

Big Chief Little Wolf: Wrestling, Radio and Folklore in Australia

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On Thursday 31 July 1980, the *Melbourne Age* carried a remarkable front page story. It reported that a professional wrestler and showman, who had not wrestled for twenty-two years, was returning to the United States.¹ Other daily newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney carried the report (though not on the front page) and, four years later, the same newspapers prominently reported the wrestler's death in the US. He had returned in 1980 in order to die in his homeland, and his wish had been fulfilled. The wrestler's name was Big Chief Little Wolf. He was the most enduring matman in Australia's professional wrestling history.²

Little Wolf first wrestled in Australia in 1937. His US ring career had peaked in 1935 when he met Dan O'Mahoney in a clash for the world's title. He was the first Native American wrestler to come here, and he returned to wrestle again in 1939; then again in 1940, 1941, 1947 and each year thereafter to 1958. From all accounts, he loved Australia, its environment, way of life and people. He married an Australian woman and settled here in the early 1950s. At this time, he combined wrestling at the stadiums with a travelling tent-show that toured most of Australia. In 1953, he claimed to have seen seventy-five percent of the Australian people through his tent-show.³ He commenced this Australian continental tour of country towns in a caravan that displayed a large portrait of himself on its side, in 1951. At each town, he would do trick horse-riding, tell stories about the Navajo culture, and display his wrestling holds. He claimed to have done every big town from Perth to north Queensland.

In the Australian wrestling ring, he fought more than a hundred individual wrestlers in more than a thousand contests.⁴ Most of his bouts were at stadiums run by Stadiums Ltd: the old West Melbourne Stadium (known locally as 'The Tin Shed'), the old Rushcutters' Bay Sydney Stadium ('The House of Stoush') and the Brisbane Stadium; though he also sometimes wrestled at provincial centres, such as Newcastle, and in Adelaide, Hobart and Perth. His most keenly recalled bouts were against the Texan cowboy, 'Dirty' Dick Raines. He was not only the most enduring of wrestlers here, but also the most over-worked — especially in the 1950s when wrestling started to decline in popularity. According to *Ring Digest* magazine, he was called back by Stadiums Ltd in 1955 to revive flagging interest in the sport.⁵ However, another view — one obtained through oral history interviews — suggests that the Chief was very keen to revive his former glory days, even though he was past his prime.

Despite the absence of any book or TV series or movie on his life, memory of Big Chief Little Wolf was retained in the public mind in a fond way. The Chief had retired from professional wrestling in November 1958, aged forty-seven, after suffering a mild stroke. That year, he had only wrestled one individual, Cowboy Jack Bence, but also wrestled in two tag-team events: one with Bence as his partner, against Rey Urbano and Andre Drapp in Sydney and, in Melbourne in August, when he tagged with Crusher Webb against Bruce Milne and Bruce Wyatt.

This was his last bout. More ill-health and strokes followed and in the early 1960s he was admitted to Mount Royal Hospital in Parkville, Melbourne. He remained there for nineteen years until his return to the US. Out of sight but definitely not out of mind, he was a genuine folk-hero.

I grew up in Brunswick, which borders the suburb of Parkville and perhaps it was due to that close proximity that 'Big Chief Little Wolf' was a household and playground name in my suburb, even to a generation who had never seen him wrestle. Whenever my mates and I would play 'Cowboys and Indians', we would draw straws to see who would be 'Big Chief Little Wolf'. The contradiction in the name — 'Big' and 'Little' — appealed, as did the whole notion of a real live Navajo Indian being in our midst. The name was always there, in the air. Yet while we were playing our games, the real man, who had been baptised by Spanish missionaries as 'Ventura Tenario', was languishing just down the road — semi-paralysed, in a wheelchair, his face twisted, the lid of one eye taped to an eyebrow to keep it open.

About thirty years later, in the early 1990s, even though the Chief had been dead for about a decade, it bemused me to find that his name still hummed in the air for people of a certain generation. I began casually testing the hypothesis that he was a folk-hero. I'd ask people — cleaners, housewives, taxi-drivers, doctors, academics — whether they'd heard of him. What, if anything, did the name mean to them? As a Research Fellow at the Australian National University, my work enabled me to travel between Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. In each place, virtually everyone — ninety percent of the right age-group — not only had heard of him but had a story to tell about him. It was extraordinary. Then, in 1994, I took a plunge. I decided to test the waters more widely. Perhaps there was a book in this! I sent out letters to editors of daily and local newspapers and made an appearance on Bert Newton's *Good Morning Australia*, seeking reminiscences about the Chief. The response was overwhelming. Over a period of five months, I received approximately 700 letters from the public. Again, each writer not only remembered the Chief but wanted, in some way, big or small, to connect their life to his. There were former wrestlers who had wrestled him, and there were nurses who had nursed him. In between, there were hundreds of people who had seen him wrestle or caught his side-show, or who had just met him by chance in the street or in a restaurant, pub, shop or cinema.

Professional wrestling in Australia is something to which historians haven't paid much attention; yet it was, on the whole, more popular than boxing. There are quite a few good histories of boxing and boxers in Australia, but so far nothing about wrestlers and wrestling, save for Libnan Ayoub's recent record book, *100 Years of Australian Professional Wrestling* (Topmill, Marrickville, 1998). Perhaps wrestling is difficult to look at academically because it is hard to categorise; boxing, like it or not, is a sport. Wrestling, well, wrestling is a, er, well ... what is it exactly?! Is it a sport? Is it just acting? My *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* defines 'sport' as 'fun or diversion, a pastime of an outdoor or athletic kind'. Wrestling is certainly fun, and it can involve considerable athleticism. The problem, of course, is that the outcome of ninety-nine percent of matches is known in advance, which is very 'non-sporting'. That, incidentally, is why spectator gambling has rarely been associated with wrestling this century. Interestingly, the dictionary defines 'sporting' in a way that means there has to be reasonable odds involved in the activity. Professional wrestling may thus be described as a 'non-sporting sport'! But, ultimately, I like to describe it as

‘sports entertainment’, a classification that recognises the great skill involved, as well as the highly theatrical essence. It is a spectacle that combines athleticism, genuine wrestling holds, and ruggedness with traditions of theatre, dance, comic entertainment, pantomime and tragi-drama.

Professional wrestling is based on the catch-as-catch-can style, or American style, which developed on the American western frontier about 130 years ago. The tough men who settled the wild west included a mix of European nationalities and Englishmen from different regions of England, plus a fair few Irishmen. Wrestling was a common, popular, past-time, and each group brought with them the wrestling traditions of their diverse regional backgrounds: the Cornish had a special style and wore jackets for wrestling; there was a Devon style, and styles from Lancashire and Ireland. The latter two had a big impact in the development of the catch-as-catch-can style, which basically is a style where anything goes, subject to a handful of restrictions. The aim of catch-as-catch-can is to pin the opponent’s shoulders for the count of three, or to force him to submit. Very few parts of the body are prohibited from being held. This itself, a hundred years ago, was considered sensational, as the Greco-Roman style, which was also very popular at that time, prohibited any manoeuvres below the waist.⁶

Professional wrestling in Australia may be traced to the 1880s, when men such as Donald Dinnie and Professor William Miller would meet on stage at carnivals and theatres, or in large taverns, or outdoor arenas, around Australia and wrestle in bouts that could last several hours. Very few holds would be applied and, while such wrestling made for interesting reading in newspapers, which provided detailed reports, it could not be sustained as a viable commercial form of entertainment once radio became a mass media in the 1920s.

The advent of radio, as a mass phenomenon, speeded up the action in professional wrestling. Strict time-limits and the rounds’ system, where a contest might go for a specified eight or ten eight-minute rounds, were introduced, along with a greater number, and wider variety, of wrestling holds and manoeuvres. During the Depression, US footballers like Gus Sonnenborn and Joe Savoldi needed work during the non-football season, so they entered the ‘rasslin’ ring’ and were instrumental in creating spectacular manoeuvres such as the flying tackle and aerial drop-kick. This type of action was perfect for radio broadcasts and, with proper stadiums having been built around the US and Australia from the turn of the century, radio — like the televised broadcasts of a much later era — served to promote attendance at the site of the live action.

Back then, radio was as important to home recreation as television is today. People set aside special times to gather around the wireless, usually in the lounge room, and to listen to their favourite programs and serials. Many of my letters refer to the thrill of listening to regular radio broadcasts. The following excerpt is representative:

In 1937 I was six years of age, living with my parents in a mud brick home with dirt floors, covered with linoleum, on a small farm in northern Victoria. My special treat was to be allowed to ‘sit up’ very late, to about 8.00pm or 9.00pm, and listen to the weekly wrestling broadcasts by 3DB/3LK which we received on a valve radio in a large cabinet with an old car battery as the power source.

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By far the best of these nights were when the Chief — the bad guy — and Vic Christie — a good fine upstanding lad — would confront each other. Their battles were brought into my home by Eric Welch of 3DB. Mr. Welch's commentary on these matches were exceptional; his descriptions painted a far clearer, better and more exciting picture than any TV screen produces now ...

They were truly wonderful nights in front of the fire with Eric Welch's vivid word pictures filling the lounge room.⁷

Wrestling itself was a type of serial, as each week the same stable of men would return to fight in challenge matches and grudge matches. In Australia, wrestling was first broadcast on air by Norm McCance for the ABC on 21 March 1925. The contest matched Walter Miller against Al Karasick at the West Melbourne Stadium. McCance's favourite expression was: 'He can't get out of it! He can't get out of it! He can't get out of it!! [pause] He's out of it!'.⁸ McCance compiled two booklets illustrating and describing wrestling holds, including *Scenes in the ring: what the microphone tells us*.⁹ Radio wrestling was so popular that a special *Tell-U-Vision* guide was published in Sydney, displaying diagrams of the wrestling holds. It was sub-titled: *The wrestling chart published to create a mind picture and increase your appreciation of the radio broadcasts*. Another popular booklet was *The Science of Wrestling*: 64 pages, mainly of photos of wrestlers applying their favourite holds, with a brief description of each hold.¹⁰ Little Wolf appears, applying his leg-lock submission hold, the Indian Deathlock.

Big Chief Little Wolf's name is synonymous with the radio era of wrestling in Australia and his decline coincided with the advent of television. One era had passed to another. While wrestling was televised occasionally from 1957, initially by HSV-7 which erected its own studio ring that year, it was not until 1964 that the famous program called 'World Championship Wrestling', screened by the Nine Network, provided for long-term regular televised broadcasts. The television era made names like Killer Kowalski and Mario Milano as well-known to the TV generation as Big Chief Little Wolf had been to the radio one.

Professional wrestlers of both eras adopted personae that embodied values that were either fundamentally 'good' or 'bad'. In the TV era, these became more varied but the basic principle remained, as the French semiotician Roland Barthes put it in his celebrated 1957 essay 'The World of Wrestling': '(the public display of) the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat and Justice'. 'Light without shadow', Barthes correctly observed, 'generates an emotion without reserve'.¹¹ Or, as the American wrestling legend and long-time promoter, Toots Mondt, once said: 'Generating excitement is the prime concern'.¹² Roland Barthes helped make popular culture — the wonders of everyday life — an acceptable field of study for academics and a proper site of attention for collecting institutions, such as museums and libraries. However, it strikes me that the time has come for historians with an interest in wrestling to go beyond Barthes' 'cultural studies' approach and give wrestling and the wrestlers an appropriate place in social history. Big Chief Little Wolf was more than a cultural sign-post or signifier; he was a real person who interacted with Australian society.

In 1937, when he first wrestled here, Little Wolf was presented as a 'noble savage' — a fearless warrior, unknown and unpredictable. His feathered head-

dress stopped people in their tracks. Over the years, he had a few head-dresses and one was very long, nearly touching the ground (according to some letter-writers). A letter from a South Australian woman captures the feeling of many others:

Chief Little Wolf's head-dress remains a vivid memory — it flowed behind him as he ran down the aisle to the ring. ... I can remember thinking it was too amazing to believe that he could be a *real* Indian with *real* feathers like a 'real' Indian in the movies. How could such an exotic person be in (as we felt in those days) isolated ordinary Australia?³

The reference to 'isolated ordinary Australia', or words to that effect, appears in other letters, too. There had been a troupe of Native American entertainers in Australia in the 1920s but they were not here long. Little Wolf arrived at a time when movies — still called 'talkies' by some people back then — had projected wild, romantic and sometimes frightening images of American Indians. Also, the 1930s were the decade of economic Depression and unemployment. One writer began his letter: 'We were the children of the 30s, parents struggling to get over the depression only to be faced with World War Two. We were mad about wrestling'.¹⁴

It's easy to see how the wrestling, as 'light without shadow', offered an escape from the problems of the world in the 1930s and 1940s and, in the 1950s, an escape from boredom for those who felt Australia too 'isolated' and 'ordinary'.

Little Wolf started off as a rule-breaker. By 1941, his third tour here, the Chief was transformed from a rule-breaker who the fans loved to hate to an undoubted crowd favourite. When a crowd at the 1941 season was told that Little Wolf would be returning later in the year, the West Melbourne Stadium erupted with cheering and applause.¹⁵ The newspapers pictured him as a constantly laughing, cheerful, giant teddy bear of a man. From 1947 to 1958, he continued to play different good/bad roles, varying his ring tactics, but no matter how villainous he might behave, he was now held in high regard and with affection. He had become a celebrity whose links to the 'common folk' ran much deeper than most other celebrities.

Why was it that, for all the Big Chief's twists and turns, he was still regarded with such esteem for so many years after his decline? In other words, why did Chief Little Wolf become an Australian folk-hero? And, of course, what does that tell us about our own society? Why do we select some people — war heroes, bushrangers, sporting figures, or whatever — over others? Are there common traits, common values, in each folk-heroic case?

In attempting to tackle these questions, I initially set about trying to put together a type of identikit of who the late, great, Chief really was. This proved an impossible task. For a start, while I uncovered many newspaper and magazine reports about him and his life, sometimes based on detailed interviews, these were repetitive. Between the late 1930s and the late 1950s, there was very little new information revealed about the Chief's background. My guess is that, as a gregarious celebrity, he told his story too often; it became patter, told over and over. I'm sure we've all met people like that. It takes special effort to get them out of their own groove. Unfortunately, as far as my research has uncovered, no journalists really ever made that special effort. And, lest I seem critical of the journalists, which I'm not, it should also be said that the Chief was a great self-promoter. Wherever he went, for instance, he wore his Indian head-dress. One letter-writer recalled seeing him, late

at night, waiting for the Bondi tram, dressed in a white suit — plus the feathered head-dress. The printed word of the time captured Chief Little Wolf as he wanted to be seen, as part of his promotion of his wrestling/showman persona.

The National Library has a world-class Oral History Collection, dating back to 1959. I've been involved with it, as an occasional interviewer, since 1988. A good oral history interview allows the interviewee to place on record a view of their life that might not otherwise be left for posterity. You can imagine how much I wish somebody had interviewed Chief Little Wolf, with a view to capturing the story of the man behind the public image and printed word. Instead of having access to a source like that, I find myself drawing on the reminiscences of others — the hundreds of people who knew the Chief personally or professionally or in the most casual of ways, and who wrote to me. Their letters represent a folkloric understanding of the Chief. They indicate the qualities that individual writers wanted to believe were his qualities. Even the most exaggerated letter is a valuable source in identifying why so many people cherish him without even necessarily really knowing him personally.

If I were to sum up from the entire collection of 700 letters, I would say that Chief Little Wolf is a folk-hero because of the following perceived qualities, which I'll list in point form before elaborating on each: he came from underprivileged origins and, despite success and celebrity status, identified with the common folk; he was an exceptionally kind-hearted human being: active and generous in helping others less fortunate than himself; he was excellent at what he did; he was regarded as possessing super-human qualities; he suffered a quick and tragic decline; and he was exotic — an acceptable outsider, a foreigner of the non-threatening kind.

Born in a farmhouse on 25 November 1911, of Navajo parents in Hoene, Colorado, his young life was frugal and hard and, at the age of twelve, he was tramping the countryside with his bankrupt father looking for work. His mother died when he was young. His big break came when he visited a travelling tent-show and took on the challenge to enter the ring with a big Greek wrestler, George Pappas. Pappas beat him in ten seconds flat but the carnival owner felt he had potential and employed him as a roustabout. He learnt how to wrestle and, in 1928, had his first professional contest.¹⁶ From the letters emerges a portrait of a celebrity who was at complete ease having a beer in a crowded pub (there's plenty of evidence that he drank lots of beer in lots of pubs!), genuinely enjoyed meeting people, being photographed with strangers, signing autographs, and so on. He would happily invite a taxi-driver to dine with him, at the end of a hired ride. It seems he never forgot his own humble origins. Nor did he lose his great sense of humour, which is conveyed in dozens of letters describing chance meetings. Wrote one of my informants from Bundaberg, Queensland, where the Chief was wrestling in the 1950s:

The Chief was outside the Paramount Theatre and as well-endowed blue-eyed blondes walked past the Chief gave the usual Indian salute and said "Chance" — a local could not stand it any more and said to the Chief, "I thought all Indians saluted and said 'How'" — the Chief with a big grin said — "Sonny, this Indian knows 'How' — all he wants is the 'Chance'"!¹⁷

Chief Little Wolf was a tireless worker for several charities, and this work probably earned him more respect than his performances in the ring. There's abundant evidence, in the letters, of a man who frequently and quietly helped individuals, as

well as institutions: a kind, sincere and intelligent gentle man. The fact that I received so many emotionally-charged letters from members of the public indicates that the Chief was much-loved and respected. There are many that relate specific instances of selfless kindness, compassion and generosity but one from a former physiotherapist at a Victorian children's hospital is worth quoting now. It said:

Most of the patients were polio's, spastics, T B bones — all long term treatments. To the hospital came all the stage stars, on arrival for a photo session with them, supposedly entertaining the children. Most were a pain — had no interest in the kids — and left as soon as they had their photos.

Little Wolf however regularly came down with all his feathers. He would put the kids out on the lawn and he would dance and entertain them for an hour or so. Never a photograph or paper report. To us, he was a Godsend — we looked on him as a friend and helper.¹⁸

The Chief loved children, loved being a celebrity, loved mixing with the masses and had a laugh and grin as hefty as himself.

There is no doubt the Chief was excellent at what he did. In 1974, he was inducted into New York's Wrestling Hall of Fame. He is still regarded by wrestling fans as the master of the Indian Deathlock, a technically difficult hold to apply. Magazine and newspaper articles tell the Chief's story of how he adapted it from a torture technique used by the great warrior Geronimo. Most of the people who remember the Chief also remember his special hold. I received letters from people who, as spectators at the Chief's shows, would go forward to let him demonstrate the hold on them. They wrote to me about the experience in terms that reflect enormous pride. Someone who had visited the Chief's tent at the Royal Melbourne Show around 1950 wrote:

I considered myself very fortunate at the time because he demonstrated his famous Indian Deathlock on me ... I consider that one of the high moments of my life.¹⁹

The folk-hero is usually one of us 'common folk' yet, somehow, in acceptable ways, above us at the same time. Often, as in the case of Ned Kelly and John Kirkpatrick Simpson, they are individuals who are believed to have performed super-human feats. Several letter-writers related incidents concerning Chief Little Wolf's super-human strength. A country storekeeper claimed his petite wife had been lifted from the ground on the palm of the Chief's hand. Another writer claimed he had seen six young boys dangling like monkeys from the Chief's arms — three boys to each bulging bicep! At the Gympie Show, another claimed that the Chief reduced the town's strongest timber cutters to 'quivering wrecks' with the Indian Deathlock 'only half applied'. I am not so much interested in the veracity of these claims as in the various writers' need to see the Chief in super-human terms. He is human — of us — but above us.

In November 1958, Little Wolf suffered a stroke that badly affected one side of his body and face. He would never wrestle again. His final years in the ring had seen him battle with a weight problem — he used to quip 'I once had the body of a Greek God but now I've got the body of a Goddam Greek!' — and his decline was sudden and dramatic. When he departed from Australia in 1980, it was hard to

recognise the frail, twisted, figure in the wheel-chair as the Big Chief. From all accounts, though, especially letters from fourteen former Mount Royal nurses, Little Wolf remained determined and spirited. He was the Big Chief till the end.

It is unlikely that Australians who were born into the era of the White Australia Policy would have accepted as a folk-hero any foreigner who was other than exotic, other than a novelty figure. Anyone who followed the boxing back then will be familiar with the disgraceful treatment meted out by Australian audiences to the Italo-Australian champion, Rocky Gattelari. Rocky has documented these well-publicised experiences in his autobiography.²⁰ There was nothing threatening in the persona of the Native American or 'Redskin' as the popular press described him. Australia was not taking in thousands of Navajos each year as part of a bold immigration program, nor was Australia home to tightknit communities of Navajo people. The American Indian was an object of curiosity and fascination. He even wore his head-dress while shopping at places like Myers, in Bourke Street. 'He was such a decent man', said one letter-writer. But how did she know from one distant sighting? It's not that she knew, but rather that she wanted to believe. And that's how folk-heroes are created.

The old Australia of the 1940s and 1950s receives a drubbing these days but I think it speaks well of Australian society back then that Big Chief Little Wolf was taken to heart. It would worry me greatly if I lived in a society where people with perceived qualities the converse of Chief Little Wolf's were embraced as heroes. Can you imagine that? A folk-hero who was a multi-millionaire capitalist, unable to relate to ordinary Australians, whose success did not arise from any excellence and hard work on his part? It will be interesting to see whether we have any enduring folk-heroes at all in the future or whether, in this post-modern age, we end up with a plethora of folk-heroes, each as fleeting as a television mini-series.

Endnotes

- 1 *Age*, 31 July 1980, p 1.
- 2 Big Chief is now challenged as Australia's most enduring wrestler by the Italian matman, Mario Milano, who first wrestled here in 1967. Like the Chief, Milano settled permanently in Australia. He is still going strong on the club wrestling circuit, at the age of 62.
- 3 *Sporting Globe*, 13 May 1953, p 16.
- 4 His better known opponents included: Matros Kirolenko, John Spellman, Sammy Stein, King Kong Cox, Vic Christie, Ray Steele, Reuben Wright, Pat Fraley, Pat Meehan, Billy Hansen, Dean Detton, George Zaharias, Leo Jensen, Roland Kirchmeyer, Brother Jonathon, Bonnie Muir, Laverne Baxter, Chief Thunderbird, Tommy O'Toole, Fred Atkins, Sandor Szabo, Red Vagnone, Babe Smolenski, Marvin Jones, Dick Raines, Danny Dusek, Dutch Hefner, Seelie Samara, Al Costello, Tarzan White, Arjan Das, Jack Claybourne, Emil Kiroshenko, Jesse James, Joginder Singh, 'Flash' Gordon, George Pencheff, Ali Riza Bey, Mel Peters, Jim 'Black Panther' Mitchell, Sammy Mennacker, Lucky Simunovitch, Johnny Moochy, Bearcat Wright, Bruno Giordenko, Chief Suni War Cloud, Don Beitelman, Chief Big Heart, Lou Newman, Ricki Waldo, Sky Hi Lee and Jack Bence.
- 5 *Ring Digest*, Sydney, September 1955, p 16.
- 6 For a good overview of the history of professional wrestling, see Graeme Kent, *A Pictorial History of Wrestling*, London, 1968.
- 7 Letter from A B, Lowood, Qld, 15 November 1994.
- 8 McCance's line was as popular to his generation as Channel 9 commentator Jack Little's 'Wham bam, thank you "ma'am"' was to mine. McCance was interviewed for the *National Library of Australia's Oral History* program in 1971, aged 90. The interview is held at TRC 121/23 as part of

the Mel Pratt Collection.

- 9 Norman McCance, *Scenes in the Ring: What the Microphone Tells Us*, Melbourne, 1927. See also McCance, *Wrestling Holds Illustrated and Wrestling Records*, Melbourne, 1927.
- 10 Dick Cameron, *The Science of Wrestling*, Sydney, c1939.
- 11 A collection of Barthes' essays, including the essay on professional wrestling, was published in *English in Mythologies*, London, 1972.
- 12 Toots Mondt, 'Give 'em what they want', in *Wrestling World*, April 1967, p 47.
- 13 Letter from C H, Norton Summit, South Australia, 27 May 1994.
- 14 Letter from M, Frankston, 20 September 1994.
- 15 *Sporting Globe*, 23 July 1941, p 12.
- 16 'The Big Bad (Chief) Little Wolf' in *People*, 8 November 1950, pp 51-4.
- 17 Letter from H M H, Bundaberg, Queensland, 27 September 1994.
- 18 Letter from N L, Dingley, Victoria, 1994.
- 19 Letter from L L, Margate, Qld, 8 October 1994.
- 20 See Rocky Gattelari, *The Rocky Road*, Richmond, 1989.