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'A Most Manly and Amusing Game': Australian Football and the Frontier Wars

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Title page

‘A most manly and amusing game’: Australian Football and the Frontier Wars

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Note: Indigenous readers are respectfully advised that images of deceased persons appear in this text.

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Abstract:

Formed in the 1850s frontier contact zone, Australian Football owes more to the experiences of the skirmishes between white settlers and Indigenous Australians than is usually recognised. If we reassess the historical sources from a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, we observe that the 'Game of Our Own' is a mix of British and Indigenous styles of warfare. The four men who drafted the rules of this new 'most manly and amusing game' were misfits from British society who were seeking new lives on the frontier. Their code contained 'striating' features played across 'smooth' spaces. The football teams adopted totemic plants and animals in their nomenclature; the players were bedizened in costumes that spoke of Empire; the bloody Frontier Wars were in living memory of the players and their 'barrackers'.

Keywords: Australian Football; Australian Frontier Wars; Victoria (Australia); Wills, Thomas William; Deleuzo-Guattarian theory

Main text

'They're in more trouble than the early settlers!' was an expression used by white Australian Football commentators as late as the 1990s, describing a team under withering attack from their opponents.¹ The metaphor remained unexamined, as the politics of Indigenous participation in Australia's main sporting code was less contested in that era. It is time to unpack some more of the meaning of this line. We want to offer the provocative suggestion that, as a product of the 1850s frontier contact zone, Australian Football owes more to the experiences of the skirmishes between white settlers and Indigenous Australians than is usually recognised. To reach this conclusion, we reassess the historical sources from a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective.

The third week of May 1859 in the Colony of Victoria proved very wet. Large quantities of gold were still being extracted from the Colony's diggings; John Stuart Mill's new *Essay on Liberty* was welcomed in one local newspaper as a statement of British democratic spirit.² And on the afternoon of Tuesday 17 May 1859 a quartet of men met in a back room at Jerry Bryant's Hotel on Wellington Parade (later known as the MCG Hotel), a little east of the centre of

Melbourne, to agree upon the rules for a local version of football. (They had been delegated by the new Melbourne Football Club for this explicit purpose.³) The hotel faced the main east-west road that had been surveyed from the datum point known as Batman's Hill, roughly half-way between the cross street that marked the one-mile point (Spring Street) and the two-mile mark (Hoddle Street), as laid out by surveyor Robert Hoddle in the town's earliest years. What had been open Aboriginal land was now demarcated by the colonists to signify the existence of clear property lines. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms it would be difficult to find a more perfect example of the deterritorialisation of Indigenous land and its subsequent reterritorialization within an imperial order.

To the south of Bryant's Hotel, across Wellington Parade, the land fell away to the Yarra River, and it was here, in this parkland undisturbed by such property boundaries, that the new code of football was being played by the settlers, starting with a match in 1858. In short, representatives of the newly arrived 'striating' culture had somehow desired to set aside a 'smooth' albeit circumscribed space for their recreational activities.

The British colonies of Australia were undergoing developments specular to what had been occurring in the 'Mother' country. There striation was being visited upon the working class under the quickening grip of its burgeoning imperial order, buttressed by incipient industrialisation. Not so many years before, the open field system had been abolished and striated by enclosures. The Commons, that smooth space enjoyed by the commoners, were becoming smaller and smaller, increasingly confined by the dictates of public order. Analogously, the free-wheeling and balling games that had been played on them (and in village streets) were undergoing a process of codification and restriction.⁴

Within Australia, however, the striation process acquired another valence. Rather than being directed against a potentially unruly working class, recently disenfranchised of its own 'smooth' space, it was imposed on the Aboriginal populations. Hence, akin to the story of Adam and Eve, expelled from their paradise following their frugal picnic at the feet of the tree of knowledge, so too the birth of Australian Rules football became an event subject to mythological telling and re-telling, a celebration of the crossing over from Arcadia to the new imperial and colonial order. Rather than acknowledge this sporting allegory of the colonial imperative, most accounts of the birth of

the 'game of our own' have, not surprisingly, elected to explain the origins of the new code of football, whether by reference to particular versions of football played at the time in the United Kingdom or, indeed, to Aboriginal ballgames that the colonists would have observed.⁵

The meeting at Bryant's Hotel is one of the most important in the history of Australian sport, and the document the four men produced is certainly the most significant.⁶ Their code caught on with the sporting public, producing 'a most manly and amusing game'.⁷

Who were these four men, and what did they have in common? If, instead of asking the usual question ('What had been their experience of football?', where the role of Cambridge University looms large), we ask a radically different question ('What was their experience of the frontier?'), we reach surprising conclusions.⁸

The connection with the frontier of the most celebrated of the four, Tommy Wills, is well known. Born in 1835 the grandson of a First Fleet convict, and the son of a Victorian squatter and parliamentarian, he grew up in western Victoria, under the shadow of Geriwerd (the Grampians), and played with Aboriginal children as a child. He learnt the local Indigenous language and according to some Aboriginal oral accounts he may have been initiated into the local clan.⁹ This presumably idyllic frontier childhood ended when he was sent to Rugby in England at age of fourteen. On his return from five years at Rugby, in 1858, he wrote a famous letter to *Bell's Life in Victoria*, published on 10 July, calling for 'a foot-ball club'. After the 1859 meeting, his family was caught up in another episode of the Frontier Wars, attacked on 17 October 1861 at their property Cullin-la-Ringo, inland from Rockhampton, Queensland by Gayiri (Kairi) people (perhaps through a misunderstanding), leading to the death of his father and 18 others.¹⁰ Wills stayed on the property until 1864, but failed as a pastoralist. From about 1864 he began living with a married woman, Sarah ('Sally') Barbor, much to his family's disapproval. He also coached a team of Aborigines from Western Victoria, captaining them at the MCG on Boxing Day 1866, to much acclaim, and organised the first cricket tour of England with a team comprising these Aborigines.¹¹ In 1880 he took his own life. Even those who doubt a direct link between *marn-grook* and Australian football recognise the intimate connections between Wills and the Australian frontier.

The other three men at the 1859 meeting were immigrants from the British Isles, and, like Wills, had their own reasons for living on the frontier.

Born in York in about 1829, James Boyne Thompson arrived in the Colony sometime in the 1850s. In 1845, he and William Hammersley had been admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, where new football rules were established in 1848. His first wife died in March 1858. By the age of 30, in 1860, he was living in Melbourne and married again, this time to Helen Willoughby, nine years his junior.¹² Thompson gave his occupation on their marriage certificate as 'reporter'.¹³ During 1859 and 1860 he helped promote the new code in *The Argus* newspaper. He played football for Melbourne. In 1861 he left Melbourne to move inland to Bendigo (Sandhurst), where he helped establish and captain the local football club. He continued to write for a living, working on the *Bendigo Courier*.¹⁴ He also helped in developing cricket in the town, on behalf of those championed 'muscular Christianity'.¹⁵ He captained Bendigo United Cricket Club.¹⁶ By 1865 he was reported attending a football match in Melbourne where he and Hammersley were regarded as 'football pioneers [who] had been driven out by younger blood' – even though their halcyon days were just four seasons earlier!¹⁷ By the next year his cricketing duties at Bendigo United had been reduced to umpiring.¹⁸ Worse was to come in his fall from grace. In 1868 he was sentenced for 14 days in gaol by the dreaded local magistrate, Bendigo Mac, for defrauding a local draper. This magistrate regarded this colonial Sandhurst as a frontier town that needed his Sandhurst Military College training to bring into line.¹⁹ Thompson died young, on 18 July 1877, back in Melbourne, and in obscurity.²⁰ He and Helen had no children; she lived to the age of 67, dying in 1906.

The third man in this group was William Hammersley. Hammersley's life has been reconstructed by the historian Gillian Hibbins through a judicious reprinting of some of his journalistic writings. Among his several sporting interests was shooting; he was an 'ace shot', with plenty of 'hunting stories' to tell. Like Thompson he was also a journalist. But, like Wills and Thompson, Hammersley had his own reason for coming to the colonies: he had a dark secret. Born in Surrey in 1826, he married Jane Thirkette on 23 September 1849 in Middlesex, and they had four children. Neither Jane nor the children came to Melbourne, when Hammersley moved there in the second half of the 1850s. By 1860, the year after the famous meeting at Bryant's hotel, Hammersley was living with Maria Wilson, the older sister of Bryant's new bride.²¹ Meanwhile one or more of Hammersley's English children migrated to Montreal, and then to Boston.²² Hammersley's health began to fail from about 1883, and he died in 1886 at his house on the corner of Victoria Parade and

Nicholson Street, East Melbourne. Near the end of his short life he said he wanted to visit America, as reported in his obituaries – no doubt to visit his estranged children.²³

The final member of this quartet, Thomas Henry Smith, was Irish, born in the northern border town of Carrickmacross, a product of Trinity College Dublin, graduating in 1852, teaching Classics at Scotch College in East Melbourne. A tall redhead, he was, like the rest of the foursome, quite ‘peppery’. In 1859 he was a bachelor, known on the sporting field as ‘Red Smith’ or ‘Football Smith’.²⁴ He slips from the historical record after his playing days for Melbourne.

These men had in common hot temperaments and relatively short lives, dying young and (especially in Wills’ case) quite tragically. They quarrelled with each other, as well as with the world, and their troubled personal lives helped explain why they were living on the frontier. Much as a breaking wave carries with it flotsam and jetsam, so did the great tide of British colonial expansion drive these and other misfits before it, casting them on to Australia’s smooth shores. Destined to advance the imperial project, they instead became seduced by the frontier, which in its as yet unstriated interstices, ended up offering a haven and opportunities to pursue the troubled projects of their unruly lives. Thus the ‘smooth’ colonial Australian frontier both provided a place of escape from their ‘striated’ British lives and also helped to give them new hybrid identities.

The potential value of football to prepare men for military action was one aspect of Wills’ 1858 letter to *Bell’s Life in Victoria*. Historians have pointed to the Crimean War as a context for this remark, but in point of fact the next recognised conflict in which Australian colonists was involved was the Maori Wars. In any case, colonial Australians prepared for military service to an extent that is often not remembered in the historical record, and Australian Football as it was then contained some significant echoes of that fact.

The two cultures, Indigenous and imperial, co-existed in this frontier contact zone during the formative decades of the new football code’s beginning.²⁵ The new football was sufficiently different from the other variants of football played elsewhere in the British Empire to earn the epithet, ‘A Game of Our Own’.²⁶ Just as Eton and Rugby had their own local rules, the ‘Melbourne Rules’ anticipated visiting teams from elsewhere in the British world. These local rules were so different that historians have often pondered

their origins, including the (unproven) hypothesis that they owed something to *marngrook*, the Indigenous code of football. The colonial world of the nineteenth century contains clear examples of this transfer of Indigenous games to the ludic culture of the colonisers, ranging from lacrosse in North America to surfing in Hawaii. We want to ask a variation of this question: we want to know what connections, if any, can be found between this new code of football and the patterns of conflict associated with the Frontier Wars which were still in living memory in the late 1850s.

In his 1858 letter, Wills called for 'laws', which became Rules a year later. To recall that this new code of football was henceforth known as 'Rules' immediately invites a Deleuzo-Guattarian interpretation. It was indeed the product of a 'striated' culture which was attempting to impose order and delineation in the 'smooth' environment where the colonists found themselves. They were, after all, still 'camping in Kulin land'.²⁷ And, moreover, the Rules focussed on questions of territory. They were most explicit about the measurements that would be used in drawing up the open spaces to be used for colonial football. In fact, there were more rules about the measurement of the playing surface than about how the ball was to be handled.²⁸ This is evidence of the 'striated' mind at work in the formulation of these rules of play. This was arguably part of the imperial project, which sought to striate the cultures of the working-class British multitudes just as it did the Indigenous Australians. Popular football, with all its potential for subversion, whether played on a green British common or during a corroboree, could no longer be left in the hands of its proletariat: it too had to be striated.²⁹

[Fig. 1 about here]

A facsimile of these rules now ornaments the interior of the northern stand of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, much like the decorative calligraphy inside a mosque (Fig. 1). The words, written out against an ochre red background, run as follows:

RULES OF THE MELBOURNE FOOTBALL CLUB, MAY 1859

The distance between the Goals and the Goal Posts shall be decided upon by the Captains of the sides playing.

II

The Captains on each side shall toss for choice of Goal; the side losing the toss has the Kick off from the centre point between the Goals.

III

A Goal must be Kicked fairly between the posts, without touching either of them, or a portion of the person of any player on either side.

IV

The game shall be played within a space of not more than 200 yards [183 metres] wide, the same to be measured equally on each side of a line drawn through the centres of the two Goals; and two posts to be called the 'Kick Off' posts shall be erected at a distance of 20 yards [18 metres] on each side of the Goal posts at both ends, an[d] in a straight line with them.

V

In case the Ball is kicked behind Goal, any one of the side behind whose Goal it is kicked may bring it 20 yards in front of any portion of the space between the 'Kick off' posts, and shall kick it as nearly as possible in a line with the opposite Goal.

VI

Any player catching the Ball *directly* from the foot may call 'mark'. He then has a free kick; no player from the opposite side being allowed to come *inside* the spot marked.

VII

Tripping and pushing are both allowed (but no hacking) when any player is in rapid motion or in possession of the Ball, except in the case provided for in Rule VI.

VIII

The Ball may be taken in hand *only* when caught from the foot, or on the hop. In no case shall it be *lifted* from the ground.

IX

When a Ball goes out of bounds (the same being indicated by a row of posts) it shall be brought back to the point where it crossed the boundary-line, and thrown in at right angles with that line.

X

The Ball, while in play, may under no circumstances be thrown.

Several features of these Rules stand out. One is the geometry of the playing surface and how it was described. There was an imagined centre-line bisecting the field of play, and another (again imagined) line running down the spine of the ground. In other words, the space was defined from inside-out, not from outside-in. This is an old imperial convention, going back to Roman town-planning principles, and even earlier. In Britain, invaded by the Roman legionnaires who saw it as barbarian and lawless ('smooth'), space was striated by running two lines through it, one north-south (the *cardo maximus*), the other east-west (the *decumanus maximus*). Around this axis they built military encampments which became ('striated') Roman cities. Victorian football grounds similarly reflected this imperial east-west convention, a practice often translated into Western Australia and South Australia as the game expanded.³⁰

The early football players formed two lines on either side of the middle and then ran to positions across the field of play once the ball had been kicked into play from the centre.³¹

Of course the 1859 Rules were modified over time, and the game proved highly adaptable to changing circumstances. But there were five basic principles in Australian Football which remained constant, and gave the game its particular character. These five underlying principles demonstrate how Australian football became an amalgam of the 'smooth' and the 'striated', a veritable product of the frontier contact zone.

First, there is (still) no off-side rule. One's own 'Goal' in the 1859 Rules refers to the goal one was defending, not attacking, but there is no particular privilege attached to one's ownership of this goal, which, after all, had been decided only by the toss of a coin.

Ball-handling is more important in the rules than man-to-man tackling. The connection between the player and the ball is paramount.

Australian football grounds are (still) not uniform in their dimensions, and line markings are less important than in other codes of football.

There are no referees with the power to send players off in Australian football, merely umpires.

Finally, the game's emphasis is 'a curious interweaving' of the two sides, rather than a focus on individual players, or, for that matter, team formations.³²

[Fig. 2 about here]

We turn now to describing those parts of the colonial frontier landscape where this new game fitted, and the conventions that became part of its foundational culture.

To begin with, Australian Football was played in the very spaces where Aboriginal people had hunted or fossicked for food, where they had engaged in traditional warfare, and where they had met for ceremonial purposes. Yarra Park still holds scarred trees cut for making canoes. The swampy ground in what had been Boonwurrung lands in South Melbourne was drained and made over for recreational boating (Fig. 2). Indeed the Albert Park lagoon had been rich in waterfowl for the Boonwurrung, but Europeanised during the 1880s Boom, and home to two of the earliest major football clubs, St Kilda, and South Melbourne (now the Sydney Swans). The grounds where they played were often described as a 'battlefield' (a term never used in the context of cricket). The field of battle could easily become the field of play: the term 'convincing ground', made infamous in historical accounts as the place of the Gunditjmara massacre in Portland, western Victoria, became a term used in the period by the prominent footballer T. S. Marshall to describe the Richmond Paddock, the section of Yarra Park where football was first played.³³

[Fig. 3 about here]

A second parallel can be found in the costumes and portraiture of the footballers and their Indigenous counterparts. In a pre-khaki era where

opposing European armies sported vivid colours, Australian football teams adopted distinctive plumage for their players, and imagined them as significant leaders of their respective communities, including mock-reverential nicknames (Fig. 3). Indigenous depictions of their warriors show them similarly bedizened in tribal markings and standing akimbo, as well as in the well-known works of Kwatkwat artist Tommy McRae.³⁴

The hooped guernseys popular with some clubs, such as Geelong and Prince Imperial (Footscray), can be seen to echo the horizontal line markings favoured by some Indigenous warriors in battle (see Fig. 4).³⁵

[Fig. 4 about here]

The focus of early football was on players rather than teams; indeed, players could change teams readily; indeed, the Rules refer to 'sides', not 'teams'. Team membership soon meant putting on colours. By 1860 Melbourne wore pure white, with colourful caps that often included red, while Richmond players wore a red ribbon over their shoulder.³⁶ Wet weather limited the efficacy of ribbons.³⁷ With caps and knickerbockers the apparel worn by the players had something of a military flavour.

The clubs adopted names and nicknames that were redolent of Empire. In their pure white strip Melbourne was described as the White Imperials. Carlton was known as the Imperials, while another Imperials club ('the Imps') played in Ballarat. Footscray began as a junior club called Prince Imperials. Whiteness was emphasised in both these namings and in a colour commonly used.

Consider the explanation for the choice of Prince Imperials, as explained by the club's first captain:

Football started definitely in Footscray in the late '70s [1876] by the formation of the Prince Imperial Football Club. It was named after the Prince Imperial of France, who was serving with the British Army in Africa in the Zulu War and during a scouting expedition was killed by the Zulus [1 June 1879]. His death caused a great shock to the British nation as he was a very popular officer in the British Army and as brave as he was popular. Out of respect to him we named the first football club the Prince Imperial. It continued under that

name for five or six years until it was thought that as Footscray was growing in importance we should have a club named after the district.³⁸

There are clues in the detailed histories of each club's evolution that a more complex story might lie behind the origins and early development of Australian Football. The nickname 'blood-stained angels' was earned by the South Melbourne club and white and red were used together in their guernsey. This nickname was still in use during the 1930s, but had faded from usage by the 1950s.³⁹ If red therefore connoted 'blood', it was a short step to nicknaming Essendon, with its red stripe over black, the 'blood-stained niggers'. The 'blood' to which this red referred was in that very period becoming a synonym for 'race', an ideological concept of great force.⁴⁰

The opposing colours of white and black found expression in several working-class football club jumpers in the 1890s, especially those of Port Adelaide and Collingwood, and, later, Swan Districts. The adoption of this guernsey coincided with the new popularity of black-and-white minstrel shows, mostly touring from the United States, fortuitously during a period of lynching in the American South.⁴¹ In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, minstrels can be seen as the attempt by whites to impersonate those 'becomings-animal/spiritual' and an appropriation of the warrior prowess that they recognised in Indigenous men.

It was a short step from the logic of guernsey design to the adoption of totemic plants and animals that might represent each club's identity. Melbourne and Hawthorn were originally the Fuchsias and the Mayblooms respectively; later Geelong became the Cats and Fitzroy the Lions. Unlike their European counterparts, Australian football clubs and other teams adopted these totemic nicknames as a matter of course.⁴² Players were also given nicknames, and sometimes these had an Indigenous connection. The famous Colden Harrison (later called 'the father of football') was so quick-footed he was dubbed 'Deerfoot', named after a native American of the Seneca people who was an athlete performing in London in 1862.⁴³

Right from the beginning, the matches involved violence of a kind that attracted the interest and passion of supporters, both male and female. How do we explain this violence and, perhaps more importantly, its appeal?

[Fig. 5 about here]

In the early years of Melbourne there was a strong military flavour to colonial life (Fig. 5). To the north of Footscray the valley of the Maribyrnong River (originally known as Saltwater Creek) was the site of a Military Review on the Hill. Volunteers came by train and marched to the opposite side of Footscray Road, firing artillery down to the racecourse side of the river. Firing went on all day, while mines were exploded in the river and on the flat.⁴⁴ Naturally this attracted the interest of local boys, including Charlie Lovett, prominent in the early years of Footscray football. In 1876 Lovett and other boys were assembled into the Footscray No 1 Fife and Drum Band.

Another part of the answer lies in the fact that the violent dispossession of the Aborigines from their land, a deterritorialisation in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, was not some remote event, but obvious in the present:

In 1850s Melbourne, moreover, violence and dispossession were not a distant, but rather a recent, memory; and Aboriginal people were ever-present in the real and imagined spaces of the city.⁴⁵

In the newspapers of the day there was talk of how Indigenous Australians held views on burial, astronomy and mythology that diverged from the British viewpoints.⁴⁶ These Indigenous Australians were steadily disappearing, just as some whites voiced their protest that these Aborigines were the victims of settler colonialism. The result was the 1869 Act to 'ameliorate the conditions' of Aboriginal people. Until 1869, when they were removed to one of the four reservations set aside for them across Victoria, Aboriginal people were part of everyday life in regional Victoria.⁴⁷

[Fig. 6 about here]

To play football well requires certain important performative skills – the ability to position one's body in ways that make it possible to maximise the handling of a ball, with all parts of one's body brought into play, to freeze-frame the ball as it travels through the air towards you, seeing its trajectory and ballistic action better than the rival player alongside you, to appreciate the effects of rain and wind on the ball's movement, and the capacity to know where the bodies of other players will be at any moment.

These are all skills, from earliest times, associated with Aboriginal people, especially the male warriors, celebrated in depictions of corroborees, trial by spears, and other ritual moments. The use of both arms and legs in Australian football distinguished it from other codes, and this echoed the male Indigenous dancing observed and depicted by Europeans (Fig. 6).

We argue that Australian Football combines Indigenous and British styles of contest and combat. As noted earlier, in the early years the two opposing teams began lined up on either side of an imagined line bisecting the ground, and then ran to position when the ball was kicked from the centre to commence play, and after each goal.⁴⁸ The long kicking and marking, especially up the spine of the ground, reflects the traditional movement of infantry troops in a column. The common theme of other codes of football, with lines of players advancing up the field, is the more perfect embodiment of this style of contest. However, Australian Football also includes the irregular movement of the ball, originally with 'little marks' (later replaced by handballs) and the use of auxiliary players on the wings whose patterns of movement have been somewhat less predictable.

[Fig. 7 about here]

So, field positions in early Australian football included two contrasting styles: the regular formation of players up the spine of the ground, as if in this colonial infantry column, and those on the edges, such as the aptly named 'goal sneak' (today's full forward), whose behaviours more resembled guerrilla fighters of the kind encountered by the British in the Frontier Wars (Fig. 7). Just as tellingly, the players assigned to one or other of these roles in the team earned different sobriquets in the sports journalism of the day, and (as demonstrated in our prosopographical work)⁴⁹ went on to careers that were either appropriately 'respectable' or 'rough', or in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, 'striated' (surveyors, architects, builders) or 'smooth' (labourers, ship providores, travelling salesmen).

For example, from the South Melbourne team of the 1870s, Billy Hopkinson 'jumps like a kangaroo', played as goal-sneak, was a carpenter, and died at 46. Matthew Minchin, 'as slippery as an eel', played back or forward, became a real estate agent, and was dead at 42. 'Barney' Murphy played on the wings and later in life became a hotelier in North Melbourne. Joseph Taylor, described as 'a useful player', played forward on the wing, and also became a hotelkeeper. In that period hoteliers subsisted on sly grog and SP bookmaking.

It was said of 'Chris' Thomas that he 'possesses good qualities... as a goal sneak' (1875); he became a tobacconist on Clarendon Street, South Melbourne's main strip (and often a cover for a gambling den). A final example we could cite was that of 'Goldie Watsford', 'a fine determined young player', who also performed 'on the wings'; though the son of a Methodist Minister he was described as 'under the influence', a clear signal to newspaper readers of the day of his wayward behaviour. These men were 'smooth' both on the football field and in their subsequent careers.

In marked contrast, Harry Latchford was 'most reliable', played down the spine, and lived to a lovely old age as a well-respected community leader. Or take the case of William Whitehorn, 'light but active', who was also a 'good forward man' and ended up in life as an engineer. These are men who chose a 'striated' path in life. Metaphors and expressions associated with the Frontier Wars routinely found their way into colonial accounts of Australian Football.

An eloquent surviving account of a football match involving both Indigenous and British players makes this distinction in methods of play quite clear. The match took place in Adelaide in 1885, and coincided with a corroboree staged at the Adelaide Oval, with hundreds of Aboriginal people coming to the city for these festivities. In this example the metaphors of 'smooth' apply to the Indigenous side, while their white opponents evince a more compelling 'striated' form of football:

... [I]t was not long before the 'niggers', who played barefooted, proved themselves foemen worthy of their opponents' steel. When the ball was first started the whole twenty natives set off in pursuit of it, the consequence being that the game was confined solely to the aboriginals' territory until a goal was notched by the whites. After this, however, the 'darkies', acting on the advice of the umpire and their captain (Harry Hewitt), fell into their places, and a splendid struggle was the result. The 'whites' were far superior to their colored opponents in the long-kicking and marking, but the extreme lighthness of the latter, combined with a wonderful knowledge of little marking, which they carried out with exceptional skill, quite counterbalanced these defects....

... Matters being now equal the game became exceedingly fast, the 'whites', determined not to be 'knocked under' by their dusky brethren, working like Trojans, and the 'niggers', equally resolved to 'die game', striving hard to keep the ball away from their citadel.

After the [half-time] interval the ‘whites’ prevailed, and very soon placed two more goals to their credit. The blacks, however, then warmed up, and ‘brought the house down’ by the prettiest piece of passing probably ever witnessed on the ground. Started slowly at first, but quickening as it proceeded, the ball was marked from one to another clean down the ground, the local men being quite nonplussed by the cunning and quickness of their sable opponents.... After this the majority of the ‘dark’uns’ were ‘full up’ [exhausted], but those who stuck to their task were playing as though their lives depended on the issue.⁵⁰

The language of this account contains moral judgements about the virtue of the ‘long-kicking and marking’ employed by the British players, whose Western lineage is confirmed by the use of the term ‘Trojans’, in contrast to the ‘cunning and quickness’ of the Indigenous footballers, who, ominously, will ‘die game’.

The Frontier Wars that raged across the Australian continent during the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in one sense merely another example of the conflicts typical across the world, as colonising powers invaded and occupied most parts of the globe. In another sense they were unusual, in that they are still to this day not recognised as ‘official’ wars by the Australian government, if ‘recognition’ is defined by the Australian War Memorial, the main repository of the nation’s collective memory of war. And the term has yet to pass into general usage. Thousands of Aborigines and British people died in the conflicts and skirmishes that accompanied the dispossession of Aboriginal land. As many as 10,000 Australian colonists took part in the so-called Maori Wars in neighbouring New Zealand – these conflicts are uncontroversially known as ‘wars’. Of course the Australian Frontier Wars were not uniform in their intensity and violence, but changed as circumstances of British settlement and Aboriginal resistance changed.⁵¹ Nonetheless they were a reality of colonial life.

Across south-eastern Australia (Van Diemen’s Land, the Port Phillip District, South Australia) these Frontier Wars took on a particular ferocity during the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. These ‘massacres’ involved the death of hundreds of Aboriginal people, including several key battles leading to the devastating loss of Aboriginal warriors, such as the following: The Black War, Van Diemen’s Land, 1828-1832; Convincing Ground, near Portland, 1833-34

(60-200 Gunditjmara killed); Murdering Gully, near Camperdown, in 1839 (35-40 Djargurdwurung people massacred); Fighting Hills, near Coleraine 1840 (20-80 Jardwadjali killed); Warrigal Creek, Gippsland, 1843 (100-150 Kurnai people); the Avenue Range Station Massacre, near Mount Gambier, 1849 (several Buandig people murdered); Brodribb River, East Gippsland, 1850 (15-20 Kurnai).

For their part, although they had experienced guerrilla war in Ireland and in many other parts of the Empire, the British soldiers garrisoned in Australia were ill-trained to deal with Aboriginal resistance, and it was only after they were provisioned with horses in 1825 that the odds began to fall their way. Aboriginal warfare was ill-suited to open country, and the spread of British settlement across south-eastern Australia from the 1830s was accompanied by the new firepower of both soldiers and settlers.⁵² These two ways of relating to territory – one Indigenous ('smooth'), the other more conventional ('striated') – were to be played out in the codification of football that ensued in colonial Australia.

[Fig. 8 about here]

These wars followed a pattern that became disturbingly familiar. The battles were fought not as the British were mostly accustomed, with set formations and lines of opposing troops, but rather as a complex interplay, and taking place across several stages: beginning with Indigenous toleration of foreign beachheads (Port Jackson, Albany Sound, Port Phillip),⁵³ failed cultural negotiations, Aboriginal guerrilla attacks, British reprisals, and then the removal of Indigenous clans from territory. The celebrated artist S.T. Gill was sympathetic to the plight of Indigenous Australians in raiding colonists for their livestock (Fig. 8). Despite these sympathetic readings at the time,⁵⁴ the Frontier Wars have been viewed as a series of events that stand outside the general treatment of colonial history. Even in the Northern Territory, where the 'colour bar' operated to divide Aboriginal and non-Indigenous football clubs and leagues, there was a lot of 'forgetting'.⁵⁵ This British and white Australian amnesia about the violence and dispossession wrought upon the ancient Australians has prevented most historians from inquiring into the complex relationships that existed between the nature of colonial warfare and the codification of a home-grown form of football.

The Aboriginal population across south-eastern Australia shrank dramatically, but even in Tasmania they did not disappear. Hundreds inhabited or visited the new British city of Melbourne.⁵⁶

The violence remained in the consciousness of both parties. For the whites, the Aborigines were treacherous, remembered in Footscray an entire century after the conflict:

FIRST WHITE MEN KILLED BY BLACKS

The first white men killed in Victoria by aborigines were two men who were speared in the present Kingsville area. They were buried on Flagstaff Hill, off William Street, Melbourne, and the remains are still there. Later two other men were killed in the bush in the vicinity of present-day Mackay Street, Seddon.

These men were in the employ of a settler named Swanston (after whom Swanston Street, Melbourne, was named) and were droving some sheep from Maribyrnong to Williamstown. They had a dray with provisions and the aborigines, considered friendly, asked the men to shoot a kangaroo for them, for food. The men separated to trail a kangaroo. Each was surrounded in the undergrowth and then speared to death, the blacks looting the provisions.⁵⁷

Since there were no independent witnesses to these killings, the stories had clearly grown in the re-telling.

Meanwhile, the sons and nephews of the generation of whites who participated in the Frontier Wars began to play Australian Football during the 1850s, with, as we have seen, the first recorded rules written in 1859.

Prosopographical research has revealed that the first generation of footballers were not immigrants to the colonies, but second-generation Victorians whose fathers and uncles had experienced or participated in the invasion of Indigenous lands and the Frontier Wars.⁵⁸ They often had first-hand experience of this conflict, spectacularly so in the case of Wills. Many were descended from Van Diemen's Land families who participated in or witnessed the Black War.

It is a truism that war and play are inextricably linked;⁵⁹ what the early British settlers observed in Aboriginal play, such as their depictions and descriptions of the corroboree, were versions of what they could also infer about the capacity for military performance, such as the brandishing of spears. War played an important part in traditional Aboriginal life,⁶⁰ and they were

well-prepared to enter into combat with the British in the first decades after 1788.⁶¹

When we return to the five persistent and distinguishing features of Australian football, outlined earlier,⁶² we can now propose that each has its clear parallel in the experience of the Frontier Wars. The game was both ‘manly’, a term of ‘striated’ praise (the Sydney suburb of the same name referenced the qualities of the local Indigenous Eora) and ‘amusing’, those elements of dodging and other athletic prowess that belonged to the world of the ‘smooth’:

The absence of an offside rule. A common trope of the Frontier Wars was the isolated and lonely settler's hut, under attack from all sides. This is the besieged ‘citadel’, a lonely outpost in the disorienting smooth spaces of the Australian bush.

The absence of a referee with the send-off rule. The Australian frontier lacked lawmen who could adjudicate in cases of conflict between the settlers and the Indigenous. Like the umpire, the Protector had only vague and general powers. After the Myall Creek Massacre (1838), the British settlers did not want their actions too closely scrutinised.

Vague rules about man-on-man contact. Relations between Aborigines and settlers were ill-defined, varying from extreme violence to intimate friendship.

Individual over group performance. This lay at the heart of the conflict on the frontier, with Aboriginal guerrilla tactics a new and challenging experience for the British. British football was increasingly favouring collective action over individual performance – Australian Football challenged that preference.

Absence of clear markings and an invariant pitch. As we have seen, the Australian frontier had no clear lines of battle for the British troops. So to the sporting battlefield in Australia eschewed the regularity and line-markings of the increasingly striated codes of British football.

The British garrisons were withdrawn from the Australian colonies after 1870. The Australian experience of war morphed into imperial narratives – after the

Maori Wars came the intervention in the Sudan in 1885, and then the Boer War in the following decade. These became legitimate wars, in a way the Frontier Wars were not. As for Australian Football, this code became a kind of Western 'dreaming'. The football grounds resounded with vigorous 'barracking', but also became havens and places for reflective meditation – 'mental doodling' – of the kind associated with sacred sites. Its tribes coalesced around powerful totems. Ancestral heroes and their deeds became part of everyday discourse. Its origins in the frontier contact zone were forgotten.

Australian Football remains thoroughly implicated in the original dispossession of Aboriginal Australian land. The game has retained the key novelties that emerged from the fateful meeting of four white Australian sportsmen in 1859 at Bryant's Hotel. These men were meeting in a contact zone where the Frontier Wars were still raging around them. They devised a 'game of our own' that incorporated the 'striated' style of the British imperium, with its careful attention to measured spaces and play up the spine of the ground, with the open, free-ranging spontaneity of 'smooth' warfare. In their performance of Australian Football the players can adopt the 'becomings spiritual/animal' persona of the nomad, step outside the regimes of the dominant culture, and can play under the totemic symbols of 'Cats' (Geelong) or 'Swans' (Sydney, previously South Melbourne) or 'Magpies' (Collingwood).

As for Indigenous Australians, over the past half-century they have embraced the game as their own. They have introduced new strategies and tactics into the game, at least since Graham 'Polly' Farmer's 'ruckwork' at Geelong in the 1960s. They are well overrepresented among the elite players. And, in the person of Adam Goodes and other contemporary Indigenous players,⁶³ they have dared to assert a special connection to a football code that white supporters had presumed was only a white man's game.

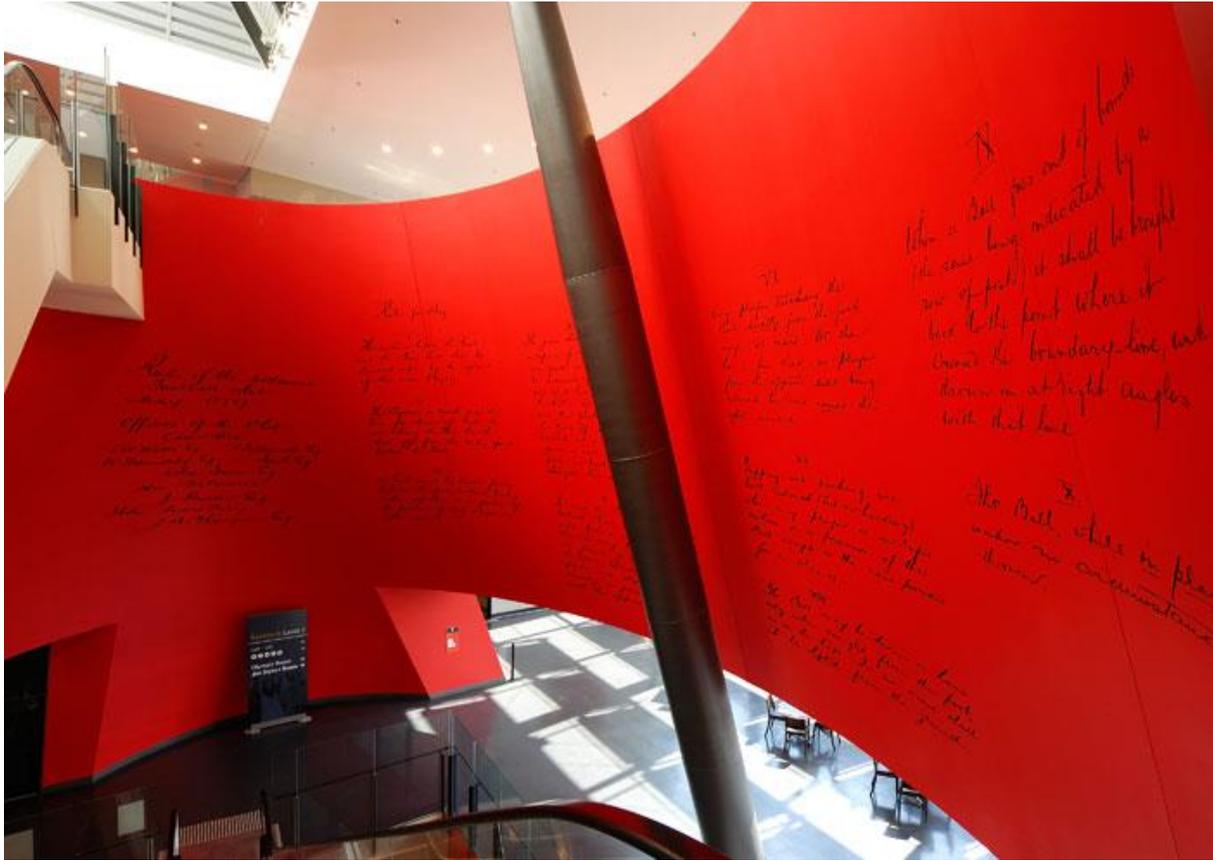


Fig. 1: MCG Northern Stand Rules of Play theming [Beattie Vass Design (BVD)]

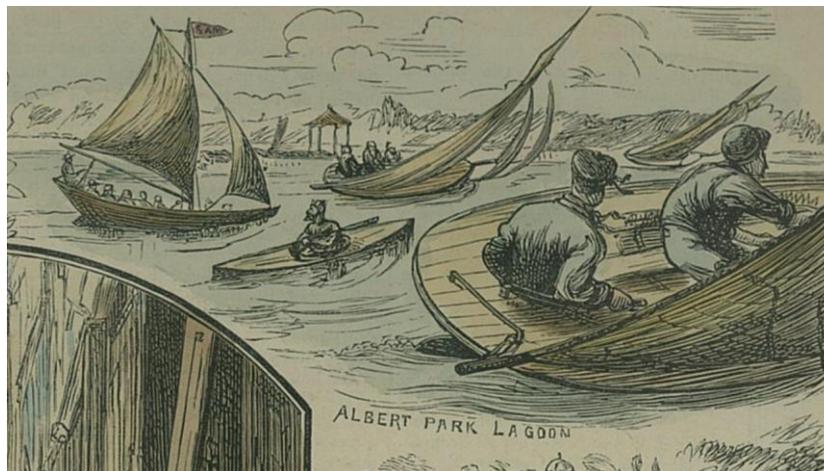


Fig. 2: Albert Park Lagoon, *The Illustrated Australian News*, Saturday 5 July 1879, p. 104 [private collection of Robert Pascoe]



Fig. 3: Club captains, tribal leaders of Australian Football: Sir Bill Fleming, Lord O'Hannaysee, Baron Bill Maloney, The Duke of South Melbourne (Peter Burns), Sir Jasper Jones, Sir Joey Tankard, The Earl of Fitzroy (John Worrall), Lord Jigger Morehouse, The Marquis of Sleepy Hollow (Dave Hickinbotham), Baron Footscray, Earl Richmond [Melbourne *Punch*, 30 May 1889]



Fig. 4: *Warriors of New S Wales*, 1813, hand-coloured aquatint by John Heaviside Clark (draughtsman) and Matthew Dubourg (engraver) [NGV 1999.400.8]

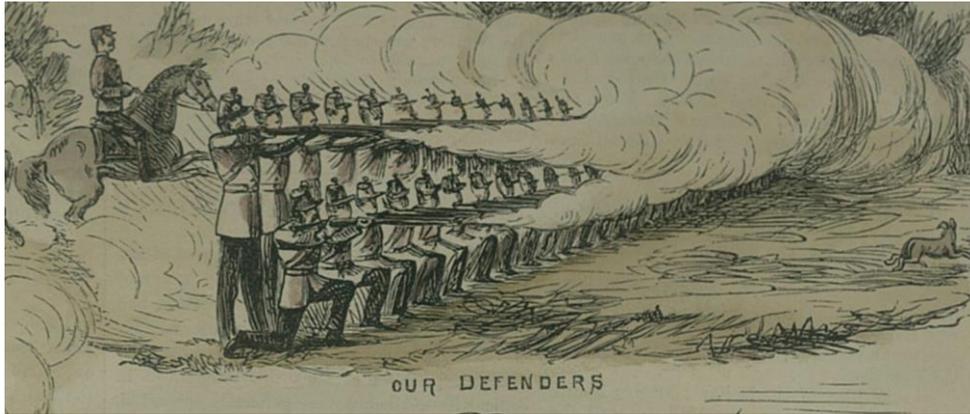


Fig. 5: 'Our defenders', *The Illustrated Australian News*, Saturday 6 July 1879 [private collection of Robert Pascoe]

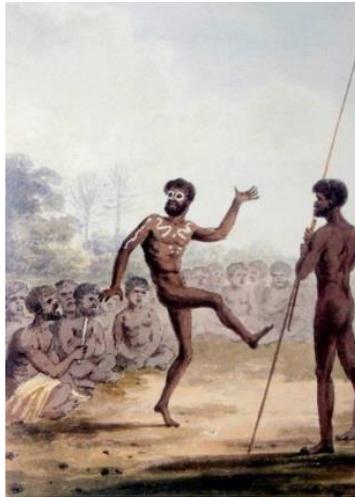


Fig. 6: *The Dance*, 1813, hand-coloured aquatint by John Heaviside Clark (draughtsman) and Matthew Dubourg (engraver) [NGV 1900.400.7]

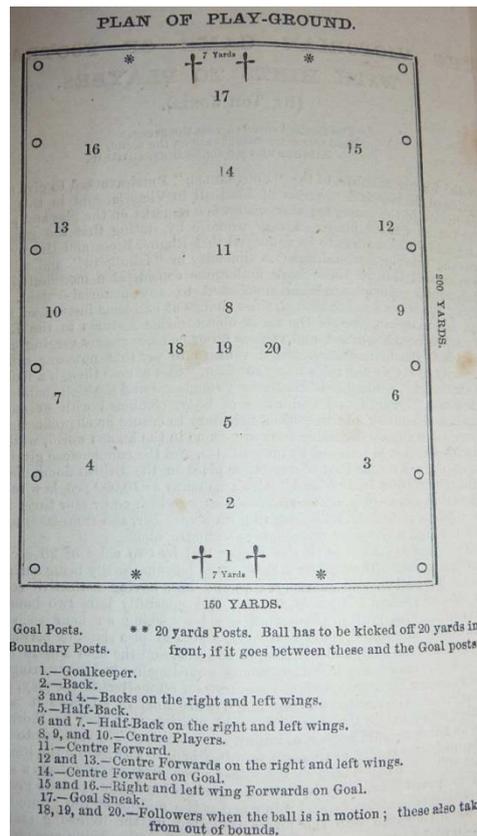


Fig 7: Plan of play-ground, early Australian Football [Thomas P. Power, ed. *The Footballer*, R. P. Hurren, Melbourne, annual, 1875-1881; 1876, p. 8.]

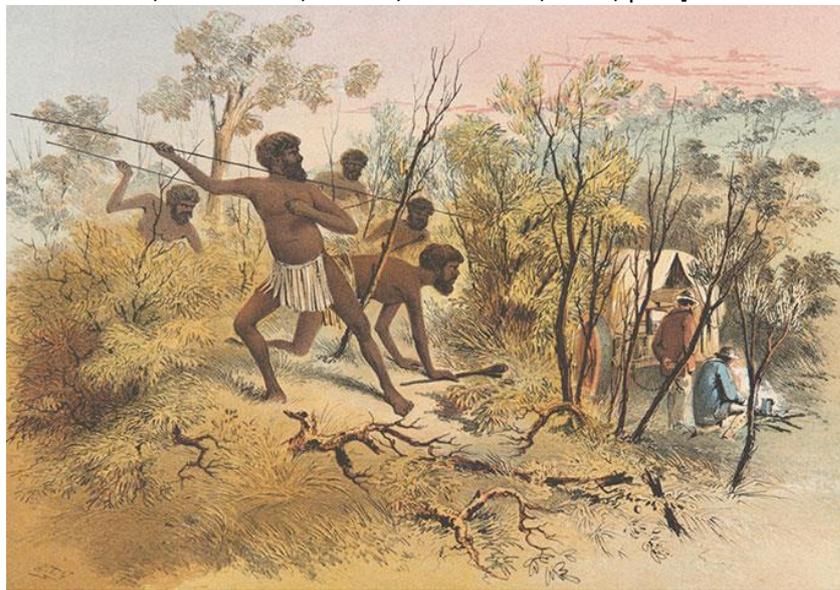


Fig. 8: S.T. Gill, *Attack on store dray*, 1865, colour lithograph [NGV 3049.7-4]

¹ The phrase occasionally still reappears in football conversations. See, for instance, <http://www.footyalmanac.com.au/round-4-collingwood-v-melbourne-early-settlers/> (accessed 18 July 2016). One journalist in the 2016 season attributed the phrase to the commentator Peter Landy: Mark Robinson, 'Tom-Toms send message [*sic*]', *Herald-Sun*, Monday 25 July 2016, p. 60c.

² *Argus* (Melbourne), Wednesday 18 May 1859, p. 4 b; 4 de.

³ Mark Pennings, *Origins of Australian Football: Victoria's Early History, vol. 1: Amateur Heroes and the Rise of Clubs, 1858 to 1876*, Connor Court, Ballan, Vic., 2012, p. 19.

⁴ Hugh Hornby, *Uppies and Downies: The Extraordinary Football Games of Britain*, English Heritage, Swindon UK, 2008.

⁵ An excellent summary of the documentary evidence and the rival camps of historians can be found in Trevor Ruddell, 'The marn-grook story: A documentary history of Aboriginal ballgames in South-Eastern Australia', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 32, no. 1, May 2015, pp. 19-37.

⁶ Rob Hess, Matthew Nicholson, Bob Stewart and Gregory de Moore, *A National Game: The History of Australian Rules Football*, Viking, Camberwell, Vic., 2008, pp. 20, 26.

⁷ *Bell's Life in Victoria and Sporting Chronicle*, 30 August 1858, p. 5 (quoted by Gillian Hibbins, *Sport and Racing in Colonial Melbourne: The Cousins and Me: Colden Harrison, Tom Wills and William Hammersley*, Lynedoch Publications, Melbourne, 2007, pp. 84-85).

⁸ Robert Pascoe and Gerardo Papalia, 'Australian Football as a construct of the frontier contact zone', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 32, no. 1, May 2015, pp. 1-17.

⁹ The latest account uses a contemporary ethnographic account to suggest it is highly probable he played *marngrook* with these children: Jenny Hocking and Nell Reidy, 'Marngrook, Tom Wills and the continuing denial of indigenous history: On the origins of Australian football', *Meanjin*, Vol. 75, No. 2, June 2016: pp. 83-93. The fullest biography of Wills remains Greg de Moore, *Tom Wills: His Spectacular Rise and Tragic Fall*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2008.

¹⁰ Les Perrin, *Cullin-la-Ringo: The Triumph and Tragedy of Tommy Wills*, The Author, Stafford, Qld, 1998. See also John McPherson, 'Marn grook, Thomas Wills and the great Australian silence', BA Hons thesis, Southern Cross University, 2005, for the argument that Horatio Wills was mistaken as the brother of Jesse Gregson, who had killed several Gayiri/Kairi people.

¹¹ The best account is still D.J. Mulvaney and Rex Harcourt, *Cricket Walkabout: The Australian Aborigines in England*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 2/e, 1988, which, despite its archaic title, is very sympathetic to the challenges experienced by Australia's first Test cricketers.

¹² Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 412.

¹³ She was the sister of an *Argus* journalist and the daughter of an accountant, Benjamin Willoughby, living in Victoria Parade, East Melbourne.

¹⁴ Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 198.

¹⁵ *Bendigo Advertiser*, Monday 21 January 1861, p. 2f.

¹⁶ *Bendigo Advertiser*, Saturday 8 November 1862, p. 3b.

¹⁷ Pennings, *Amateur Heroes*, p.229, quoting *Bells' Life in Victoria and Sporting Chronicle*, 29 July 1865.

¹⁸ *Bendigo Advertiser*, Friday 16 November 1866, page 2d. In January 1867 his cricketing fame got him a place in a scratch team that hosted a match against Tommy Wills' visiting Aboriginal cricketers. 'The darkies' [*sic*], according to the local newspaper, were 'now a celebrity in the land, not only for their cricketing but also for their athletic proclivities'. (*Bendigo Advertiser*, Wednesday 9 January 1867, p. 2d)

¹⁹ *Bendigo Advertiser*, Thursday 6 February 1868, p. 3a. On Bendigo Mac, see Robert Pascoe, *Sierakowski: Five Generations*, Brian C Sierakowski, Perth, 2002, pp. 2-4.

²⁰ *Argus* (Melbourne), Saturday 21 July 1877, p. 1a. No obituary appeared in the *Argus*, despite his previous connection with that paper.

²¹ She had been born Maria Donaldson, the name she gave on their marriage certificate, but six years earlier had married Edward George Wilson.

²² When Jane remarried in 1869, to James Armeson in Devon, she described herself as a 'widow'.

²³ Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, pp. 96, 400-02; ancestry.com (accessed 29 July 2016); *Sydney Sportsman*, Wednesday 18 June 1902, p. 6 ef.

²⁴ Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, pp. 95, 125.

²⁵ Barry Judd, *On the Boundary Line: Colonial Identity in Football*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2008; Pascoe and Papalia, 'Australian Football'.

- ²⁶ Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2010 [1990, 2003]
- ²⁷ James Boyce, *1835: The Founding of Melbourne & the Conquest of Australia*, Black, Collingwood, Vic., 2013.
- ²⁸ Hess et alia, *A National Game*, pp. 26-29.
- ²⁹ Mark Pennings and Robert Pascoe, 'Watching football in Marvellous Melbourne: Spectators, barrackers, and working-class rituals', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 28, no. 1, May 2011, pp. 1-20.
- ³⁰ Robert Pascoe, *The Winter Game: The Complete History of Australian Football*, Reed Books, Melbourne, 1995; reprinted, 1996, pp. 5-6. Melbourne's Docklands stadium slavishly followed this practice, despite its impracticability: see Robert Pascoe, *Bonacci: No Ordinary Australian*, Connor Court, Ballarat, 2012, pp. 172-74.
- ³¹ As explained by Charlie Lovett in John Lack, ed., *Charlie Lovett's Footscray, being the Reminiscences of Charles Eldred Lovett...*, City of Footscray Historical Society, Footscray, 1993.
- ³² Pascoe, *The Winter Game*, pp. xiv-xvi.
- ³³ Bruce Pascoe, *Convincing Ground*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007; David Thompson, *The Rules That Made Australian Football: The Evolution of a Unique Game, 1858 to 1879*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 2013.
- ³⁴ Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994.
- ³⁵ A photo from 1883 shows players in hooped guernseys (*Charlie Lovett's Footscray*, p. 64).
- ³⁶ Pennings, *Amateur Heroes*, p. 23; Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 124.
- ³⁷ Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 126.
- ³⁸ *Charlie Lovett's Footscray*, p. 65.
- ³⁹ Interview with 1930s Collingwood player: Ian Johnson, 'We stopped the mighty South machine', *Argus* (Melbourne), Saturday 7 August 1954: 12.
- ⁴⁰ Patrick Wolfe, 'Race and racialisation: Some thoughts', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2002, pp. 51-62, p. 55.
- ⁴¹ Wolfe, 'Race and racialisation'.
- ⁴² The closest parallel is that of American football and baseball teams, where similar acts of Indigenous appropriation (controversially) took place.
- ⁴³ Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 157.
- ⁴⁴ *Charlie Lovett's Footscray*, pp. 34-35
- ⁴⁵ Leigh Boucher and Lynette Russell 'Soliciting sixpences from township to township': Moral dilemmas in mid-nineteenth-century Melbourne, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 15, no.2, 2012, pp. 149-65: p. 150.
- ⁴⁶ Boucher and Russell, 'Soliciting sixpences', p. 157.
- ⁴⁷ Fred Cahir, *Black Gold: Aboriginal People on the Goldfields of Victoria, 1850-1870*, ANU E Press and Aboriginal History Inc., Canberra, 2012; Boucher and Russell, 'Soliciting sixpences', p. 161.
- ⁴⁸ Charlie Lovett provides a graphic account of this.
- ⁴⁹ Such as Mark Pennings and Robert Pascoe, 'The Corio Oval tribe: A prosopographical perspective of the Geelong Football Club in the nineteenth century', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 28, no. 1, May 2012, pp. 77-94.
- ⁵⁰ *Express and Telegraph* (Adelaide) Saturday 30 May 1885: 2f. The quote marks are in the original.
- ⁵¹ In this very large literature we note in particular the following: Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster, eds, *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003; Nicholas Clements, *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia QLD, 2014; Richard Broome, 'The struggle for Australia: Aboriginal-European warfare, 1770-1930', in M. McKernan and M. Browne, eds, *Australia: Two Centuries of War & Peace*, Australian War Memorial, in association with Allen & Unwin, Australia, Canberra, 1988, pp. 92-120; John Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars, 1788-1838*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2002; Anna Haebich, 'The battlefields of Aboriginal history', in *Australia's History: Themes and Debates*, ed. Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell, eds, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2005, pp. 1-21; Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1998.
- ⁵² Broome 'The struggle for Australia'; Connor, *Australian Frontier Wars*, pp. 7-21.
- ⁵³ The Kulin thought Batman's Treaty was simply a request for permission to travel through their lands.
- ⁵⁴ See also Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*; Boucher and Russell, 'Soliciting sixpences', for numerous examples of colonists who castigated fellow Victorians for their behaviour.
- ⁵⁵ Matthew Stephen, *Colour Bar: Remembering and Forgetting Northern Territory Football, 1916-1955*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Casuarina NT, 2015.

⁵⁶ Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*, UBC Press, Vancouver and Toronto, 2010.

⁵⁷ Footscray Council, *Footscray's First 100 Years: The Story of a Great Australian City*, The Council and Footscray Advertiser, Footscray, 1960, unnumbered p. 9.

⁵⁸ This research is reported in several places, including Pennings and Pascoe, 'The Corio Oval tribe'. Geelong's earliest players were disproportionately drawn from the squattocracy of the Western District, the original usurpers of Indigenous land.

⁵⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1955 [1938]; Robert Pascoe, 'The AFL's Anzac Day match', *CCLReview*, vol. 1, no.1, May 2007, 8 pp. [www.cclreview.org.au]; Robert, 'Contesting the AFL Anzac Day match', in Anne-Marie Hede and Ruth Rentschler, eds, *Reflections on ANZAC Day: From One Millennium to the Next*, Heidelberg Press, Heidelberg, Vic., 2010, pp. 165-74.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Blainey, 'Duel and battle', in *The Story of Australia's People: The Rise and Fall of Ancient Australia*, Viking, 2015, pp. 106-22.

⁶¹ Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars*, pp. 1-7.

⁶² Pascoe, *The Winter Game*, pp. xi-xvii, Pascoe and Papalia, 'Australian football', p. 7.

⁶³ Goodes, an outspoken Indigenous player of the modern era, retired early as a result of incessant crowd booing in the mid-2010s. The booing was then inflicted on other Indigenous players, such as Adelaide's Eddie Betts.