



## **Rob Riley, a life lived in the cause of liberation**

17 November 1993

*Rob Riley, an Aboriginal Leader's Quest for Justice*

By **Quentin Beresford**

Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006

374 pages, \$39.95

REVIEW BY BARRY HEALY

**Rob Riley was a major leader of Aboriginal Australia whose influence was felt from the streets of Perth, through the remote outback into the halls of power in Canberra. The arc of his journey includes most of the major struggles of Aboriginal politics since the 1970s to his death in 1996.**

Quentin Beresford's account delves into all of those events and is an important source for understanding the power of those struggles.

Riley's life was a microcosm of the injustices lumped onto Australia's Indigenous people. He carried the pain of being stolen from his family as a baby, sexually abused in an orphanage and apartheid, WA-style, in hick country towns where Aborigines were marginalised.

Riley's lasting legacy is that he never wavered from speaking the truth, no matter what the personal cost.

Aboriginal leader Pat Dodson officially launched this biography on May 12 in Perth before 400 guests in the Government House ballroom. On stage with him were the WA Premier Alan Carpenter and a long list of high-flying dignitaries.

Carpenter announced a new scholarship program for Aboriginal students completing Year 12 to perpetuate Riley's legacy.

There is power that comes from holding an official position, and Riley held many important ones from the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Royal Commission into the Stolen Generation and the office of the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gerry Hand. But authority comes from personal honesty and the fact that Riley is being honoured so much 10 years after his tragic death is a small measure of his integrity.

Beresford's account begins with the story of Riley's grandmother, which amounts to a snapshot of the horrible workings of A.O. Neville, the dreaded WA Commissioner of Native Affairs. Anna Dinah was stolen from her family as a teenager and spent most of the rest of her life cooped up at the Moore River Settlement concentration camp outside Perth.

Neville offered her the chance to leave, but only if she abandoned her children to him; she refused. She died at age 39. "Her commitment to her children was her life's achievement, attained at the expense of her independence", Beresford writes.

Riley was taken from his mother as a baby in 1955 and placed in Sister Kate's Children's Home, which, while less oppressive than the Moore River Settlement, was dedicated to eliminating Aboriginality through assimilation.

Beresford's chapters detailing all this are a well-weighted synopsis of WA's racist heritage.

Riley exploded into political activity as a leader of Black Action in Perth in the early 1970s, inspired by Malcolm X and Native American activists.

Riley's first major foe was Liberal premier Sir Charles Court. Riley battled in the streets and the courts against the use of section 54b of the Police Act to crack down on dissent.

From there, Riley went forward to other struggles, of which the 1980 Noonkanbah dispute was a personal turning point. The traditional owners of the Noonkanbah station tried to prevent the Amax oil company from knowingly desecrating one of their sacred sites.

Noonkanbah "brought to a head the contrasting narratives of Blacks and whites in Western Australia", Beresford writes. Ever the dry academic, Beresford understates the issue: Court was determined to destroy Aboriginal resistance to him and his racist corporate buddies.

Court organised a fleet of scab trucks to break a union ban on transporting drilling equipment north. At a critical moment in the fight, the Liberals got a trusted member of the Perth Aboriginal community to denounce the Noonkanbah people.

Riley learned from Noonkanbah that he needed to move to a bigger stage to try to liberate Indigenous people.

What followed were many years where he toiled with other prominent Aboriginal leaders to push the ALP to make good on its promises to Aborigines. It was to break his heart.

First he had to live through the Brian Burke WA government. Burke swept into power in 1983 promising justice for Aborigines. Then he sat on his hands and allowed the mining companies to set the political agenda through expensive, racist advertising campaigns.

With the political landscape then dominated by racism, Burke proceeded to betray his promises. Riley was to see the Hawke and Keating governments do the same.

Beresford details all the political machinations with forensic precision.

Riley's final undoing came as a consequence of his work for the national inquiry into Aboriginal stolen children. It brought to the surface his own demons and, being the man that he was, he spoke of them in public.

But the pain ruined him and led to his suicide.

Beresford traces the last, dark days well, but there is an element missing. For Aboriginal people to assert the truth of their existence in the face of a society that permanently invalidates them is to live with unbearable pain.

Like countless others, Riley's final self-destruction was the last defence of his Aboriginal integrity. His suicide note was a clear political indictment of racism.

"Understand white Australia that you have so much to answer for", he wrote. "Your greed, your massacres, your sanitised history in the name of might and right."

He had been through "so much trauma, shame and guilt that I can't make peace with myself".

That a person such as Rob Riley, who always spoke and acted on the truth, could be driven to suicide is the ultimate condemnation of Australian racism.

From *Green Left Weekly*, June 7, 2006.