Aboriginal People and Australian Football in the Nineteenth Century

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They Did Not Come from Nowhere

By

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Warning. This book contains images of people who are deceased. It is my attempt to pay my respects to the Indigenous people of Australia past, present and future in the hope that they will tell the whole story one day.

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PREFACE

In his most recent autobiographical work, *Made in Scotland*, the Scottish comedian and musician Sir Billy Connolly reflects on his background and explains why he rejects the easy assumption of a BBC interviewer that he came from nothing to his current international celebrity. As he writes, "I didnae come from nothing. I come from something". He could not be prouder of his working-class and national origins and the book that follows this opening response is a testament to the extent that he has retained a clear historical sense of the importance of the journey he has taken in his 75 years—and its starting point.

In a similar way, the Indigenous population of Australia did not come from nowhere. They have inhabited this continent for around 60 000 years, according to the most recent estimates, managing it and changing it sustainably for generations. But they have not yet taken command of their own history and impressed their own story on the majority of the current Australian population today. As a result, the narrative of this country remains distorted and its cultural and sporting history in particular are impoverished.

Bernard Whimpress's *Passport to Nowhere* is the story of how Aboriginal involvement in Australian cricket began in the mid-nineteenth century, leading to the first tour to England long before the white men ventured there, but led nowhere thereafter in terms of Indigenous participation in first-class and international cricket. His forensic discussion based on his doctoral thesis is still the most convincing account of why this was so and it was done long before newspapers were digitised and we had the wonders of modern technology to aid research.

The trajectory of Indigenous participation in football is very different from that of cricket, however, and it is a story that has not been told. As a partial consequence, another story has come to dominate popular thinking about the origins of Australian football and links to Indigenous games. I wish this story—that the white man's game of football was partially derived from Indigenous games—were true and that there was some evidence to support it, not necessarily written down "colonial archive" sources or other contemporary material, but something perhaps that exists in the storytelling of Indigenous people about their families and clans and nations. To my knowledge, no one from an Indigenous background has

shared that information with the rest of the world. The originator of the notion of a link with the Indigenous games, Jim Poulter, probably came closest in modern times with *Sharing Heritage in Kulin Country*, a moving account of his family's close involvement with Indigenous people on the outskirts of Melbourne.

This book sets out to tell a different story, one based on contemporary evidence in a tainted source, the "colonial record" that was largely written by the newcomers, but telling of Aboriginal deeds in the sports pages of their newspapers. Without this trove of information the story that follows could not be told. And it needs to be told so that the descendants of the pioneers of Indigenous football get the recognition they deserve, but also so that a modern generation of young Indigenous people might turn their love for football into a modern reinterpretation of its history from their unique perspective. Their ancestors and families are the real heroes of nineteenth-century sport. They were active participants in the game and several of them were equally involved in the political campaigns that underpin Indigenous life today. Rather than spending time seeking a link between the games Indigenous people played and the origins of Australian football in Melbourne, it would be much more valuable to develop the stories of those who saw the white men playing their strange game and thought "We could do that" and did in the most difficult of circumstances, initially in the missions and stations around the periphery of Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. They are the real heroes and their stories should be told. This book is just a taste of the richness that awaits.

Many people helped me with the research for this book and I thank them all. Aunty Janice Austin, Aunty Dot Shaw, Uncle Johnny Lovett, Tyson Lovett-Murray, Michael Bell, Heather Cox, Lionel Lawrence Harradine and several members of their families welcomed and spent time with me when I arrived without notice and with a series of questions and puzzles about football and families.

Ken Edwards, Barry Judd, Abby Cooper, Ciannon Cazaly, Jim Poulter, Robert Messenger, Anne McMaster, Ian D. Clark, Daryle Rigney, Lionel Frost, Tony Ward and Sean Gorman responded to my requests for information.

Vern McCallum provided stunning photographs from his enormous collection. Dr Wayne Atkinson kindly allowed us to use his map of the reserves, missions and stations in Victoria. Tim Rippon provided the portrait of his grandfather. Researching in local historical societies and archives in Victoria and the state libraries in Victoria and South Australia was a delight. I met nothing but assistance and encouragement and the wonderful "can do" spirit that made my all-too-brief visits productive and

enjoyable. Rob Nolan at Healesville and Sue Thompson at Lilydale provided information and introductions.

Trevor Ruddell at the Melbourne Cricket Club Library shared his meticulous research, much of it undertaken in the old way on microfilm and hard copy. Gillian Hibbins deserves apologies from many who have wilfully or ignorantly maligned her and her outstanding empirical and imaginative work. Richard Broome's work has been a beacon and he encouraged me to continue with this book.

I was introduced to Athas Zafiris by Ian Syson, who unearthed some interesting sources for me for this book and with whom I have talked and worked on the story of another code for years. Athas runs a marvellous blog, Shoot Farken, full of ideas and vignettes on football, sport and life. We collaborated on some of the pivotal research that led to this book and only his other commitments prevented him from being its joint author.

Joe Gorman, Martin Flanagan, Greg Baum and Tony Wright inspired and intimidated me with their stylish journalism, which I can never hope to match.

Col Hutchinson, Australian Football League and Geelong Football Club statistician and historian, shared his encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of the game and its players with me, as did Mark Pennings, whose monumental five volumes on the game before 1897 and the rediscovery of Albert "Pompey" Austin redound to his credit. James Annand helped me with some family trees in the early stages of his research.

At the end of 2017 my wife and editor Frances Hay said, "No more big projects". Then Wray Vamplew, fellow economic historian and long-time friend, invited submissions for sports history books for Cambridge Scholars Publishing. That proved irresistible, but if Frances had known what was involved in turning my research into a publishable book I suspect she would have ensured it never happened. But it has and she deserves the credit for its appearance.

It should be obvious to readers of this book that the information contained here comes from many different sources, but the interpretation of that material and the errors in it are all down to me. I hope it is the first word in a new interpretation of the Indigenous history of Australian football, but I am sure it will not be the last.

INTRODUCTION

In July 1908 the Victorian Football League (VFL) held a self-congratulatory meeting at its new premises in Collins Street, Melbourne. The President, Alexander McCracken, opened proceedings with the claim that "the League could safely be described as one of the most successful athletic associations ever formed. It had come through without a blemish, so far as he knew, and it had brought football to the highest status". Other members of the committee echoed his remarks.

However, the first item of business showed just how narrow the vision of the League was when it turned down a request from the secretary of the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Football Club to discuss playing matches against good metropolitan teams.[1] The bias against Aboriginal players is evident in the fact that only one Indigenous player has been traced playing for a top senior club in a competitive match in Victoria in the nineteenth century.[2]

In 2018 players identifying as Aboriginal are over-represented in senior Australian Football League ranks compared with their share of the national population.[3] They are widely believed to have a unique affinity for the game and they certainly lend a distinct character to the composition of teams taking part in the modern Australian code. They have made the game their own in significant ways and some Indigenous players—Sir Doug Nicholls, Graham "Polly" Farmer, Nicky Winmar, Michael Long and Adam Goodes, to name but five—have had a huge influence on it, on and off the field.

It is incredible how recently this transformation has occurred. In 2005, according to Andrew Demetriou, then Chief Executive of the Australian Football League, between 1906 and 1980 only 18 players who claimed Indigenous heritage had played in the VFL.[4] Australian football deserves credit for the way it has tried to make up for more than a century of exclusion and denigration of Aboriginal people, though it is arguable that it, and the other codes, needs to do far more to promote people of Aboriginal heritage as coaches, administrators and members of governing bodies.[5] The treatment of Indigenous players during and after their careers, particularly greater sensitivity to their individual and cultural needs, remains a matter of concern.[6]

One aspect of the recognition of Indigenous contributions to the game is a fundamental reconsideration of the history of their involvement since the game was codified. There is at present a complete disjunction between what has been accepted as the popular story of that involvement and what actually happened in the nineteenth century. A powerful myth has become accepted in the popular mind that Indigenous games, such as marngrook, influenced the origins and early development of football in Melbourne and Victoria through the agency of the charismatic and wayward cricketer Thomas Wentworth Wills, who as a child played Indigenous games with local children in the Western District of Victoria where he grew up. Since this notion was first floated by Jim Poulter in 1983, it has gained widespread traction at local and national level. It is one of those stories that even the historians who have researched the subject most closely wish were true, but evidence in support of the argument remains lacking and the myth continues to flourish.[7]

There is, however, another story that can be told, this one based on a growing body of evidence that will account for a well-founded belief that Aboriginal people did take part in the white man's game of football in the nineteenth century. This story is a much more powerful and complex one, non-linear and full of stops and starts, noble and empowering, and it should be the focus for research on the history of the game if we are to understand how Australia's unique code of football developed and the place of Indigenous people in its evolution.[8]

Though the almost genocidal obliteration of the Indigenous population of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales (from 1851, the colony of Victoria) in the nineteenth century is the overwhelming fact of the period, the resilience of the human spirit that led to the remaining Aborigines finding ways of forcing entry into the white man's sports is a remarkable tale. Nearly all those who have researched and written about Indigenous involvement in football have concentrated on the codification episode in the 1850s and early 1860s and then jumped ahead to the twentieth century when Indigenous players and teams took part in the game at local level and occasionally individuals participated in the VFL. A few have looked more closely at what was happening in the intervening period, but this book is the first attempt to analyse the extent and significance of Indigenous involvement away from the Melbourne–Geelong axis where the top level of the game was played.[9]

Several historians have touched on aspects of this story, but the scale and substance of Aboriginal involvement in football has until now not been analysed and its significance for our understanding of Australian sport and culture in the nineteenth century has not been revealed. By

uncovering evidence of Aboriginal involvement in the game in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a much more convincing explanation of Indigenous involvement and influence on football becomes possible. They did not found the game or influence its origins, but they took it up and transformed it over a very long period.

This is the story of the first generations who began that process despite potentially overwhelming obstacles to their participation. The book explains and charts a much messier story than the triumphalism of the origins myth, one that is full of twists and turns and dead ends but eventually leads to success over a century later. This is about where it really all began. It returns the idea of agency to the story as the Indigenous people involved created and developed their own history in the game.

Rather than begin with a recapitulation of the popular story and the reasons why it is unacceptable as history, this book plunges straight into the Indigenous involvement in the game in the missions and stations around the periphery of the colony of Victoria. The second part is a first attempt at a series of individual biographies of Indigenous footballers and a collective assessment of their contribution to the game. The third section is a briefer consideration of developments in South Australia and Western Australia. Only then, in the fourth section, is the myth of Aboriginal origins critically revisited for the benefit of any readers who still feel that it must have some substance. The final section restates the conclusions of the research underpinning this book and points to a productive way forward if we are truly to understand the first stages of Indigenous involvement in football and its significance for the history not just of the game but of Australian culture in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth.

The early part of this book is highly empirical, detailing contemporary evidence that either has not been accessible before or has not been assessed collectively rather than examined specifically in the context of local or club history. The detail is necessary to give the modern reader a flavour of the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary material, nearly all of which comes from the much-despised "colonial record", with all its biases and prejudices.[10] But this material is not all as racist and critical as it is often portrayed. Many contemporaries had a much more nuanced view of Indigenous life and culture, though obviously they were influenced by the dominant ideologies and scientific theories of the day. Without the "colonial record", however, this story could never be told. A full understanding is going to require much more than is presented here and if this book leads to a much more thorough and comprehensive

treatment, particularly from an Indigenous perspective, then it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Where does this book fit into the historiography of Australia? It is neither black-armband nor white-blanket history but an attempt to answer a series of simple questions that may have highly complex answers. What part, if any, did Indigenous people play in the domestic game of football that was codified in Melbourne in 1859 during the second half of the nineteenth century? Did their games influence the origins of the code? If not, why might their descendants today believe that football was their game? Is this a legitimate belief based on sound history or is it another myth?

Sources and research strategy

> … science … is an ongoing inquiry. All it takes is a new piece of evidence to turn on its head what we thought we knew. Science is a journey and knowledge is ever evolving.[11]

History is the same. Sometimes it advances because people think differently inside or outside the field and someone spots the relevance of the latter. At other times it advances because a curious inquirer turns up new evidence or a new source bearing on an existing or settled issue. The latter can turn existing interpretations upside down or modify them to the extent that they have to be completely rethought. The gathering of evidence through "mud, dust and sweat" in the archives and the sources may not be as physically demanding as archaeology and may be assisted dramatically by changes in technology, as with the digitisation of newspapers for example, but it is vital to the health of a discipline that the provisional nature of historical conclusions is always kept in mind. So what is written today can always be modified or overturned by what is learned tomorrow.

When researchers began the study of Indigenous people after the European invasion they concentrated on the material in the reports of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines of Victoria and the associated correspondence and other records, plus the work of contemporary anthropologists and others who had committed their knowledge of Indigenous people to print. Also, various commissions of inquiry were undertaken in an effort to understand what was happening to the Indigenous survivors in Victoria. The Select Committee of the Victorian Legislative Council's Inquiry in 1858–59 is typical of these early inquiries. It reflects the whole range of views that were current in the 1850s and 1860s, from those who were convinced that the only possibility

was presiding over the demise of the original inhabitants to some who could provide evidence that Indigenous people matched the capacities or even exceeded those of the incomers. Nearly all were baffled as to how the Aborigines could be sustained in the face of rampant appropriation of their land and resources and hence their livelihood by the invaders. This inquiry, like others, also sought information on the life and culture of the Indigenous people and this included their sports and games.

Though several respondents to the inquiry, including those who sent written replies to a series of questions and those who appeared before the inquiry, mentioned Aboriginal cultural practices, there is no reference to football in the report, the minutes of evidence or the appendices of the deliberations of the Select Committee of the Victorian Legislative Council, which were published in February 1859, though the Appendix by G.W. Hawkes, recounting a visit to the Poonindie Mission in South Australia, notes:

> They are capital cricketers, the best in the district. They played a match with the settlers at Port Lincoln, who brought their best players into the field, but the natives beat them easily. An eyewitness told me that, although they seemed gratified at the result, no unseemly expression of exultation escaped them.[12]

It has to be said that this official material had very little information on Aborigines and sport, though it has been thoroughly combed by Ken Edwards subsequently, along with oral and other material, to bring to light a mass of information on play cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.[13] Edwards has stressed that this material should be studied in its own right and not simply as possible precursors of a game developed by Europeans.[14]

The annual reports of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in Victoria are now available in digitised form and they have been searched for references to sport, football and cricket, but very few have been found. There are 51 reports of the Board covering the period from 1861 to 1925 and they are digitised and searchable via the internet at the University of Melbourne. There is no reference to sport, cricket or football in 35 of the reports and only 28 mentions in the remaining 16 of anything remotely connected to these terms. One of the repeated passages is:

> The blacks are still fond of hunting, but more from inherent love of sport than with the intention of providing for their own wants, and, therefore, they claim their meat supply independent of this pursuit—but if game is plentiful they get less meat than at other times.[15]

The broader collection of records includes correspondence by Indigenous people, some of which has been published, but the vast bulk of the material is by Europeans about the people for whom they were responsible.

Veracity and bias in newspaper reports

Newspaper reports on any subject are problematic sources of information. Reporters, editors, sub-editors and proprietors all have a share in what appears on the page. The same incident can appear in multiple different ways in contemporary reports. Behind that, of course, lies the preconceptions and ideologies of the age, the power structure in the society and the political aims of the participants. The presentation of material about Aborigines in the nineteenth century is for Europeans by Europeans. None of this means that Indigenous people were unable to get their views across at the time. From very early on they became sophisticated users of the press to supplement traditional means of communication and influence. The rebellion at Coranderrk, an Aboriginal station in the upper Yarra valley of Victoria, is a powerful example, as the Indigenous protagonists, sometimes assisted by Europeans but often directly, got their messages into political and media arenas. Across regional Victoria local concerns found their way into the press, demonstrating that the people concerned were not always duped by the messages from the government, local authorities and those more directly in power over them. So the press is a rich source of material even when it cannot be taken at face value, but it would be a big jump to assume that it provides an Indigenous view unmediated and direct, even when it appears as reported speech.

Thanks to the digitisation of Australian newspapers by the National Library of Australia (NLA) source material that previously was extremely difficult to research can now be used to generate huge amounts of information. Given Australians' interest in sport, notable from the earliest days of settlement, the sports pages have a mass of material on cricket, football and other sports in rural and remote parts of the colony of Victoria. Local and club historians have sometimes exploited this information for their histories and Colin Tatz in his marvellous pioneering work on Aboriginal sports participation, *Obstacle Race*, provides a brilliant overview of the subject, derived in some part from newspaper sources for the late nineteenth century.[16] But Tatz did not have the benefit of Trove, the NLA's searchable newspaper database, so his coverage of football, cricket and pedestrianism for the period before 1914 is inevitably limited.

It was sport that got the Indigenous people of Australia into intermittent appearances in the media from the 1860s onwards. Prior to that it was only "outrages" by "them" that were regularly newsworthy. Outrages by the Europeans against the Indigenous people did not gain so much coverage, if any.

Boolean searches in Trove are a wonderful way of generating relevant information, but it is a system with limitations. When researching the history of football, *tout court*, in the early nineteenth century many new and untapped references were found, but when Gillian Hibbins alerted me to a typographical error in one of my first articles on the topic by pointing out that I had written "foothall" rather than "football", I was then able to use that error to generate a significant number of additional references.[17] The Optical Character Recognition (OCR) system on which Trove is based finds it difficult to distinguish "b" and "h", or "e", "c" and "o", so that in a later period the word "soccer" might appear as "sooоor". Apparently, the most common word in Trove is "tbe", an error in the attempt to render "the".[18]

Given that the European names of Aboriginal people might be rendered virtually phonetically, another source of confusion is that searches using one form of the name could easily miss several variants. For example, Robert Wandin's anglicised family name might appear as Wandon, Wandoon or Wander; Tom Dunolly as Donnelly; and so on.

Another factor to take into account is that the concept of Aboriginality is only in the making in the nineteenth century, as Bain Attwood demonstrated, following work by Bob Reece and Jeremy Beckett.[19] Indigenous people did not see themselves in this term. Rather they were part of distinct and separate families, clan groups or nations, not a homogenous collective. They were present at their own making, they were actors in their own drama, but it was not entirely of their making. So the words they used to describe themselves appear infrequently in the media, because only the few Europeans who spent significant time with the original inhabitants understood those terms and what they meant.[20] W.E.H. Stanner made the point that the wholeness of Indigenous "body, spirit, ghost, shadow, spirit site and totem" is necessary to "think black" and this is not something that is given to historians from outside that community.[21]

Therefore finding the precise words to use when searching is an art in itself. "Aboriginal" is an obvious term, but players of Indigenous heritage can appear as "sable", "dark", "black" or in more derogatory form in the sports pages or other reports.[22] Simply combining terms such as "Aboriginal" and "football" turns up many references where the words just happen to

appear in an article in the source, but they are not related. Sifting the relevant ones is highly time-consuming.

Moreover, there is a particular trap for researchers in the Western District of Victoria. References to an Aboriginal football team in the 1880s may pick up the exploits of a touring team under that name. This was a group of young men from schools in Melbourne and Geelong returning home for the winter holiday and playing a series of matches in Mortlake, Warrnambool and Portland.[23] They called themselves the "Aboriginals", almost certainly as a schoolboy joke, but there were no Indigenous students in their ranks, because there were none in their schools.

Sometimes relevant material turns up on pages alongside the one being searched. This is still one of the advantages of hard-copy searching since it is sometimes easier to scan a page in a full-size newspaper than on the computer screen. Though most newspapers very quickly had dedicated sports pages or at least columns, interesting and relevant material was likely to turn up in many other places in the newspapers. So what has been unearthed so far in the research for this book gives a lower bound to the extent of Indigenous involvement in football. Progress will require a co-operative effort to exhaust these sources that have been sampled here.

Notes

1 "Victorian Football League", *Argus*, 25 July 1908, p. 17.

2 Trevor Ruddell, "Albert 'Pompey' Austin", pp. 89–105.

3 The National Rugby League premier competition claims an even higher proportion of Indigenous players in its ranks, but the figures in both cases are sparse and somewhat rubbery.

4 Andrew Demetriou, "The glue that brings us together: Combating racism in sport", Speech delivered at the 5th Annual Human Rights Oration, Melbourne, 9 December 2005.

5 Roy Hay, "A tale of two footballs", p. 963.

6 Jake Niall, "Indigenous players' struggles revealed", *Age*, 28 June 2018, pp. 40–1, 44, https://www.theage.com.au/sport/afl/indigenous-players-struggles-revealed-20180627-p4zo5o.html, reporting on an original study by Sean Gorman.

7 For an excellent summary of the debate see Trevor Ruddell, "The marn grook story". Ruddell's conclusion remains sound despite the appearance of Jenny Hocking & Nell Reidy, "Marngrook, Tom Wills and the continuing denial of Indigenous history", and David Thompson, "Marngrook and Aussie rules".

8 Some of the research associated with this book has already appeared in print. See Roy Hay & Athas Zafiris, "Australian football's Indigenous history",

and Roy Hay, "Indigenous players didn't invent Australian rules but did make it their own", *The Conversation*, 25 May 2017, http://theconversation.com/indigenous-players-didnt-invent-australian-rules-but-did-make-it-their-own-76606. Zafiris's blog, www.shootfarken.com.au, has excellent material on Cummeragunja and Lake Tyers.

9 See, for example, David Thompson, "Indigenous sportsmen and women"; Barry Judd, "Australian rules football as Aboriginal cultural artefact"; Barry Judd, *On the Boundary Line*; Sean Gorman et al., "Aboriginal rules". Barry Judd has also examined the early involvement of Indigenous people in cricket at Coranderrk in Barry Judd, "It's not cricket".

10 Barry Judd despairs at the impossibility of finding absolute truth through the colonial archive. I agree, but it is worth making the effort to find as much as is possible, and the limits of that knowledge remain uncertain. "Human history, as outlined in the colonial archive of Australia, makes the prospect of knowing and understanding Aboriginal people in anything approaching the absolute truth an impossible objective" (Barry Judd, "From Paris to Papunya: Postcolonial theory, Australian Indigenous studies and 'knowing the Aborigine' ", http://pressfiles.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p301021/pdf/ch101.pdf).

11 Billy Griffiths, Lynette Russell & Richard Roberts, "Friday essay: When did Australia's human history begin?", *The Conversation*, 17 November 2017, https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-when-did-australias-human-history-begin-87251.

12 *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines; together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices*, Melbourne, 1859, app., p. 89.

13 Ken Edwards with the assistance of Troy Meston, *Yulunga*.

14 Ken Edwards, "Traditional games of a timeless land".

15 J.H. Stähle, "Report on Lake Condah Mission", 24 August 1894, *Thirtieth Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines,* Government Printer, Melbourne, 1894, app. 2, p. 7; see also *Eleventh Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1875, p. 17; Joseph Shaw, "Report on Coranderrk", 31 June [*sic*] 1891, *Twenty-seventh Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1891, p. 5; Joseph Shaw, "Report on Coranderrk", 30 June 1892, *Twenty-eighth Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1892, p. 6.

16 Colin Tatz, *Obstacle Race*.

17 Roy Hay, Adrian Harvey & Mel Smith, "Football before codification".

18 Tim Sherratt, Paper to the Contemporary Histories Group at Deakin University, 11 April 2018.

19 Bain Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. x–31 and references on p. 131.

20 The word 'Kulin' may appear in Trove more than 4000 times for the second half of the nineteenth century, but the majority of these references turn out to

be to individuals who had that name or Brahmins in Bengal in India, not to the Kulin nation in Victoria.

21 W.E.H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, p. 9.

22 See, for example, the report on a game in Adelaide in May 1885 where, in a generally favourable assessment of the performance of the Indigenous team and its players, the whole spectrum of epithets is applied to them: "Football", *Express and Telegraph*, Adelaide, 30 May 1885, p. 2.

23 *Camperdown Chronicle*, 22 October 1881, p. 3. The article is taken from the *Grammar School Quarterly*; "Football", *Camperdown Chronicle*, 2 July 1884, p. 3.

PART I

THE EVIDENCE IN VICTORIA

CHAPTER ONE

INDIGENOUS INVOLVEMENT IN SPORT IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

When a small group of members of the Melbourne Cricket Club sat down to draw up a set of rules for a football game they and their friends could all play in 1859, they could not have envisaged how that code would evolve into the one that dominates the sporting landscape of much of Australia today. Though the way the early game was played differed hugely from today's fast-moving, high-scoring, spectacular athletic performance, there were two features associated with that embryonic exercise that were to influence the game throughout its subsequent history.

First, the rules were not immutable and were changed constantly by those who had drawn them up and by their peers and successors.[1] Secondly, the game was promoted by a group of journalists, the first of whom were also players, to the people of Melbourne and Victoria in a myopic exercise that ignored what had happened before codification and marginalised the other forms of football that were developing overseas and in other parts of Australia.[2]

Many small-sided predominantly kicking games for money or other prizes were being played in Victoria and all over the Australian colonies long before the 1859 rules for a game were drafted.[3] The people who drafted the Melbourne rules were quite unaware of these games and believed that they had a *tabula rasa* on which to inscribe their efforts. Their prime source was the games with their unique and distinct rules that were played in the English public schools that some of them had attended in their youth.[4] But once the rules of the Melbourne Football Club had been written down, the authors and those who quickly followed them believed that they could change and adapt them without reference to any external body, so that the basis for a flexible domestic code was there from the start. This was different from the experience of the other forms of football, cricket, golf, horse-racing and kindred sports, where an overseas reference point or rule-making body existed. In that sense, Melbournians and later Victorians, really did have "a game of their own".

Nobody suggests that Indigenous Australians invented cricket, yet they formed the first Australian team to tour overseas in 1868 and most of the players concerned were coached by Tom Wills, a year earlier.[5] It does not demean Indigenous players in any way to suggest that they learned the white man's games of football and cricket and then tried to take part whenever they could. Movement between stations and contacts when shearing or harvesting or at ceremonial or family gatherings allowed Aborigines to pass on knowledge of the white man's strange games. They were largely excluded from involvement because there were so few of them, they were supposed to remain in remote areas and they were subject to the control of protectors and others and restrictions imposed by the white sports clubs and their memberships. There is a remote analogue in the way the Football Association in England tried to keep working-class people, and particularly professionals, out of Association football, though they were eventually swamped by the numbers, led by the Scots. In Australia the Indigenous people were being "ethnically cleansed" by settlers, disease, neglect and policy. If they could not protect their country, fundamental to their being, how could the few survivors penetrate the white man's effective bans on their absorption into settler society? Despite that, a pioneering few managed to work their way into the local code of football and it is these people who should be researched and recognised as they are the real heroes.

The key reason Indigenous players were unable to take part in football in significant numbers from 1860 onwards is demographic. By the 1860s the Indigenous population of Victoria (where what became Australian rules football was played) had been reduced to a few thousand and most of these were in the remoter parts of the colony or in missions or stations under the control of the "protectors".[6] If, as recent demographic history suggests, there was population pressure along the Murray leading to the foundation of settlements with a defined infrastructure around the time the Europeans arrived, then the destruction of the local nations must have been appalling in its severity. People write about the population being decimated, but that literally means reduced by a tenth. In reality, the Indigenous population may have been reduced to ten per cent of its pre-invasion levels, and that is a 90 per cent reduction.[7] In fact, it could be much worse. If the careful recalculations by Len Smith and his colleagues are correct there may have been around 60 000 Indigenous people in the land area of the later colony of Victoria in 1780 and around 650 as calculated in the census in 1901, a decline of nearly 99 per cent.[8] What complicates that calculation is the existence of significant numbers of people who were not counted as Aborigines and did not identify as

Aborigines in any administrative source. The so-called "Half Caste" Act of 1886 that defined non-pure blood Aborigines as non-Aboriginal and insisted that those over the age of 35 be removed from the reservations and become ineligible for public support on the eve of the great depression of the 1890s effectively "disappeared" a significant number of people.[9] Such people had every incentive not to identify themselves as Aboriginal.[10]

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was a stronger notion of assimilation of "the blacks", but from mid-century onwards a more vigorous exclusionist current was flowing, according to Henry Reynolds:

> Assimilationist views generally held sway during the first part of the nineteenth century. But the failure of early policy initiatives, recurrent frontier skirmishes and hardening racial attitudes strengthened the hand of those who believed the Aborigines should be confined to the fringes of society.[11]

So if we want to find out about the relationships between Indigenous Australians and football in the second half of the nineteenth century we need to begin by looking at what was taking place in the missions and stations around the periphery of the newly separate colony of Victoria.

The games in the stations and missions

Indigenous Australians may have found it slightly easier to break into individual sports like pedestrianism or boxing than team sports like cricket and football. The latter two required teams and regular play, but Indigenous numbers were small and getting leave to compete from the missions and stations was often difficult and/or inconsistent. In 1899 only 449 Aborigines and half-castes under certificates were to be found in the six remaining stations and depots (see table on p. 18) [12] The other factor as far as boxing and pedestrianism were concerned was that Europeans could exploit Indigenous fighters and runners for their own profit, so the barriers to entry were lower. The rewards to the individual from boxing and athletics could be attractive though the risks were high, especially for the boxers. Many of the early Aboriginal players were pedestrians—athletes before athletics evolved as an amateur pursuit in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

> Most of the members of the team are pedestrians, and some of them have proved very fast on the track. The veteran player amongst them is "Jack" Cooper, who was a few years ago a capital cricketer, his batting being quite a treat to witness. He has been playing football for many years, but much of the great dash which characterised him has gone. Many members of the

team are little more than lads, who have learned to play on the Mission Station near Echuca, where they have been brought up.[13]

Reserves in Victoria

*Map: copyright W. Atkinson, University of Melbourne.

The 1867 cricket tour of Victoria by a team of Aborigines and the 1868 tour to England were occasions when white devotees and speculators believed that they could make money from a team of Aboriginal cricketers.[14] The driving force was the Europeans. On the stations and the missions, on the other hand, the inspiration and the impetus came much more from the Indigenous people themselves.

Those who came into contact with Aborigines had different views on the value of sport. Sport that involved gambling, as most sports did, had the potential to be pernicious. The Reverend John Bulmer, manager of the Lake Tyers Mission in Gippsland, noted:

> The young people when they get a fair education mix with fast and sporting characters, which does not tend to improvement. Their powers of writing they too often use to write the most mischievous letters. I have seen a whole camp in a ferment when such a letter has been received from a member of the community who has been away.[15]

Yet under Bulmer the Lake Tyers Aborigines developed strong cricket and football teams in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Other managers, including William Goodall and Amos Brazier, encouraged their charges to play cricket. In 1878 the Rev. Johann Heinrich Stähle at Lake Condah acknowledged receipt of a cricket set from a Mr Godfrey via Captain Page at the Board.[16] He is quoted in an article from the *Portland Mirror* to the effect that: "The blacks work from 9.30 a.m. to twelve, and from half-past one to four. They have the rest of the day to themselves for cricket or other congenial amusement".[17] The reality, especially at harvest, shearing, planting and other labour-intensive periods, differed from this idyllic picture.

In the case of cricket and football the way into the game was more likely to begin on the missions when individuals or a few Indigenous people demonstrated a capacity at the game and were then picked up by local teams. After a while the demonstration effect could lead to enough players being interested to form teams, often with white support to make up the numbers. In a few cases, ongoing teams were eventually created consisting solely of Indigenous players and they began taking part in one-off games against neighbouring white teams and entering local competitions and then travelling further afield or hosting visiting teams from outside their local areas. Fielding teams consistently over several seasons was very rare, however, as Indigenous numbers remained tiny and fluctuating. This was not unique to Indigenous teams in the second half of the nineteenth century, for even quite populous townships found it difficult to field teams year on year.[18] The number of games played in a season in these rural and remote areas fluctuated and was usually quite small. Many people could not afford to take time off to play every winter or summer weekend. The number of games played is also probably under-reported.[19] Competitions or leagues, where they existed, might have only three or four teams, resulting in up to a dozen games per home-and-away season, though some leagues managed to double the number of games by playing each opponent four times. Forming and maintaining a team to participate in local leagues and cup competitions was the most difficult challenge for Aboriginal footballers. For most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the recognised complement for a football team was 18 or 20 players. Having that number of adult or young males available for multiple games on a regular basis was very challenging, given the small numbers of people on all the missions. The table on page 18 shows the numbers in the various missions and stations.

Estimates of the Aboriginal population of Victoria, 1861–1899

Total population in Victoria

Year	*Number*
1861	2341
1862	2165
1864	1908
1869	1834
1880	551
1890	422*
1899	449‡

Population in individual missions/stations in Victoria in 1869

Mission/Station	*Number*
Coranderrk & Mordialloc	110
Geelong & Colac	24
Camperdown	18
Framlingham, Warrnambool, Belfast, Mortlake	62
Nareeb-Nareeb, Wickliffe	69
Hamilton	46
Mount Rose, Condah, Portland	97
Casterton & Sandford	28
Balmoral	22
Carngham & Talbot	60
Mount Talbot	28
Apsley	17
Wimmera, Richardson & Carr's Plains	269
Mildura, Kulkyne & Swan Hill	340
Boort & Loddon	60
Gunbower and Terrick-Terrick	80
Echuca, Wyuna & Ulupna	94
Goulburn Valley	50
Gippsland	186
Wangaratta & Tangambalanga	74
Wanderers	100
Total	1834‡‡

Population in individual missions/stations in Victoria in 1899

Mission/Station	*Number*
Coranderrk	84
Lake Condah	71
Ramahyuck	69
Lake Tyers	63
Ebenezer	53
Framlingham	26
Depots etc	83
Total	449

* Plus 185 half castes living in the general population with some assistance from the Board.
‡ Includes Aborigines and half castes under certificates.
‡‡ John Green's returns and estimates.

The managers of the stations also played a critical role in Aboriginal involvement in sport. They had controlling powers, which they were not loath to exercise, over those Aborigines who lived at or frequented the missions and stations. One, William Goodall, was a very young "muscular Christian" who ran the Framlingham station from its re-foundation in 1867 until he was transferred to Coranderrk for three years in the 1880s, before returning to Framlingham. He coached and played with his charges at both cricket and football, though even he may not have been the cause of, or the catalyst for, their initial involvement. Some of the cricketers at Framlingham had already been to England in 1868. Several of the other manager/superintendents tolerated rather than supported the cricketers and footballers, while it appears that it was the outright opposition of the manager that goes a long way to explaining why the Ramahyuck mission in Gippsland did not have an Indigenous football team, as far as can be discovered in 2019. In each of the missions/stations cricket seems to have preceded football as the sport of choice of the young male inhabitants.

The matter of choice is important. Indigenous people had proved themselves inventive, flexible and discriminating when it came to meeting the challenge of the European newcomers, though it took some time for the latter to appreciate that. They saw the technology, the religion, the behaviour of the invaders and selectively chose elements of all of these for their own purposes. They gave their own meanings to what was happening in situations where their own previously unchallenged occupation of the land and its output was being overrun. There was a clear imbalance of

power, particularly in urban settings, but in the country Indigenous people could exercise choices about what they would and would not do in response to European attempts to exercise control, even within the missions and stations. They resisted attempts to get them to conform to white norms in numerous ways, including their choice of sports. Other aspects of European behaviour they embraced and modified. Unlike many other aspects of their constrained existence, they played cricket and football because they enjoyed it, not because they were coerced into doing it.[20] Taking part in sport helped bring them to the notice of local journalists, whose readers avidly consumed the sports pages of the local and metropolitan press. Sport was an area that was newsworthy at a time when the only other Aboriginal activities likely to be reported were outrages of one kind or another or occasional curiosity vignettes by visitors to the missions.

It makes much more sense to see the Indigenous players bringing skills from marngrook to the white man's game rather than providing a template for the latter. The evidence of the extent of Aboriginal involvement in Australian football in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is there in the colonial archive waiting to be fully researched and understood. They have a claim to the game by virtue of their participation at grassroots level. Some of skills they had honed long before the white men arrived could be used to develop different ways of playing the game—speed at ground level, rapid hand movement and brilliant hand-eye and foot-eye coordination, plus physical play, as well as high marking, keepings off and "little marking" to bamboozle slower opponents were all already well-developed skills. Deflection shooting, at which they were expert, was a key requirement of a mobile game, as it is today. That is, you have to aim not at the player you are intending to pass to but at the point in three-dimensional space where the player will be when he takes possession of the ball. Bringing down wild animals with a woomera and a throwing spear requires exactly that facility. They had to learn to do that with their feet as well as their hands in order to play white men's football as it developed. Moreover, to take part effectively they had to learn the specific skills and roles within the game—positional play, passing rather than solely individual runs, defence by zone as well as man on man, and many other elements, including scrummaging and rucking where weight and strength were key considerations. Pacing a game is also critical. Numerous reports have Aboriginal players starting at very high speed but being unable to sustain that for four quarters of football. The heavy, plodding Europeans then came into their own and often won games after a long period of attrition. Adam Goodes may be right when he reflects that