

The Book

Bernborough

by Duncan Stearn
 The Definitive Bernborough Book
 The Preface
 Towards the end of 1945 Australians were recovering from more than a decade and a half of hardship, first the economic disaster of the Great Depression followed by a world war they had come close to losing. The great collective national struggle for survival united the nation, cementing the social fabric. In the darkest days of the conflict following the entry of Japan into the war, thousands of American service personnel flooded into Australia, commanded by General Douglas MacArthur. The American Caesar asked Prime Minister John Curtin, a MacArthur fan, to ban racing. He refused; a rebuff MacArthur must have found bewildering. Although Eagle Farm and Doomben racecourses in Brisbane were turned over to the military and Wednesday racing- and some Saturday's- in Sydney were cancelled, horse racing went on as before, and crowds still flocked to the track. With the end of the war and basking in the warm glow of a hard-fought victory, the Australian public were ready for a sporting champion. They found one in the unlikely form of a controversial huge bay horse from outback Queensland who went by the name of Bernborough. Already six years old, an age when racehorses have usually run their best races, Bernborough became a household name and hero to a country for whom racing was almost a national pastime. Bernborough was the first cultural icon of the Baby Boom era. His story was the stuff of legend, his early career held in check by racing's unending reel of red tape; he was the underdog, the horse who hadn't been given a "fair go", and Australians- with their inbred resentment of anything resembling oppression- rallied to Bernborough's corner. Through most of 1946 no one could drink in a pub, eat in a restaurant, go to a nightclub or talk about racing without Bernborough's name coming up in conversation. He was more widely talked about than any horse for a decade. His every move was studied and commented upon. Wherever he raced he drew huge crowds. People who had never before seen a horse race came just to see Bernborough. People who had never gambled, wagered on Bernborough. Stories and songs were written about him, advertisers invoked his name as if it possessed magical selling properties, churchmen centred sermons on his deeds and at least one Perth baker named his cakes and pastries after the horse. Crowds would gather for his training workouts, on race days the faithful assembled in front of his stall, people would risk injury to pluck hairs from his tail as souvenirs; others would scramble for his discarded racing plates. Competing in the 1946 Caulfield Cup, over 108,000 fans crammed into Caulfield, a record for the track and one of the highest attendances ever on an Australian racecourse. This in a nation of around seven and a half million people; the rest of the country listened to the race on the radio. Three men were most closely associated with the emergence and success of Bernborough. Only one- his trainer Harry Plant- was not widely recognised prior to 1946. His owner, Azzalin 'the Dazzlin' Romano, was a prominent and colourful businessmen in Sydney. Arriving as a poor migrant from Britain in the early 1920s the Italian-born Romano worked hard, exhibited flair and persistence and, flouting arcane laws, made his fortune; living proof Australia was indeed the 'lucky country'. His eponymous nightclub and restaurant drew the cream of Sydney society through its doors. He loved racing, liked to gamble, and purchased a few racehorses. Until Bernborough, he lacked real success. His jockey, Athol 'call me George' Mulley, was a star in his own right: a combination of youth, verbal dexterity, ability, and enough of the unpredictable wild boy to make him both an angel and demon in the eyes of most racegoers. An acknowledged genius in the saddle, twice the leading apprentice jockey in Sydney and later champion jockey, he was no stranger to fierce and angry demonstrations from racegoers after riding what they perceived a poor race. Equally, he attracted standing ovations from crowds who witnessed some remarkable performances in an action-packed and controversial career. His wedding made the front pages of the national newspapers. Like Bernborough, Harry Plant originally hailed from Queensland. A dedicated horseman, he was a former buckjump rider and trainer who settled in Sydney with a small but effective team of racehorses. Through his Queensland connections Plant gained an opportunity to purchase Bernborough at auction in late 1945. The result was a partnership that propelled Plant, Romano, and Mulley into a media and public spotlight for which none was truly prepared. Bernborough changed their lives forever. This is their story.