

# AUSTRALIAN RULES FOOTBALL AS ABORIGINAL CULTURAL ARTIFACT

**Barry Judd**

Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies  
Monash University  
Melbourne, Australia

## **Abstract / Résumé**

This paper examines the historical development of Australian Rules Football and the game's importance as a cultural marker of Australian identities. Long considered a colonial offshoot of Rugby, Australian Rules Football has been defined as a purely Anglo-Australian invention. The rules and characteristics of the 'Australian Game' are therefore generally regarded as being deeply embedded in and mirroring the values and ideals of British Imperial culture as these occurred in 19<sup>th</sup> century Melbourne. However, alternative perspectives suggest that codified Australian Football owes much to the Aboriginal game of *Marn-Grook*. This paper examines the possibility that Aboriginal perspectives have affected significant cultural change on the non-Indigenous settler society through the game of Australian Rules Football. This paper forms the basis for discussion and subsequent research of Aboriginal cultural influence in Australian Rules Football.

Dans cet article, l'auteur examine l'évolution historique du football australien et l'importance des matchs à titre d'indicateur culturel des identités australiennes. Considéré longtemps comme étant un dérivé du rugby, le football australien a été défini comme une invention entièrement anglosaxonne. Les règlements et les caractéristiques du « jeu australien » sont donc généralement compris comme étant gravés profondément dans les valeurs et les idéaux de la culture impériale britannique du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle à Melbourne et comme un miroir de ces valeurs et idéaux. Toutefois, un autre point de vue suggère que la codification du football australien est grandement redevable au jeu aborigène de *Marn-Grook*. L'auteur examine la possibilité que des perspectives aborigènes aient suscité un changement culturel important dans la société non aborigène par l'intermédiaire du football australien. L'article vise à lancer la discussion et la recherche dans le secteur de l'influence culturelle aborigène sur le football australien.

## **Introduction: Australian Football, 'A Game of Our Own'**

Australian Rules Football is Australia's premier spectator sport annually 'attracting more than 14 million people to watch all levels of the game across all communities' (AFL 2002, 1). It is the dominant football code in 4 of the 6 Australian States and is played across all Australian States and Territories. At the elite level of competition, the Australian Football League (AFL) annually attracts crowds in excess of 6 million, approximately 30% of the population (AFL 2002, 1). Millions more tune into television and radio broadcasts as they 'follow' the season's fortunes of the 16 AFL clubs. In addition, some 500,000 Australians actively support their AFL club by taking out annual club memberships, thus retaining ownership of 'their team' (AFL 2002, 1).

Nowhere is the public's affection for the Australian code more apparent than in Melbourne, the spiritual home of the game. Here, in the State of Victoria's capital city, Australian Rules Football is considered to be more a religion than a sport. The outcome of games often takes on significance far greater than mere matters of life and death. The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) standing on the site of the first 'official' match is considered to be 'sacred ground'. An updated version of Rome's famous colosseum, the vast cauldron represents the altar upon which the game's adherents come to worship the football gods. Away from the football grounds, the game dominates school, workplace and dinner-party conversation. Significant space is provided football commentary in the city's two daily newspapers, and television programmes dedicated to the game regularly top network ratings. Only in Melbourne is allegiance to a football team deemed a more important indicator of social acceptability than a person's place of schooling or the suburb in which they reside.

As a people, Australians like to think football encapsulates the core values of which they aspire. These include:

1. A sense that all are equal on the field of play regardless of class and cultural background; or the natural attributes in terms of skill, size, speed, vision and tactics that individual players bring to the game.
2. A sense of fair-play in which all are bound to the same laws of the game.
3. Admiration for team-work especially in adversity coupled with a sense that we should never give up without a fight and should never 'let our mates down'.
4. A sense that dour defence is as worthy of our respect and reward as skilful attack.

5. A sense that individualism should only be celebrated insofar as it does not diminish cooperative effort and collective achievement.

The Australian game and the values it embodies were a major force in shaping the cultural life of Melbourne and other parts of Australia. The game reflects 'the progressive social democratic milieu in which it was formed' (Pascoe 1995, xvi). Melbourne's preference for participatory politics, its strong belief in the social improvement of the lower orders and its historical preference for the liberal arts over business entrepreneurship in education collided to foster the development of a game that attracted 'rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, old and young, women and men...quickly it became a game of the people' (Blainey 1990, 94-95). 'There was something about the game itself, as it developed with no offside rule and the freedom to take the ball anywhere on the ground that appealed to a vigorous local economy and democracy than the English game of Rugby eventually played in the convict colonies to the north (AFL 1996, 13).

In these respects Australian football constituted an important cultural marker of Melbourne and later Victorian and Australian identities. The game, and in particular the club one follows, helps define 'us' as individuals and 'we' as a people. Indeed the game that is played on wide-open spaces can be viewed as a powerful metaphor for Australia itself. Developing this point further, Pascoe, argues that 'each time a group of spectators watch a football match, they are looking at themselves mirrored in the play and learning something about their own lives. The sense of catharsis, of profound emotional release, which comes at the end of a football game, is the signal that some deeply significant reaffirmation of one's place in the larger social order has taken place' (Pascoe 1995, xiii-xiv). Australian football has meaning; it ties 'us' to the city in which 'we' live, the community in which 'we' belong and the democratic principles that underpin Australia's key political institutions. In this respect, Australian football mirrors the harsh and uncompromising adversarial politics characteristic of Australian Parliamentary Democracy that is played out in between different social classes, different suburbs, cities, and states; and more recently between different 'racial' and cultural groups.

### **Indigenous Participation in the Australian Game**

Australian rules football reflects other aspects of Australian society. It is, therefore, not surprising that the game has a long history of Aboriginal involvement. Soon after the game's development, football teams emerged within Aboriginal mission communities such as those at

Coranderrk, Lake Tyers and Framlingham in Victoria. At the elite level, the barrier of racism and the game's long and unfortunate history of racial sledging has made Aboriginal participation in the game more difficult. In 1982, Melbourne's foremost newspaper, 'The Age' reported that every time leading Aboriginal player Jim Krakouer went near the boundary line a chorus of voices could be clearly heard 'singing out: *you black bastard*. The taunts were not only from fans, players were as guilty' ('The Age' cited in Tatz 1995, 154). In 1995, Aboriginal player David Cockatoo-Collins claimed that he had been called a '*Black c...* by a White opponent (Gardiner 1997, 22). Glenn James, the only Aborigine to umpire at VFL/AFL level was on several occasions called a '*useless f...ing boong*' (Lyons 1978, 105). Despite this history of racism, Aboriginal players have competed in the AFL (then known as the VFL, Victorian Football League) since 1904 when Joe Johnson starred for Fitzroy, indicating that Aboriginal people living in this inner city suburb were as involved with the game as their kin who lived on rural missions and reserves (Main and Homesburry 1992, 219). Over the years, 122 Aboriginal players have participated in the premier competition. The achievements of Aboriginal players include (1) Brownlow Medal (the AFL's highest award for the fairest and the best player over the duration of a season): 5 Norm Smith Medals (best player in a Grand Final) and (2) AFL Rising Star awards (best first year player). Furthermore, 19 Aboriginal players have played in premiership teams (AFL 2002, 1). In 2002, there are 48 Aboriginal players listed by AFL clubs, a figure that represents approximately 6% of AFL players. As has been observed 'this is a considerable overrepresentation considering they [Aborigines] make up less than 2% of the Australian population' (Hallinan, Bruce and Coram 1999, 369-370).

### **Making Sense of Indigenous Participation**

The relative success of Aborigines in Australian football is commonly viewed within the context of widely accepted ideas of Aboriginal 'race' and culture derived from Australia's colonial past. Ideas about the 'racial' traits of Aboriginal people persist in the nation's sporting discourse. As Professor Colin Tatz, an authority on Aborigines in sport has noted, 'while playing fields are not places where people expect to find, or want to see racial discrimination, sport is an important indicator of Australian racism' (Tatz and Tatz 2000, 7). Even though the science of genetics has refuted the idea that racial categories exist in biology fixed ideas of racial types persist. In their recent study of Aborigines in elite Australian football, Hallinan *et al* note that, 'studies of Australian sports media suggest that Aboriginal athletes in general are seen as possessing different skills and qualities from those non-Aboriginal athletes.... Comments at-

tributed to AFL coaches and leading AFL commentators provide insights into stereotypes about playing styles of Aborigines. Aboriginal players are described as being mesmeric, scintillating, instinctive, naturally talented, magical and having breathtaking flair, exquisite touch and a different sense of space and time' (Hallinan, Bruce and Coram 1999, 372). The idea that particular football abilities are the outcome of 'racial' makeup suggests that Aboriginal success in the game is the result of mere happenstance that sees the skills as abilities developed over 40,000 years by the continent's hunter-gather peoples and those required by Australian footballers at the elite level of competition conveniently coincide.

Intertwined with these racial ideas is the notion that Aboriginal players in the AFL represent exemplars of successful assimilation and integration. There exists an implicit inference that success in contemporary Australia requires Aborigines to discard their 'primitive' and 'irrelevant' culture and adopt the core values and cultural norms of a 'modern' mainstream' Anglo Australia: the 'core values' inherent in the game of Australian football. Aboriginal players are therefore held up as 'role models' for 'their people' on the basis of their 'adoption' of 'core Australian values'. Such thinking is perhaps more influential than ever before as the Australian sporting public has come to appreciate AFL Football as big business that generates significant economic wealth indicated by annual revenue in excess of \$110 million (AFL 2002, 1-2). Ideas about the deficiency of Aboriginal culture remain particularly strong in Australian sporting discourse. In 1993, the President of influential AFL club Collingwood suggested that, 'as long as they (Aborigines) conduct themselves like white people—well, off the field—everyone will admire and respect them' (Ross 1996, 350).

Although explanations of Aboriginal success in Australian football grounded in ideas of race and culture draw sometimes contradictory conclusions, each is grounded in the fundamental idea that participation has required Aboriginal people to adapt and/or conform to the cultural norms, values and practices of 'mainstream' Anglo Australian society as represented by the Australian game. In other words, it is Aboriginal people who have been required to accommodate Anglo culture in order to participate in the 'Australian game'. It is a suggestion that relies on a reading of Australian football that regards the game's origin and subsequent development as the sole outcome of Anglo-Australian ingenuity, thus confirming the games status as an important 'cultural marker' of white 'Australianness'.

Yet such assertions need to be viewed as highly contentious given that many of the 'facts' surrounding the birth of the Australian game

remain nothing more than historical conjecture. This much is admitted by historian Professor Geoffrey Blainey, who more than any other writer has sought to firmly locate the origin and development of Australian Football within the insular realm of Anglo-Australian culture. In his highly influential book, *'A Game of Our own – The History of Australian Football'*, Blainey contends that the game's prime originator, Thomas Wentworth Wills (1836-1880) drew his inspiration for the game exclusively from his knowledge and experience of codified football that was emerging within the English public school system in the mid 10<sup>th</sup> Century. Moreover, he contends that the English public school creed of muscular Christianity popularized by the novel *Tom Brown's School Days (1856)* and its motto *mens sana in corpore sano*, 'a healthy mind in a healthy body' became the fundamental principle that moulded the life of T.W. Wills. In particular, he argues that Wills' attendance at the Rugby School during the early 1850s and confirmation that he regularly played Rugby football while a student provides strong evidence that the Australian game is an offshoot of this English game. Blainey concludes that development of an Australian code of football was an invention necessitated primarily by competing football perspectives that existed in Melbourne during the late 1850s. While Wills was a graduate of Rugby, other Melbournians had attended the Winchester School, Cambridge and Oxford Universities, places whose football codes would later provide the basis of Association Football (or Soccer). For Blainey, it was this social context that provided the catalyst for Wills to develop his new hybrid rules, the only ones to which the well-to-do sporting men of Melbourne would all agree.

Having outlined his thesis with authority, Blainey nonetheless concedes that, 'in trying to understand the origins of the present game of Australian football we forget that it was moulded by many people and influences, decade after decade. Instead we imagine that it was largely shaped in its first years, and we hope that if only we can uncover those years we will find its birth and the single most formative influence' (Blainey 1990, 95).

It is a concession that has allowed considerable licence for other perspectives on our game's origins to be put forward. Commentators have long debated the extent to which Rugby and Association Football influenced the development of the game. Still others have invigorated the debate with claims that Australian Football is an offshoot of Gaelic Football and is therefore an artifact of Celtic Australian and not Anglo Australian culture. In 1985, sports-historian, Jim Poulter, extended the debates beyond the realms of the European framework in which they had historically taken place. He did so by suggesting that the Aboriginal

football game of *Marn-Grook* (literal translation, game ball, used to describe the game in several Victorian Aboriginal languages) constituted an Indigenous influence on the game's development as important as any introduced English or Irish components.

### **Locating Australian Football as Indigenous Cultural Artifact**

As someone who strongly identifies with his Indigenous heritage, the possibility that Australian Football has a significant Aboriginal component is a highly appealing prospect. Might this explain why this 'Melbourne game' has become so deeply imbedded in the cultural activities of Aboriginal communities throughout Australia that they today regard it 'a game of their own'? I am motivated by the fact that far too often, in the context of Australian Indigenous Studies, we are bound to consider the various cultural accommodations and concessions Aboriginal people have made in response to the coming of a hostile non-Aboriginal colonial society. Through an analysis of the game of *Marn-Grook* there is an opportunity for us to explore how non-Aboriginal Australians, living in 19<sup>th</sup> century Victoria, made accommodations and concessions to the cultural practices and values of Aboriginal societies through the development of Australian Football. Although a full history of these developments is beyond the scope of this paper, I do wish to further explore Poulter's thesis and the various cultural implications that emerge. In order to discuss these issues, I outline the historical context in which Australian Football developed that connect it to the Aboriginal game of *Marn-Grook*. Further, I discuss in brief some of the cultural continuities that exist between *Marn-Grook* and the playing and watching of Australian Football today.

### **Marn-Grook Observed**

According to the record left us by colonial writers, observations of *Marn-Grook* 'predate the development of our national game by many decades and indicate that the tribal game was played virtually throughout Australia. References to the tribal game to date, have been located in Victoria, South Australia, the Riverina area of New South Wales and the Carpentaria basin area of Queensland and the Northern Territory' (Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 76). The game as played by Aboriginal people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was described in detail by Scottish pastoralist, James Dawson who detailed the customs and languages of Aboriginal peoples in western Victoria in his book, *Australian Aborigines* first published in 1881. In a section he entitled 'Amusements', Dawson wrote,

'One of the favourite games is football, in which fifty, or as many as one hundred players engage at a time. The ball is

about the size of an orange, and is made of opossum-skin, [possum] with the fur side outwards. It is filled with pounded charcoal, which gives solidity without much increase of weight, and is tied hard round and round with kangaroo sinews. The players are divided into two sides and ranged in opposing lines, which are always of a different 'class', white cockatoo against black cockatoo, quail against snake, & c. Each side endeavours to keep possession of the ball, which is tossed a short distance by hand, and then kicked in any direction. The side who kicks it oftenest and furthest gains the game. The person who sends it highest is considered the best player, and has the honour of burying it in the ground till required next day. The sport is concluded with a shout of applause, and the best player is complemented on his skill.' (Dawson, 1981, 58)

Dawson continued his description of *Marn-Grook* by drawing parallels with the Australian game, which had, by the time of his writing, become the dominant code throughout Victoria. Without admitting the connection of the two games he indicated the game to be, 'somewhat similar to the white man's game of football, is very rough; but as the players are barefooted and naked, they do not hurt each other so much as the white people do' (Dawson 1981, 85). Interestingly, given the political influence many Aboriginal players in the AFL have exerted as a result of their playing prowess, Dawson concluded his outline of the Indigenous game by remarking that 'nor is the fact of an Aborigine [sic] being a good football player considered to entitle him to assist in making laws for the tribe to which he belongs' (Dawson 1981, 85).

The description Dawson provides followed notes made by Protector of Aborigines, William Thomas in the Melbourne area during 1838-39. According to Thoma,

'The *Marn-Grook* or Ball is a favourite game with the boys and men. A party assemble, one makes a ball of opossum skin [possum] or fur of another animal, of a large size working it over and over with the sinews of a kangaroo tail, the ball is kicked up in the air, not thrown up by hand as White boys do, nor kicked along the ground, there is general excitement who shall catch it, the tall fellows stand the best chance, when the ball is caught it is kicked up in the air again by the one who caught it, it is sent with great force and ascends as straight up and as high as when thrown by hand, they will play the game for hours and fine exercise it is for adults or youths.' (Thomas 1839, 28)

Another colonist, the Reverend Bulmer, also described the game being played by Victorian Aborigines in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His description says, 'the ball with which they play is named *Dirik*. The material of which it is made is suggested by the name. It is part of the organs of the 'old man' kangaroo, blown out. The game is played by the ball being thrown, or kicked up with the foot. Whoever catches the ball oftenest, wins the game' (Bulmer cited Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 76). Still another colonist, the ethnographer R. Brough Smyth observed the game being played in Gippsland. Here, consistent with the description provided by Bulmer, the game was played with a ball formed from the bladder of a kangaroo' (Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 77).

Colonial descriptions of *Marn-Grook* not only confirm that Aboriginal football was played throughout the geographic area now called Victoria, but more importantly they indicate that while local variations did exist, the game was played according to rules that transcended national boundaries. In this sense, *Marn-Grook* unlike Australian Football today, was an international form of football, played by, perhaps, hundreds of politically independent Aboriginal nations. Dawson's description, in particular, is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, it indicates that the selection of *Marn-Grook* teams occurred according to the totemic moieties of players indicating that he had some understanding of the cultural meaning that lay behind the game. The selection of teams in such a way suggests that *Marn-Grook* constituted an important material expression of the spiritual/philosophic framework that framed Aboriginal understandings of the universe in which they lived. As Poulter explains,

'Throughout Australia, Aboriginal tribes divide all things living or not, into two opposing but complimentary halves which are given the term moiety. Commonly these halves or moieties are symbolised by Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo, or sometimes by Eagle and Crow. Commonly, [in Western Victoria at least] every person is born into the moiety of their father and therefore has a special relationship with each animal or object belonging to that moiety. Within each of these moieties there is usually two 'skin' groups. This total of four skin groups are usually symbolised by two types of animal, say birds and reptiles, so that Black Cockatoo for instance consists of two skin groups Python and Quail, with White Cockatoo consisting of Pelican and Tiger Snake skill group. This is in fact thought to be the skin and moiety totems of the Gunditjimara tribe of the western district of Victoria. In any event, it is these moiety and skin division

that determine your opponent in a game of tribal football.'  
(Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 77-78)

Selected according to moiety and skin group, the teams were, most likely, visually differentiated by the addition of body paints reflecting the totemic affiliation. Painted designs associated with Crow, Eagle, Black and White Cockatoos therefore functioned as 'team uniforms' allowing each player to easily identify team-mates and opponents.

Secondly, the descriptions Dawson and the other colonists cited provide of *Marn-Grook* are important because they show that Indigenous football was played in contexts where spectators were often present. This suggests that *Marn-Grook* was played during seasonal gatherings that took place between Aboriginal nations. These gatherings, commonly known as corroborees drew together hundreds, sometimes thousands of individuals. Used primarily as a mechanism to facilitate religious ceremony, political diplomacy and trade; these large gatherings of people included a significant sports component as neighbouring peoples tested their skill in spear and boomerang throwing games and football. Its not difficult to imagine, that as the boys and young men played, onlookers of both sexes willed on and cheered the Tiger Snakes, or Crows or the Black Cockatoos.

### Cultural Interchange in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Victoria

In the Melbourne area, such gatherings were recorded as taking place in the vicinity of the MCG and at other suitable sites along the Yarra River. The meetings continued for many decades after non-Aborigines invaded Victoria in the late 1830s. The last recorded meeting to occur in Melbourne took place in the summer of 1852 near the gold rush village of Warrandyte.

'When the people of the *Wurundjeri* (Melbourne) *Bunurong* (Westernport), *Wathaurong* (Geelong) and *Taungurong* (Goulbourn) tribes gathered at Warrandyte...coincidentally, this is where gold had been discovered first in Victoria eight months before. The area was thus inhabited by many Irish, Scottish and English gold panners and miners, who witnessed the corroboree activity that lasted two weeks.'  
(Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 76)

Poulter, commenting on the 1852 gathering asserts that, 'there is little doubt that Native football was one of these activities, the distinctive feature of the game being the way Natives would leap higher in the air over each other's backs to catch the ball' (Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 76-77).

The ceremonial gathering of Aboriginal people at Warrandyte reminds

us that during the period in which Australian Football was developed, interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people throughout Victoria occurred on a daily basis. Pre-dating the legislative segregation of Aboriginal people on reserves by the Aborigines Protection Board of Victoria; interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the period 1838-1869 was characterised by minimal government interference. It was a situation that allowed for both violent conflict and more peaceful and constructive interaction. Victoria's paper of record during the period, *The Argus*, indicates that events like, as those at Warrandyte, were common occurrences, with the White population considering Aborigines to be 'mundane' neighbours rather than an unknown 'exotica'.

### The Australian Game is Born

On 10 July, 1858, Thomas Wentworth Wills wrote the letter 'considered Australian Football's founding document, its Magna Carta', the codes 'Declaration of Independence' (Stephens 1996, 14). The letter published in *Bell's Life Victoria*, read:

'Sir, Now that cricket has been put aside for some months to come and cricketers have assumed somewhat of a chrysalis nature (for a time only tis' true) but at length will again burst forth in all their varied hues, rather than allow this state of torpor to creep over them and stifle their now supple limbs, why can they not, I say form a football club and form a committee of three or more to draw up a Code of Laws. If a club of this sort were got up it would be of vast benefit to any cricket ground to be trampled upon and would make the turf firm and durable, asides which it would keep those who are inclined to become stout from having their joints encased in useless superabundant flesh. If it is not possible to form a football club, why should not these young men who have adopted this new born country for their native land, why I say, do they not form themselves into a rifle club...., I remain yours truly, T.W. Wills.' (T.W. Wills cited Stephens 1996, 14)

Although Wills' call to arms was rejected, the idea that football might be used to maintain the fitness of Victorian cricketers during the long winter months was adopted with enthusiasm. The first to respond to Wills' idea was professional cricketer and publican, James Bryant who, seeing the commercial value of thirsty players, advertised 'football' to be played in Yarra Park which lay opposite his hotel on 31 July, 1858. 'The response from the colony's overwhelmingly male and predominantly young population was a large and heterogeneous crowd' (Mancini and Hibbins 1987, 20). Lacking an agreed code general confusion reigned as

one present recalled, 'While a large percentage of Rugby players from England, still not a few hailed from Ireland and Scotland, all eager to refresh their memories with games of their faraway homes. Englishmen of course played Rugby, Scotchmen a nondescript game,...while Irishmen contented themselves by yelling and punting the ball as straight as a die heavenwards. Each man played a lone hand or foot, according to his lights, some guided by their particular code or rules, others by no rules at all' (T.S. Marshall cited Mancini and Hibbins 1987, 20).

At this same venue a week later on 7 June, the boys of Melbourne Church of England Grammar School played Scotch College. Played by 40 a side, including several masters, the game was played over the course of three Saturday afternoons. 'Then, as neither side had scored the requisite two goals, the contest was declared a draw' (Mancini and Hibbins 1987, 21). Wills, an Anglican, participated as umpire on behalf of the Grammar School. Due to his involvement this game is considered the first game of Australian Football. It is commemorated in a marble tablet embedded in an outer wall of the MCG that proclaims, 'On this site the first game of Australian Football was played on August 7, 1858, between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar School'. As Blainey notes, 'at the bottom of the tablet is an emblem showing a map of Australia and the surrounding seas, engraved on a football. That the football is larger than Australia, is almost a comment on how football eventually came to command more loyalty than Australia itself' (Blainey 1990, 17).

At around the same time, Wills' established the Melbourne Football Club (MFC) as an adjunct to the influential Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC). At a meeting held on 17 May 1859, over a few drinks at the Parade Hotel, the first recorded rules of Australian Football were drafted by the committee members of the recently formed Melbourne Football Club. The primary author of the 10 rules adopted by the Club at this historic meeting was Thomas Wentworth Wills. At a meeting held on 19 July 1859, Wills initiated the formation of the Geelong Football Club. Wills would captain both clubs and be deemed 'Champion of the Colony' in Football during 3 of his playing seasons (Stephens 1996, 28-29). Soon other communities would follow Wills' lead and new clubs appeared in the Melbourne suburbs of South Yarra, Richmond, St. Kilda and Carlton.

Wills' success in initiating Australian Football was the result of the fame he had achieved in the summer of 1857-58. Wills a noted cricketer, had while in England, played cricket for Rugby School, Cambridge University, the County of Kent and United Ireland (Baggy Green 2002). On his return to Victoria, his cricketing prowess was soon recognised and he was made both captain of Victoria and secretary of the Melbourne Cricket Club. In January 1858, Wills captained the Victorian cricket team

to its first victory of the older, larger and more powerful colony of New South Wales. The 'Grand Cricket Match' as it was called resulted in the recess of Parliament and a lull in the general business of the city as politicians, tradesmen and labourers went down to the MCG to watch the game. The victory brought several days of celebration and the entire colony was gripped with cricket fever. *The Argus* proclaimed that, 'The Victorian eleven has passed the Rubicon' (*The Argus* 1858). After successive victories in the decade to come. Wills became known as the 'Great Gun of the Colony' (*The Argus* 1860). It was these cricket triumphs that allowed Wills, then at the height of his sporting fame, to successfully develop the Australian game.

Cricketing fame may explain his influence but other questions require exploration. Among these is the fundamental question of why Wills? Why not Hammesley, Butterworth or Smith, who had joined Wills in framing the game's first written rules? Why did this individual feel compelled to initiate a new Australian game, instead of adopting Rugby as his sporting counterparts in Sydney had chosen to do? The answer to this question, I believe, can be found in Wills' extraordinary life and in particular, his knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people.

### **Thomas Wentworth Wills: Interaction with Aboriginal People**

Thomas Wentworth Wills was born at Parramatta, New South Wales, on 19 August 1835 and, aged four, came overland to Port Phillip in 1839-40, the family settling near what is now Ararat in western Victoria. Here, his father, Horatio Spencer Wills (1811-1861) a newspaperman turned squatter, established Lexington Station, a huge pastoral property covering thousands of acres. As the first Europeans in the area, Horatio was able to negotiate a successful co-existence with the *Djabwurung* whose traditional country, the older Wills now sought to exploit (Horton 1994). Wills maintained close contact with the *Djabwurung* employing several of their number as workers on Lexington. Isolated from other Whites, the young Wills made his friends among the *Djabwurung* children, learning much about their culture, custom and law. He became proficient in *Djaburung* language. According to his cousin and fellow pioneer footballer, Henry Colden Harrison, Wills was 'very clever at picking up their songs which he delivered with a very amusing imitation of their voice and gestures, and could speak their language as fluently as they did themselves, much to their delight' (Mancini and Hibbins 1987, 79). Harrison tells us in his memoirs, *The Story of an Athlete: A Picture of the Past*, first published in 1923, that 'Of the Aborigines and their customs, so much has been written by expert that I am afraid I cannot add to the general information on the subject. Besides which, we were too young

to take a scientific interest in their habits and history. We were so used to having them about, we took them very much for granted, as part of the ordinary scheme of things' (Mancini and Hibbins 1987, 78). Harrison like his cousin Tom Wills also witnessed corroborees becoming so familiar with the custom and habits of the Aboriginal people that they were considered 'part of the ordinary scheme of things,' a mundane part of life in western Victoria.

Wills' youth among the *Djabwurung*, his ability to speak their language with fluency and his knowledge of their culture and law suggests that this experience in his life was every bit as influential as his years at Rugby School. Inspired by Poulter's *Marn-Grook* thesis, sports writer, Martin Flanagan believes that it was Will's early interaction with Aboriginal people that was the critical factor in his demand that Australia develop a 'game of our own.' Flanagan rejects the assertion that Australian Football is purely a derivative of games played in England, observing that many of the young men in Melbourne during the 1850's were graduates of the English public school system, but only T.W. Wills had an intimate knowledge of Aboriginal cultural practice. Flanagan noting that it was Wills, not the others, who initiated the new Australian game.

In his historically based novel about Wills' life, *The Call*, Flanagan emphasises this part of Tom's life as the formative experience that was to shape his destiny (Flanagan 1998, 11-19). According to Flanagan, 'Tom Wills grew up in sight of the mountains where the *Djabwurung* said that fire first fell to earth.... Young Tom Wills soon became another link between the black and white for he was the idol of the gins and the playmate of the piccaninnies.' Playing the games and singing the songs of the forest, little Tommy steadily imbibed the language and learnt the tricks and forest lore of his wonderful playmates' (Flanagan 1998, 11).

### **Wills, Marn-Grook and Australian Football**

Dawson's description of *Marn-Grook* in Western Victoria constitutes strong evidence that that Indigenous game was known and played by Wills in a childhood spent among the *Djabwurung*. 'Dawson witnessed an Aboriginal game, which he called football being played of *kooroboreas* [corroborees], or the meeting of clans, one of which he identified as the *chap: wurung*, otherwise spelt *Djabwurung*. Tom Wills spent his childhood among the *Djabwurung*, speaking their language' (Flanagan 1998, 11-19). Outlining the critical connection between Wills, Aborigines and Australian football, Flanagan says,

"The claim I make for Tom Wills is not that he persuaded a sub-committee of the Melbourne Cricket Club to adopt an Aboriginal game. Rather, when the subject of selecting a code

of football arose. Wills declared, 'We shall have a game of our own'. In the context of the 1850's with the new colony of Victoria bursting to demonstrate its Britishness, this was a radical proclamation. Clearly, Wills had played the famous game of the Rugby school. What I would like to think is that his familiarity with Aboriginal football told him not only that there were different ways of playing such a game but also that the different ways brought into play completely different skills. Sportsmen and women of vision note such things.' (Flanagan 2001)

It is a conclusion that some within the Australian Football League (AFL) have recently begun to embrace. Col Hutchinson the AFL Chief Statistician and Official Historian, is one who, 'recognises the place of *Marn-Grook* in the origins of Australian Football and is committed to acknowledging the Indigenous origins of the Australian game' (Daffey 2001, 141). In September 1998, at the small village of Moyston close to the site of the Wills homestead at Lexington, 'Hutchinson was the main dignitary at a ceremony on the outskirts of Moyston.... A monument commemorating Wills was unveiled and Moyston declared the home of Australian Football. A year later, signs were erected alongside the five roads that lead into Moyston. The signs confirmed the town as the home of Australian Football. As a home for an obsession, Moyston is humble.... The only shop is low roofed and busy, and there is no pub.... The road to the Grampians wraps around the football ground before the AFL approved monument invites the driver to stop. The monument stands 2.5 metres high and features an inscription praising the vision of Tom Wills' (Daffey 2001, 141-142). In the black marble tablet, the inscription proclaims, 'He lived at Lexington Station, Moyston, while playing as a child with Aboriginal children. In this area he developed a game which he later utilised in the formation of Australian football.'

In 2002, the AFL recognised the contribution of Aboriginal people to Australian Football by dubbing the match between Sydney and Essendon, 'The Indigenous Game.' The *Herald-Sun*, Melbourne's popular daily newspaper, reported that, 'Two hundred years ago they played *Marn-Grook* in the bush. On May 25, the Sydney Swans and Essendon will play for the inaugural Marn-Grook Trophy at Stadium Australia, in front of 60,000 people, in front of a national TV audience of millions more, and in a stadium worth hundreds of millions of dollars. You could say Marn-Grook has come a long way' (Herald Sun 2002). The significance of the game was recognised through the involvement of Aboriginal Elders in a ceremony that symbolically transferred the spirit of the Indigenous game from Moyston to the new Sydney stadium. 'A handful of

soil gathered yesterday from what is claimed to be Australian football's birthplace in the Grampians will be sprinkled on Stadium Australia on Saturday night as a form of baptism of the game's newest turf. Tim Chatfield, an Elder of *Djabwurung* people, performed yesterday's ceremony at the football ground at Moyston (population: 100), near Ararat, and packed it in a traditional Aboriginal vessel. An Elder of the people whose traditional land Stadium Australia sits will perform the reciprocal ceremony in Sydney (population: 4 million)' (Derald Sun 2002).

Recent attempts by the AFL to embrace the Indigenous origins of Australian football are yet to stamp themselves in popular football culture. Indeed, the AFL itself seems divided on the issue, for although it sanctioned the monument to Wills at Moyston, its fact sheet entitled 'The Origins of Australian Football,' makes no reference to *Marn-Grook*. It seems that despite the growing evidence that has emerged in support of Poulter's thesis, some within the AFL remain unmoved, maintaining that the game is essentially an Anglo-Australian invention.

In this matter, the contrary conclusions drawn by influential historian Geoffrey Blainey remain the conventional understanding of the game's historical evolution. Refuting the connection between *Marn-Grook* and codified Australian Football, Blainey asserted that, 'on the basis of the sparse existing evidence, however, it is unlikely that this Aboriginal game influenced Australian Football. In Melbourne the early teams seem to have included few if any Aboriginals [sic]. Generally the new settlers from the British Isles learned almost nothing from Aboriginal rituals and customs, even when learning could have been to their advantage' (Blainey 1990, 96). Blainey does concede that the high leap and overhead mark of the Australian game might be Aboriginal inventions, although his concession is highly qualified. 'One possible exception is the high mark of Australian football. It seems to be primarily an extension of the 'mark' of English football, but it is conceivable that several of the early exponents of what became a distinctively Australian form of marking had seen Aboriginals [sic] at play in rural areas, gained confidence from watching them, and even imitated their style of leaping' (Blainey 1990. 96).

### **Australian Football Explained as Aboriginal Cultural Artifact**

Contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in colonial Victoria, prior to 1869, was such that significant possibilities for cultural interchange existed during the period in which Australian football was significant possibilities for cultural interchange existed during the period in which Australian football was conceived. This is almost certainly the case in respect to the acknowledged originator of the Australian

game, Thomas Wentworth Wills. As a result, it seems reasonable to consider how the playing and watching of Australian Football today might echo the cultural practices of Aboriginal people who once played the game of *Marn-Grook*.

In addition to the high mark, Poulter indicates a number of characteristics of Australian Football that may be derived from *Marn-Grook*. He draws our attention to the following parallels that exist between the Indigenous game and contemporary Australian Football: (1): *Marn-Grook* was playing on large open spaces. 'Today, Australian Rules is still conducted on the largest playing area of any code. (2): 'The tribal game has 50 to 100 players each side. The 1858 game at first had 40 a side and today 18 a side on the field is still the largest number of any code in the world. (3): The elements of the original tribal game were stated basically as keeping off through handball, kicking and marking and this still remains the distinctive feature of our modern game. (4): The Aboriginal teams were organised in line and today teams are still named that way. That is we refer to halfback line, centre line etc, rather than functions such as sweep, tag, link or convert. (5): The traditional game was played over at least half a day, and our modern game is still played over a longer period than any other game' (Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 78). As further evidence, Poulter indicates that 'mark' or 'mummark' is an Aboriginal word meaning catch and of course, it is used to be called out when the ball was caught, so as to prevent to tackle' (Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 78). With this in mind he imagines that, 'it would have been a colourful spectacle to early colonists deep in the bush, to witness this fast, rugged game that was made distinctive by the players leaping on each others' backs in an effort to catch the ball; and which was punctuated by cries of 'Mark!' from spectators and players alike when the ball was caught' (Poulter and Atkinson 1993, 78).

The parallels Poulter identifies all concern the material similarities that exist between *Marn-Grook* and Australian Football as the game is played today. However, I believe that the parallels extend to concerns of a far more metaphysical nature. For one, the totemic basis of *Marn-Grook* continues to resonate in the Australian game today. Sports and anthropologists have long described material expression in the face paints, replica-playing jumpers, flags, hats, and scarves of football supporters as indications of what they have termed 'tribalism'. In Britain, an Oxford University researcher, Pete Marsh, recently commented on the 'tribalism' he believes to be inherent in association football. 'By any definition of tribalism, in terms of bonding, rituals, the roles people play, the stylized patterns, the ceremonial dress, you can't really have a more clear cut modern equivalent of what has been timeless traditional

behaviour.... The drive is a kind of Jungian, collective emotional unconscious...bonding with your fellow man' (Marsh cited Ingram 2002). In Australia, while football writers have consistently spoken about 'tribalism' in the game and the tradition of suburban based 'tribal' rivalry none have suggested possible parallels between this phenomenon and the totemic affiliations embodied in the Aboriginal game of *Marn-Grook*. Yet, today in the AFL, the Eagles continue to do battle with the Crows, the Hawks battle Kangaroos, the Swans struggle with the Magpies. To these have been added non-Aboriginal symbols represented by Tigers, Lions, Cats, Bombers, Demons, Saints, Power, Bulldogs, Blues and Dockers.

These totemic deities continue to be potent symbols of 'family,' 'community' and 'shared purpose and ambition.' Historically, the totemic symbols of Australian Football teams and the 'tribes' that 'followed' with them were formed around a shared suburban geography and bound up in class and to a lesser extent religious identity. To speak of football tradition is to conjure up images of the 1820s. and 30s when Collingwood played arch rivals Fitzroy and Carlton at Victoria Park, Brunswick Street and Princes Park. At such venues, the crowd was clearly partitioned into opposing 'tribes' according to the lines of division that all had come to be accept and understand.

Today the suburban, class and sectarian identities that AFL clubs once embodied have been replaced by the economic imperatives of professional sporting organisations that exist as much for profit as for the game. In the drive for ever increasing supporter bases and corporate sponsorship, the geographic scope of clubs has been extended to regional, state and national levels. In this context old divisions of class and religion count little in determining club membership and support, the link between clubs and city, players and community has weakened, perhaps, reflective of life in the cities where the game is played. These are post-industrial cities with populations of millions in which feelings of isolations and loneliness pervade. Yet in the search for a 'sense' of 'community' and 'fixed relationships' that seems lost to contemporary western societies; many continue to find solace in the sense of belonging that support of a football team provides. In the absence of the powerful social forces that once buttressed community support for AFL clubs, supporters now seek a sense of 'belonging' that derives solely from club colours and more importantly, its totemic emblem. To affiliate with the Hawks, Eagles, Kangaroos or Crows is an attempt to secure one's place in the world and to make sense of that world. It seems that little has changed for Australians in this respect, football teams have been divided and followed according to their totemic symbols for thousands of

years.

But echoes of *Marn-Grook* can also be found to exist in the ethos that underpins Australian Football. Like the codified game, *Marn-Grook* emphasised equality as a core value of the football. It did so embedding the ideal of balance implicit in the totemic moieties that determined an individual's societal position in the game via the mechanism of team selection. In the Aboriginal societies that had created *Marn-Grook* a sense of balance infused the universe dividing all its possession into either black or white cockatoo. While different, both were considered to be equal, the two halves necessary for the whole to sustain life.

Such thinking ensured the regulation of social relations that required the balance inherent in the universe to be replicated within the world of human affairs. To maintain equilibrium between individual members of society a system of reciprocity applied in which rights, obligations and responsibilities operated to sustain a state of equality through time. 'If an individual or group gives food or a marriage partner, to another individual or group they expect to receive something or somebody in return. If a person or a group offends another person or group they can expect retribution in return. These systems of checks and balances are designed to maintain equilibrium between individuals and groups' (Bourke, Bourke and Edwards 1994, 106). This system is given expression in the language of my mother, *Pitjantjatjara*, in the phrase *ngapartji-ngapartji*, which may be translated into English as 'in return.' As a complex term of political philosophy, *ngapartji-ngapartji* might also be translated as 'equal respect,' the state of equilibrium it describes being indicated in the repetitive nature of the phrase. As a fundamental organizing principle of Aboriginal society, equality is conceived as being independent of the social status, skills and natural abilities of individuals. In this moral universe, all living things are considered worthy of equal respect, regardless of their specific characteristics.

Such thinking was also the organizing principle of *Marn-Grook* with players selected not on the basis of their inherent football skills, or athleticism, but according to their status as representatives of opposing totemic entities, and the requirement for the black cockatoo to balance the white cockatoo on the field of play. Today, equality remains an underpinning value of Australian Football. The relative strength of the 16 AFL clubs is 'equalised' via the national draft, which allocates selection picks from lowest to highest-ranking clubs. Match receipts and AFL profits are also subject to 'equalisation' as the competitions most powerful clubs subsidise the rest; a policy that is best described as 'football socialism.' Such measures are designed to encourage an even national competition in which the possible success of the 16 clubs remains in a

state of 'balance.'

In the mythology of Australian Football, the field exists as a place where all have the opportunity to participate and all are considered equal. This idea has gained credence due to the openness with which the game has embraced players from ethnic minorities; and since the 1960s, Aborigines. In the 1990s, when the sanctity of equality seemed under attack due to the emergence of racial sledging as an 'issue,' the AFL responded with the introduction of racial and religious vilification laws. The AFL was the first national sporting body in Australia to do so (Tatz 1998, 6). At a deeper psychological level, individual honours are deemed secondary to team achievement with premierships considered far more significant than Brownlow, Coleman or Norm Smith medals. Such perspectives on the game are perhaps hangovers from footballs suburban traditions. Australian's most famous sporting club, Collingwood, placed sustained team success and absolute loyalty to 'the club' above any concern for the individual. Collingwood 'had a policy of paying its players equally, both before and after wages became open and legitimate in 1911. There was one ingredient of the club's 'above all recipe' which Collingwood brought into the game.... Lifetime supporter Tom Wanliss started following Collingwood in 1932, but not because of any particular champion team!' (Pascoe 1996, 76-77, 96). Collingwood's bloody-minded insistence on equality wielded its teams into the most successful football force of the pre-1945 period. What mattered to Collingwood were not the individual exploits of graceful champions but loyalty to the black and white jumper and the Magpie it represented. The game's continued concern for equality and the idea that team and club take priority over the player as individual again suggests value that have long operated among players of football in Australia.

### Concluding Remarks

While several important sporting historians now accept the role that *Marn-Grook* played in the development of Australian Football, the football public remains largely ignorant of these origins. The ability to claim an Indigenous origin of Australian Football should be regarded as a golden opportunity to confirm it as the one true 'Australian game.' However, the AFL remains highly ambivalent on the issue and is yet to include *Marn-Grook* into its official accounts of the game's genesis. Its 'official' fact sheet on the origins of the game does not mention *Marn-Grook* at all, preferring to recount the game as an Anglo-Australian innovation. Yet, the intimate and life-long connection between Aboriginal peoples and the man who codified the game in 1858, Thomas Wentworth Wills, suggests that Australian Football is likely to be a hybrid invention

that like Wills himself, occupies the hitherto sparsely populated cultural space that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in Australia. This is not to say that Wills can be viewed as a romantic figure. He did after all seek to inculcate Aboriginal people with British civilisation and its particular moral universe through the 'sublime' game of cricket in which he was a leading colonial exponent. While the Aborigines eventually rejected cricket, the game Wills had developed from *Marn-Grook* became a defining feature of White Australian culture. It is extremely ironic that Wills lasting contribution to Australian life appears to have been the transmission not of English culture to the 'Natives,' but rather the promotion of Indigenous cultural values within White Australia. The extent to which continuities continue to exist between the cultural values and practices embodied in the Aboriginal game *Marn-Grook* and those present in contemporary Australian Football remains unclear. However, as this paper makes clear, research to clarify the extent to such continuities is long overdue.

### References

*Age*, Newspaper, Melbourne

*Argus*, Newspaper, Melbourne

Australian Football League

1996 *Football Record: Centenary Souvenir Edition*, Melbourne.

2002 AFL Fact Sheet #2, *The AFL Explained*, Melbourne.

2002 AFL Fact Sheet #7, AFL statistics and figures, Melbourne.

2002 AFL Fact Sheet #18, *Influence of Aboriginal Players*, Melbourne.

Baggy Green: Home of Australian Cricket

2002 (19-11) *Thomas Wentworth Wills, Player Profile* [http://www-aus.cricket.org/link to database/PLAYERS/AUS/W/WILLS TW 02017139/](http://www-aus.cricket.org/link%20to%20database/PLAYERS/AUS/W/WILLS%20TW%2002017139/)

Blainey, G.

1990 *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football*, Information Australia, Melbourne.

Bourke, C., Bourke, E. and Edwards, W.

1994 *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader into Aboriginal Studies*, Queensland University Press, St. Lucia.

- Daffey, P.  
2001 *Local Rites: A Year in Grass Roots Football in Victoria and Beyond*, Black Duck Publications, Melbourne.
- Dawson, J.  
1981 *Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia (Centenary Edition)*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.
- Flanagan, M.  
1998 *The Call*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.
- Flanagan, M.  
2001 *Sport: Touchstone of Australian Life*, Alfred Deakin Lecture, Melbourne Town Hall, 16 May, 2001.
- Gardiner, G.  
1997 *Football and Racism: The AFL's Racial and Religious Vilification Rule: Discussion Paper*, Koorie Research Centre, Monash University, Melbourne.
- Hallinan, C., Bruce, T. and Coram, S.  
1999 *Up Front and Beyond the Centre Line: Australian Aborigines in Elite Australian Football*, International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Vol. 34, No. 4, London. *Herald Sun*, Newspaper, Melbourne.
- Ingram, R.  
2002 (22-07) *Football? No It's Tribal War*, <http://cooltech.iafrica.com/science/961625>.
- Lyons, G.  
1978 *Racial Prejudice at the Footy*. Legal Service Bulletin, Vol.3, No. 3, Fitzroy Legal Service, Melbourne.
- Mancini, A. and Hibbins, G.M. Eds.  
1987 *Running With the Ball: Football's Foster Father, The Autobiography of H.C.A. Harrison*, Lynedoch Publications, Melbourne.
- Pascoe, R.  
1995 *The Winter Game: The Complete History of Australian Football*, Text Publishing Company, Melbourne.
- Poulter, J. and Atkinson, W.  
1993 *The Origins of Australian Football Skills*, Ngariaty – Kooris Talkin', La Trobe University, Melbourne.
- Ross, J. Ed.  
1996 *The Complete Story of the AFL, 100 Years of Australian Football 1896-1996*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.

Stephens, R.

1996 *The Road to Kardinia Park: The Story of the Geelong Football Club*, Playright Publishing, Sydney.

Tatz, C.

1998 *AFL's Black Stars*, Lothian Books, Melbourne.

Tatz, C. and Tatz, P.

2000 *Black Gold: The Aboriginal and Islander Sports Hall of Fame*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

Tatz, C.

1995 *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

Thomas, W.

1839 *Brief Remarks on the Aborigines of Victoria 1838-39*, La Trobe Library Manuscript Collection, MS7838, Box 862/9(a).