expectation.

It is certainly a well thought out book because publisher (and antiquarian bookseller) Paul Depasquale tried to get author Jeff Pash interested in it 35 years ago, and kept on pestering him down the years. The result is well worth the wait because not only do Pash's words ring out strongly from another time but Depasquale's brief biographical introduction, and perceptive editing and annotating raise the book into a special realm. This is the best sort of intervention. The publisher's cumulative love of, and sharp judgement about, books is directed into his own project.

Pash was a great player, as his Magarey Medal win attests, and he came from a family with a strong football tradition. Two of his uncles — Norman and Harold Pash — were North Adelaide Football Club legends and South Australian players. Australian Rules football was talked and lived as he grew up so it was not surprising that he too became a North Adelaide and interstate representative.

Jeff Pash was a clever man who took first-class honours in French at the University of Adelaide and following a teaching career became an inspector of education. As a writer or sports journalist, he was influenced by the English cricket reporter Neville Cardus and particularly Cardus's reflective pieces on players of bygone days. As time went by Pash became much more his own man.

Pash wrote weekly analytical articles and match commentaries for *The News* from 1950-64 at a time when South Australian league football was semi-professional and suburban, hard-knuckled and skilfully aesthetic. The drop-kick ruled. Depasquale writes of Pash being given "elbow room" by the newspaper to develop his ideas and plenty of such space is afforded here.

The Pash Papers is divided into sections rather than chapters, headed "Our Game", "Reminiscences", "Players", "Teams", "In Brief" and "Reflections" where the author reveals his deep insights into the game he is writing about and that of his own playing era in the 1930s and 1940s. The observations on players are possibly the most acute and this long section is helpfully arranged in alphabetical order. "In Brief" are snippets gathered mainly from match reports and contain

many pearls. The "Reflections" are the most Cardusian pieces, the stand alone essays bear reading one at a time and thought about in between. The book as a whole should probably be read like this. Reading it from cover to cover and laying it aside would do it a great disservice. It should be picked up and put down, picked up again and so on.

Great poets are remembered by their individual great lines and Pash's character study of West Torrens hero Fred Bills as 'patient, long suffering, a tireless upholder of lost causes' (p.79) is matchless. Throughout the book there are pithy phrases aplenty, and perhaps none better than in a reflective article, 'They All can show Special Skills' printed in 1960 (pp.269-70) where spectacular centre half-forward Don Lindner was 'of the flying-jump mark, the bounding stride and the enormous free-swing kick'; veteran full-back John Abley 'never really had a football youth'; Geoff Kingston, the new champion full-forward was 'all elegance in motion'; centreman Bob Shearman was 'the spice of danger, the violent activity, the muscular bump-and-buffet man of football'; and rover Haydn Bunton's body was 'a vehicle — to be driven'.

The Pash Papers is not social history. There is nothing of the game or the club being a microcosm of society but it is the study of a game in a historical context, and important for that. *Pride of the Bay* is a solid narrative history of the Glenelg Football Club and *Dynasty* evokes much of the mythology of the Port Adelaide Football Club via the Williams family story. All three books have benefitted from the generosity of the *Advertiser* opening up both its old newspaper photographic files and those of the *News*. Of the three books *The Pash Papers* alone has an index. The lack of an index is a shortcoming in reference books which I hope *Dynasty* and *Pride of the Bay* will correct should they go into further editions. The three books are a welcome addition to South Australia's football history.

Note

- 1 W.F.Mandle, 'Sports History' in G.Osborne and W.F.Mandle (eds) *New History: Studying Australia Today*, Sydney, 1982, p.91.