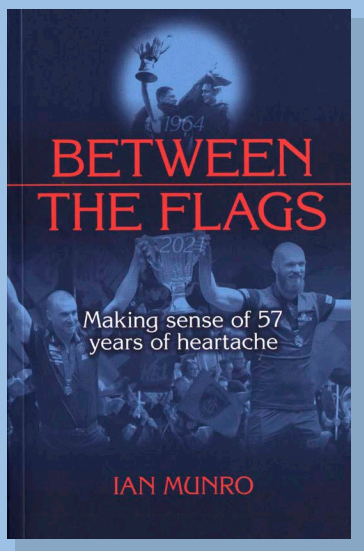


Book Reviews



Ian Munro

Between The Flags: Making sense of 57 years of heartache

Ian Munro, [Melbourne], 2022
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Since September 2021, Ian Munro has been living the dream that most Melbourne supporters have enjoyed: supporting the reigning premiers for the first time in 57 years.

It's been a long and sometimes tortuous journey for all involved, from the middle of the arena to everyone sitting in the stands. Really, it's been anything but a safe "between the flags" paddle. Supporting, playing for or working at Melbourne throughout nearly sixty years, you're more likely to have been buffeted by a freak wave or tripped over a sandcastle. As someone who has seen the story unfold, Munro delivers a range of perspectives. He is able to traverse the end of the 1960s, when – as a student – he took "some solace in examining the reserves ladder. That was where Melbourne was still winning." [p.71] At the same time, his ongoing interaction with club figures and events means that he can also deliver the perspective of those more closely involved in these tumultuous and trying times.

One fascinating example is that of Ray Biffin, recruited from Tasmania in 1968 and connecting generations of Melbourne people as he recalls "Checker" Hughes conferring with him after an incident at Waverley, saying:

"Checker grabbed me and said to me, 'Biff, we need someone like you playing in the seniors. We've got nobody who's prepared to use their body and look after any of the players. We need you to become that sort of player.' Which is something I had never been asked to do before or had to do... So Biffin became the player the club needed him to be, and made himself into a cult hero before anyone had heard of the term." [p.71]

This was the 1970s, and Munro crisply sums up – as a lovely combination of supporter and researcher – that:

"Melbourne's fall from grace was a function of its amateur origins within the MCC, compounded by the shutting-down of its traditional recruiting zones and the loss of its unique appeal as the sole tenant of the MCG. It is some sort of badge of honour to have been so strong that the rules of recruiting were remade to bring you undone." [p.126]

Other forces that have created headaches for everyone involved with Melbourne over 57 seasons naturally include the merger mayhem of 1996, when even then first year player Andrew Leoncelli "told all my friends they had to come because of it could be my last game." [p.166] This was the "merger game", which saw Hawthorn narrowly defeat Melbourne mere weeks before the membership vote.

Following this, the appointment of Neale Daniher as coach at the end of 1997, complemented by Danny Corcoran as football manager, gave hope to the many, but highlighted the challenges faced by Melbourne players in inadequate and overcrowded facilities, which he recalls thus:

"There were machines twenty or thirty years old... Money was perennially the issue at this small club that had this wonderful tradition that they all lived off from the halcyon days, and never moved into the real world of the AFL." [p.195]

These are just examples of the challenges – cultural, financial and structural - faced by the Melbourne Football Club over many years, and Munro goes on to revisit momentous episodes such as the Debt Demolition campaign of 2008, when "The club was \$5 million in debt... had won just two of its nineteen games", and was now seeking to find "150 'foundation heroes' to save the club." [p.218] That these people were found is a triumph. That they had to be found – as Munro details – is a tragedy. But that is Melbourne, and that is the 'making sense' element of Munro's investigation. It's certainly not a relaxing or amusing volume; in common with being involved with the Melbourne Football Club and hoping against hope for the team's success no matter what forces may batter it, you find yourself constantly on edge through conflict, craziness and even – stop the heartache – success in 2021.

Overall, it is a compelling read. Ian Munro provides a fascinating insight into the red and blue world, as well as how the machinations of assorted governing bodies have influenced all clubs throughout the game's existence. His love for the Melbourne Football Club is, of course, a significant bonus. I will need to re-read *Between The Flags* in order to absorb everything, and I certainly have different views regarding some events and personalities.

But that's the beauty of it, really; after 57 years, we are all in agreement about our love of club and our appreciation of everyone involved. Long may it continue.

Lynda Carroll