

MARNGROOK - THE TRIBAL ROOTS OF AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL

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The Aboriginal context of Tom Wills' early years

Australian football is the oldest codified football game in the world, tracing its formal beginnings to 1859. Tom Wills was the foremost among the group of men who founded our national game and he had begun promoting the idea of a 'game of our own' the year before its codification. Although scratch games of football had been played in the Victorian colony during the 1850s, it is generally accepted that the first game of Australian football was played between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar in August 1858, with Tom Wills having been one of the umpires.

Having been a student at Scotch College in the 1950s, I had always been fully aware of this history of Australian Football. The reputed first game had forty or more students on each side and had been played over three weekends, on the 7th and 21st of August and the 4th of September 1858. It had taken place at Jolimont Park, the site of where the Melbourne Cricket Ground now stands.

Tom Wills, who helped organise and umpire the Scotch-Melbourne Grammar match was barely 23 years at the time. For one so young he was a commanding figure and had already established himself as the best cricketer in the colony of Victoria. Born on 19th August 1835 at Gundagai, he and his family had settled in Victoria's Western District in 1840 near Ararat. Tribal Aboriginal life was still well intact at this time and having no younger brothers and sisters at the time, Tom grew up with Aboriginal children as his only playmates. He consequently became inured in tribal ways. He played their sports and games, attended their ceremonies and learnt their language, customs, songs and dances.

Apart from local oral history attesting to the fact that a corroboree ground was in close proximity to the Wills homestead, there is also direct documentary evidence of Tom's strong affiliation with the local tribe. Family letters for instance reveal he spoke the Tjapwoorong language with such fluency and performed songs and dances with such proficiency that was openly applauded by local tribal Elders. This proficiency in indigenous language and culture was also apparent to his teachers when he began school, as the following quote from the history of Ararat indicates.

'As a boy at Lexington Tom Wills was very clever in picking up the black's speech, and he used to amuse them by singing their songs and imitating their dances. This power of mimicry was useful when he went to Rugby, for he was granted release from fagging because of his entertaining ability.'

This second comment about Tom Wills' time at Rugby School is rather interesting. At the age of fourteen in late February 1850, Tom had been sent to England to complete his education. Once there he obviously did not try to hide his knowledge and skill in indigenous culture. In fact, it is recorded that at Tom's specific request his father shipped many of Tom's Aboriginal weapons and artefacts to him whilst at Rugby. There is no doubt that Tom demonstrated his proficiency with these artefacts and weapons to his classmates at Rugby.

Wills added a new dimension to playing Rugby

Over the next seven years whilst at Rugby, Tom did not distinguish himself academically nearly as much as on the sporting field, ultimately captaining both the school football and cricket teams. Although football at Rugby had not yet been codified, it had always been known as little more than a mass moving scum played at ground level. Tom may however have exhibited an aerial skill

not seen before in the game, as is seemingly conveyed by the following newspaper report from Bell's Life in London in November 1854.

'Wills, to the admiration of the spectators rose above the swarm of boys and displayed an eel-like agility which baffled all the efforts of his opponents to retain him in their grasp.'

It was clear that right from the start at Rugby, Tom was a natural at football and the question never seems to have been put as to what experiences in Australia might have prepared him and lain the foundations of his football skills. However, one thing seems absolutely certain, he did not play any form of English football growing up in Australia.

On the other hand, it is equally certain that he played games of Aboriginal football with his Aboriginal playmates on virtually a daily basis. It therefore seems most likely that the skills he had absorbed as a child and early teenager playing the indigenous game must have stood him in good stead. Not only was he immediately able to adapt to the Rugby game, but he also played it with a flair not seen before. For instance in the game of Marngrook the players commonly leapt on the backs of others to catch the ball. The preceding quote describing the way Wills *'rose above the swarm'* seems redolent of that. Perhaps the lineout in Rugby where players are hoisted high by teammates had its origins in Marngrook?

In regard to cricket however, it is known that Tom played the game in Australia, and this foundation of skills similarly served him well at Rugby. Ultimately, Tom not only captained the Rugby cricket team, but also played County cricket with such flair with both bat and ball, that he was under the close eye of the All England selectors. They were no doubt greatly disappointed to see such a bright new talent return to the Antipodes in 1856, when he was just 21 years old.

Later, when historians tried to trace the roots of Australian football, Wills' time at Rugby was focussed on. An unquestioning and Anglocentric view was immediately adopted that Tom must have imported the elements of the Australian football game from England. Not one shred of thought was given to the possibility of a connection between our new national football game and the universal tribal game that Tom Wills has undoubtedly participated in as a child and youth.

His childhood experiences with tribal game of football that we now universally refer to as 'Marngrook', consequently lay ignored and unexplored for the next 125 years. Even then, when I did raise the possibility in the early 1980s I was openly laughed at by AFL officials and historians, but not so much by ordinary members of the public.

The social context at the birth of Australian football

In the nearly seven years that Tom Wills had been away, life in the colony had changed dramatically. Not only had Victoria achieved self-government in 1851, but the gold rush had swelled the population of the colony to around half a million. It had also made Melbourne the richest city in the British Empire, with a population that had more than tripled in the seven years, to now be at 80,000. In the time that Tom Wills had been away in England, Melbourne had transformed from a provincial town into a buzzing metropolis.

The extinguishment of tribal Aboriginal life that had begun with the pastoral settlement in the 1830s had now been dramatically completed by the gold rush of the 1850s. At the time of Tom Wills' return at the end of 1856, it was only the arid north-west fringe in the Mallee that continued to host traditional Aboriginal tribal life.

Those Aboriginal people who had survived the dispossession, dispersal and disease of the 1840s and 1850s had then been herded onto Reserves or Missions, or they otherwise lived in poverty on the urban fringes of colonial society. This was therefore the real beginning of the stolen generations. It was borne out of the intention to 'smooth the dying pillow' of any tribal people who were left and to assimilate their children of mixed race. This was the harsh reality created by the

Act of 1886 which gave colonial authorities the power to place 'half caste' Aboriginal children wherever they wished, regardless of parental wishes or capacity to care for their children.

An era of colonial apartheid

By the time Tom Wills returned home then, the context to his childhood and upbringing was gone. His Aboriginal friends from childhood were now not only disenfranchised from the wealth and prosperity of the new society, but they had also been forcibly detached from their own culture. On the Missions, Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their own language or practice traditional culture in any way. They were instead required to attend church, not weekly, but daily. Any sign of cohesion or leadership on the mission stations was remedied by the arbitrary relocation of the individuals involved to other mission stations.

Despite this period of intense repression, elements of traditional culture and language did survive. However, this was more through the inculcation of values and behaviours, rather than through teaching the underlying conceptual systems. Levels of secrecy had always attached to various aspects of Aboriginal culture, but now secrecy was forced on every aspect of culture. The survival of any vestiges of traditional culture relied on Aboriginal people effectively becoming a secret society. Both literally and metaphorically then, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Aboriginal people were forced to live on the fringes of Australian society, but now had a culture of poverty also insidiously shaping their lives.

When Wills arrived back in the colony in 1856 this apartheid process had already been achieved. He was therefore quickly faced with the realisation that his proficiency in indigenous language and culture would no longer be an asset to him like it had been at Rugby. In fact it would have been quite the reverse. In this brave new affluent neo-colonial world, anything to do with Aboriginal culture would have been a downright liability to Tom Wills' status and future.

On the other hand, Tom's cricketing prowess proved to be an unquestionable asset. At the time of his return, only one obstacle remained in confirming Victoria's burgeoning sense of identity. This was that it had never beaten 'the older colony' New South Wales, at cricket. Barely a week after stepping off the boat from England in late 1856, Tom Wills' prowess as both a bowler and a batsman was the talk of Melbourne.

Over the next 18 months Tom Wills established himself as clearly the best cricketer in the colony. He saw though that the fitness of players had to improve if they were ever going to beat New South Wales at cricket. Accordingly, on 10th July 1858 Tom wrote a letter to the Melbourne sporting magazine 'Bell's Life' suggesting that the cricketers should be active in the winter by playing football, and that football clubs should be established for this purpose. It was at this time that Wills was later credited by his cousin Colden Harrison as having said to him that the code of football to be played should be: '*A game of our own*'.

The marketing of 'a game of our own'

A number of trial games, such as that between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar, generated great public enthusiasm. So on 19th May 1859 Tom Wills convened a meeting at Bryant's Hotel. It was here that the basic rules of Australian football were drafted by Tom Wills, W. J. Hammersly, T. H. Smith, and J. B. Thompson. Being more an ideas man rather than an administrator, Tom did not take the minutes of the meeting, but it is significant that he was the first signatory to this historic document. After this, Tom Wills plus in particular his cousin Colden Harrison and J. B. Thompson, set about marketing the game to the colonial public. Indeed, so cleverly was this done that within three years it became the major spectator attraction in Melbourne and had even spread to other States.

In marketing it as '*a game of our own*' Tom Wills and his compatriots first of all appealed to colonial pride and patriotism. They then reinforced this by actively denigrating the game of Rugby

as a vicious mauling scrum with little skill. Tom and his associates most vociferously condemned the practice of 'hacking' in Rugby. Hacking involved players deliberately kicking the shins of opposing players so that they had to retire hurt from the game, not infrequently with a broken leg.

Hacking was therefore outlawed in the first rules of 1859 and within a month tripping was also outlawed. This condemnation led by Wills and Thompson was so successful that the public quickly generated a disdain for any form of kicking as un-Australian. It is still today accorded far stronger approbation than any other form of violence on the footy field.

The Wills group was also strongly opposed to the offside rule that prevented free forward movement of the ball. This was a matter of some public debate with some people arguing strongly in favour of an offside rule. These proponents of the offside rule scorned the relatively easy kicking of goals through unrestricted forward movement as 'cheating' and 'sneaking'. However, this denigration was ultimately turned to advantage by the Willa group, with the early full forward position being named 'goalsneak' as a proud differentiation from the English offside rule.

More than this though, in the very early years of Australian football, Tom Wills proved himself to be something of a tactical genius, exploiting the lack of an offside rule by inventing forward positional play. It is obvious that Rugby football had no such strategies, so it immediately raises the question as to what model Tom may have based these strategies on. The answer is obvious. The games of tribal football that Tom had played as a child did contain these elements of forward positional play, even though there were in fact no goals scored in the games and it was essentially a game of keepings-off where pairs of opponents would position themselves a kick ahead of the play.

Tom and his friends successfully generating this public scorn of Rugby and this resulted in many derisory letters and articles being published about the English game. Despite this however, there was still a strong tendency among many within the colony of Victoria to fawn on things English. Many settlers saw themselves essentially not as Australians, but as Englishmen who had been born in the Antipodes by accident of birth.

As indicated earlier, because Wills' had captained the Rugby school football team, the easy assumption was made that the Australian game had been derived from the English game. Tom Wills' cousin, Colden Harrison, even actively promoted the myth that our game was derived from Rugby. This was despite the fact that Tom had never ever said it was and had instead stated, even according to Harrison, that we should have 'a game of our own'.

The hidden connection between the two games

This approach by Harrison was curious, even paradoxical, given the nature of his own upbringing. A little more than a year younger than his cousin Tom Wills, Harrison's family had originally settled at Whittlesea in 1836 when tribal life was still fully intact. Harrison lived there until aged ten and like Wills, was strongly exposed to indigenous culture. Marngrook is in fact a Woiwuring word from the Wurundjeri people of the greater Melbourne area and it literally means 'football'.

In 1846 the Harrison family moved to the Ararat area and for the next four years Colden and Tom spent a great deal of his time in each other's company, until Tom went to Rugby School four years later. Tribal life was still intact in that area during that period and Harrison was therefore exposed to the same tribal influences as Tom, including tribal football. In the Tjapwoorong language of the Ararat region, the word for football was 'mingorm'. This of course is similar to the Woiwuring word for the same tribal game that was played at Whittlesea, where Harrison spent his first ten years.

Some historians have tried discount the connection of Wills with Aboriginal football stating that there is 'no evidence' that tribal football was played in the Ararat area. The evidence referred to is of course the lack of a documented eye-witness account by a white person. However one only has

to look at the Tjapwoorong language to realise that football was an institutional part of their lives, just as it was over the rest of Australia.

Not only did the Tjapwoorong people have their own word of *mingorm* for the game, but they also had a dictionary of terms for the various aspects of the game. For instance, *marngoormp* is the term for passing the ball by hand, *kurkak* is the term for catching or marking the ball in flight, *beeyne* is the word exclusively used for football players and *koornmuk* means kicker. This is in effect the word for the best player on the ground. That is, the one who kicks the ball most often and to best advantage in the course of the football game.

In view of these words specific to tribal football, to suggest that there is no evidence of tribal football being played where Tom Wills grew up, is simply ludicrous. Why would the Aboriginal people where Wills grew up have a lexicon of words for a game they didn't play?

Why Wills remained silent about Aboriginal football

That such a claim could be made in the 21st century, just on the basis of no white eyewitness account and in total ignorance of Aboriginal language and culture, beggars belief. However in the nineteenth century, such devaluing of Aboriginal experience was so commonplace it was the norm. In that day and age it was conventional wisdom for anything Aboriginal to be universally denigrated as 'primitive' or 'uncivilised'. The assumption built into the proposition of Terra Nullius was clearly that the white man had nothing to learn from the black man.

Terra Nullius was therefore not just a doctrine that Aboriginal people did not own or manage the land. It was also by direct implication a thesis that Aboriginal culture and history was itself empty and meaningless, and that the status of Aboriginal people as human beings was even in question.

It is easy to see then, why Tom Wills and his cousin Colden Harrison remained silent on any possible connection between the new Australian football game and Marngrook. Some historians have tried to impute Wills' silence on the indigenous game as proof that there was no connection between Marngrook and Australian football, but such a conclusion does not stand up to closer scrutiny. For instance, when Josiah Hammersly later recalled the early discussions on the possible rules of the new game, he stated that:

'Tom Wills suggested the Rugby rules, but nobody understood them except himself'.

This is a mystifyingly self contradictory statement. If Wills later led the public denigration of Rugby, why would he be promoting adoption of those rules? Also, the Rugby school rules for football were essentially little different to other schools at that time and even soccer had not yet evolved as a separate feet-only game. The vigorous debates with many favouring an offside rule are proof enough of their familiarity with the Rugby game.

So what was the reason for their confusion over the so called 'Rugby' rules Hammersly thought Wills was trying to introduce? Was Wills in fact trying to communicate something else? Maybe he had tried to introduce the essential rules of Marngrook under the guise of them being Rugby rules. Then, when he saw the inability of the others to immediately comprehend the broader scope of the game he had in mind, he just changed tack and plumed for no offside rule as the key to the situation. Certainly, the only model of forward positional play that Wills had ever been exposed to in his life was that of Marngrook.

Historians have also argued that because Wills plumed for a crossbar between the goalposts and for a designated kicker to take shots on goal, that this shows he supported the adoption of Rugby rules. The argument is however irrelevant. There were no goals in Marngrook, so Rugby was the only point of reference that Wills had for this aspect of play.

How Marngrook influenced Wills' playing style

It is also a matter of record that Wills was the best set shot on goal when at Rugby and then later back in Victoria. So it would be only natural that he would try to maximise his own influence and standing in the game by having a designated kicker rule. His support for a crossbar and a designated kicker therefore in no way indicates his support for the game of Rugby; it was just a device for him to be an even more dominant player. On the other hand, Marngrook did provide a reference point for Wills in its unrestricted forward movement and positional play, and he successfully engineered the introduction of these aspects into the new game.

That he chose not to acknowledge the source of his inspiration as an Aboriginal game he had played is no surprise. In that day and age it was surely much better to let the myth persist that was derived from an upper-class English game. This was much more likely to ensure support by the more affluent and influential sections of colonial society. On the other hand Tom was equally keen to ensure that the common man had access to the game and his derision of the English game therefore sat well with the general public. Many of the ordinary classes in colonial Australia were of Celtic stock, and far from fawning on things English, saw themselves as proud Australians.

Wills' strategies therefore proved patently successful on all fronts and the new game was most rapidly adopted into the fabric of colonial life. So quickly did it take hold of the public imagination, and so good was Tom Wills at this game, that he has been accredited with being twice accorded the Brownlow Medal like status of 'Champion of the Colony'. His status at football, cricket, shooting, or whatever he chose to turn his hand, truly made him our first Australian sporting icon.

A personal perspective

From my days at Scotch I had known about Tom Wills and his role in the first recorded game between Scotch and Melbourne Grammar in 1858. However from my own family background, I also become aware of a vague connection with Tom Wills. Like Wills, my own great-grandfather, Tom Chivers had been a pioneer child who grew up immersed in Aboriginal culture. However Wills had grown up in the Ararat area, whilst my own great-grandfather had grown up in the Yarra Valley east of Melbourne.

The indirect connection came about through another local pioneer, James Dawson who arrived in 1840, the same year as my great-great grandfather, John Chivers. James Dawson had settled at Warrandyte barely two miles away from John Chivers. Both men were rather apart from the norm in those times, in that they both struck up very friendly relations with the local Wurundjeri tribe. Both even went so far as to learn the local language and culture, and their own children grew up immersed in Aboriginal culture, as indeed was happening to Tom Wills at the very same time in the Western District.

My own great grandfather, Tom Chivers, was born in 1844 and like Tom Wills, grew up with Aboriginal children as playmates. After his mother died in 1850 my great-grandfather and his older brother Willie lived virtually full time with the tribe. They learnt the culture and language, went walkabout, and ended up maintaining lifelong Aboriginal friendships. Tom passed many stories down about these childhood experiences and I grew up with these tales being recounted to me by my mother and grandfather and other relatives.

Tom eventually died in 1942 at age just on 98, when I was little more than one year old, so I do not remember him. However our lives overlapped for that one year and it gives me a sense of direct connection to him and his life. Through the stories passed down I grew aware from an early age, how inextricably Aboriginal culture was woven into the fabric of our Australian heritage.

This awareness strengthened as I got older, and as I continued to learn from my own Aboriginal friends. This really began in earnest in 1968 when I and my young family holidayed at Lake Tyers Station and I subsequently worked with the Aboriginal community in the 1970s and 80s. It was during this time that I got to know a number of Gunditjmarra people from the Western District.

From this I became aware of Tom Wills' involvement in organising the first Aboriginal cricket team that toured England in 1868. By the late 1970s I had become closely aware of the amazing fighting tradition of the Gunditjmara. In fact they are known universally as the 'Fighting Gunditjmara'.

Not only had the Gunditjmara fought an 18-year war against white settlement in the Western District, but every Victorian born Aboriginal boxing champion has been of Gunditjmara lineage. Names like Lionel Rose, Harry Hayes, Lachie Austin, Arthur Thomas, Henry Armstrong, and Graham Brooks were all Gunditjmara. Many Gunditjmara in fact served in both the first and second world wars, with Reg Saunders being the only Aboriginal ever to become a commissioned officer in the Australian Army. Add to this, the fact that many of the first Aboriginal cricket team in 1868 were Gunditjmara, and you have a proud tradition indeed.

Indigenous football in Western Victoria

I then became aware that in 1844 my great-great-grandfather's neighbour, James Dawson had moved from Warrandyte to the Western District, and again had established close relations with the local Gunditjmara and Tjapwoorong tribes. Learning the language of the Tjapwoorong had been made somewhat easier for Dawson by the fact that it was a west Kulin dialect, which was very similar to the east Kulin Woiwurung dialect, the language of the Wurundjeri.

I was so fascinated by the history and heritage of the Gunditjmara, that I decided to make a documentary film, and began doing some further research. I then became aware that James Dawson, my forbear's neighbour from Warrandyte, had written a book which documented the language and culture of both the Gunditjmara and Tjapwoorong people. This latter tribe was of course the people with whom Tom Wills had spent his early childhood.

The whole book was compelling reading for me, but what was most compelling of all was Dawson's description of 'Aboriginal Football', which he noted had traditionally been played at intertribal corroborees attended by tribes from the Western District, Wimmera, Central Highlands and Barwon areas. The following is his verbatim description:

'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, with the fur side outwards. It is filled with pounded charcoal, which gives solidity without much increase of weight, and is tied hard around with kangaroo tail 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 etc. 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 which 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 complimented on his skill. This game, which is somewhat similar to the white man's game of football, is very rough; but as the players are barefoot and naked, they do not hurt each other so much as the white people do; nor is the fact of an aborigine being a good football player considered to entitle him to assist in making laws for the tribe to which he belongs.'

Indigenous football in Central Victoria

Knowing about the Scotch College-Melbourne Grammar game of 1858, the similarity between this game and the tribal game immediately struck me. Dawson clearly referred to its similarities with the Rugby-like games he had seen played in English villages before emigrating in 1840, but the tribal game also had significant differences. The native game was more open in nature, had specific lines of individual opponents matched for height and weight, and an emphasis on kicking the ball long and high or handballing into the open. It was also without restriction on forward

movement and this made it distinctly dissimilar from the mass, mauling marauding scrum played at schools like Rugby.

But there was a further connection. I also realised that I had heard about this native game before, through my grandfather. Many of the games that Tom, my great-grand-father had played as a child had been described to me by my grandfather, including fleeting references to football, but the account that immediately rushed back into my consciousness was the detailed description of a football game played at an intertribal corroboree in 1852.

My grandfather had told me how as a seven year old, my great-grandfather, Tom Chivers, his twelve year old brother Willie, and their father John, had attended an inter-tribal corroboree at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. This had been at the invitation of the local tribe. It was a huge affair attended by tribes from the Barwon, Melbourne, Gippsland and Goulburn River areas, and proved to be the last intertribal corroboree ever held in the Melbourne area. It virtually signalled the end of tribal life around Melbourne.

The corroboree went for two weeks with all sorts of traditional games and celebrations. This included a spectacular game of native football that involved players leaping high in the air onto each other's backs in order to catch the ball. It was the same game that my great-grandfather and his Aboriginal playmates played on an almost daily basis. At seven years of age Tom was too young to have participated in this adult version, but at twelve years Willie was in fact now old enough to have done so.

My grandfather told me that the athletic displays of the footballers, both men and women, were met with much excitement and cheering from hundreds of onlooking natives, settlers, and gold miners. Their view of the events was aided by the fact that Pound Bend was a natural amphitheatre with hillsides surrounding a wide loop of the Yarra River, thus giving a grandstand view of the proceedings.

I immediately sought documentary confirmation of our family oral history of this 1852 intertribal corroboree, and found that the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas had indeed also attended it. Not only this, but Thomas' records included the following description of Marngrook.

'The men and boys joyfully assemble when this game is to be played. One makes a ball of opossum skin, or the like, of good size, somewhat elastic, but firm and strong. It is given to the foremost player or some other one of mark who is chosen to commence the game. He does not throw it as a white man might do, but drops it and at the same time kicks it with his foot, using the instep for the purpose. It is thrown high in the air, and there is a rush to secure it – such a rush as is seen commonly at football matches among our own people. The tallest men, and those who are able to spring to a great height, have the best chances in this game. Some of them will leap as high as five feet or more from the ground to catch the ball. The person who secures the ball kicks it again; and again a scramble ensues. This continues for hours, and the natives never seem to tire of the exercise.'

Here again, the similarities of the Aboriginal game with Australian Rules were even more compelling. Rather than the ball being hacked along the ground in a rolling scrum as in Rugby, the ball was constantly being kicked high into the open, and then pursued again. It was intrinsically a far more open and free flowing game. Also clearly implied was that catching the ball from a kick enabled the player to take his kick without being tackled. Most compelling of all though, was the way in which players leapt high on each other's backs to catch the ball.

Indigenous football in other states

Another account of indigenous football was given by P. Beveridge, a pioneer of the Riverina area in New South Wales, where the tribal game had been observed involving tribes right throughout

the Murray, Darling, Murrumbidgee and Lower Murray areas. In other words, Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and extending into Queensland.

'Ball playing is another game to which they are exceedingly partial. They make it much more boisterous and noisy than are the wrestling bouts, although it results in much fewer serious mishaps. The women participate in the game as well as the men. We have seen as many as two hundred –including sexes- engaged in it at one time.

The ball is composed of old opossum skins, tightly rolled up, and covered over with a fresh and strong piece of skin, nice and firmly sewn together with opossum tail sinews. Before they begin to play they arrange sides, each side having a captain, whose place it is to guide his often times unruly squad.

When all is in order, a Lyoore (a female elder) starts off with the ball in her hand. She walks a little way out from her own side, and toward that of her opponents, drops the ball with seeming carelessness, but ere it has time to reach the ground, she gives a dexterous, and by no means gentle kick, which correctly aimed, sends the ball spinning high into the air. Thereupon the fun begins in downright earnest. Such screaming, jumping and frothing at the mouth, we are certain was never seen at any other game outside the walls of Bedlam; and then again such intermingling of bronze limbs, nude and glossy; or such outré grouping was never yet beheld under any circumstances other than those attendant on an Aboriginal ball match.

They have not any goal to which the ball has to be driven, the whole of the play is merely to keep the ball in motion, and to prevent its coming to the ground; whilst the struggles of the game consist in trying which side can retain the ball longest in possession. Those holding the ball throw it from one to another, and it is during such flights that the opposing side vigorously run and jump with a view to its capture. As the eyes of the players are never by any chance bent on the ground, tumbles during a game are numerous, and in many cases indecorous enough, more especially when goes down, and so becoming a stumbling block, over which a dozen or more come tumbling in a heap. These incidents, however, add mirth to the game, without creating the least ill temper.

These games are frequently kept up from noon until dark, and even at that late hour they are given up with reluctance. The many laughable incidents which occur during these games, provide ample matter for consideration round the camp fire, besides affording abundant opportunity for boasting, to which they are addicted pretty much, old and young.'

Again, the visual impact of the game on European observers was vivid and lasting. Beveridge had in effect stated that it was the experience of a lifetime. It was such a free flowing and athletic game that was unimpeded by any type of offside rule. These similarities with modern Australian Football are simply stunning. Like Marngrook, the traditions of Australian football has been to speedily move the ball by hand or foot, to catch it spectacularly in flight, and retain possession for your side without restriction on the direction of movement.

Ozkick has been with us for thousands of years

It was also at this time that I recalled having been told by Aboriginal friends about names they used for the games of 'kick to kick' football they had played when children at the Cummeragunga, Coranderrk, Framlingham, Lake Condah and Lake Tyers Mission Stations. I was subsequently able to find pioneer accounts of these universally played games of 'Parndo' and 'Bidi'.

In Parndo, a group of children, both boys and girls, form a circle. The ball used was variously made of bound bulrush roots, a possum skin stuffed with charcoal, an inflated kangaroo bladder or a kangaroo scrotum stuffed with grass. An older child starts the game by moving into the centre and kicking the ball straight up. All the children then rush in, leaping to try and catch the ball. The

successful child is applauded and he or she then waits in the centre for the circle of children to move out again, when the ball is kicked in the air once more.

In Bidi, two groups of children form a kick's distance apart and play 'kick-to-kick' in exactly the same way it is still played today by children all over Australia. In 1857 an expedition was undertaken by Blandowski to the Mallee region of Victoria, which was by then the only remaining tribal area in the State. An engraving was subsequently made of an idyllic tribal scene observed by the expedition near present day Merbein. In it are six children in two groups, clearly playing Bidi the kick-to-kick footy, with Blandowski providing the following brief description.

'The ball is made out of Typha (bulrush) roots; it is not thrown or hit with a bat, but is kicked up in the air with the foot. Aim of the game: never let the ball hit the ground.'

The basic purpose of the children's games was therefore exactly the same as the adult game and inculcated the same basic marking and kicking skills. Ultimately, I was able to uncover pioneer references to tribal football, predating Australian football, in every Australian State and Territory. This of course does not prove a direct connection between tribal and modern Australian football, but it shows that countless settlers across Australia observed the game, and it invariably left an indelible impression.

A truly national game then as well as now

Some historians, in trying to dismiss the possibility of indigenous football having influenced Australian Rules, point to the fact that the Romans, Mayans and Chinese are all recorded as having played versions of football a couple of thousand years ago. My only response is, so what! Marngrook was truly a national game in Australia for countless thousands of years before that, and the influence of the indigenous game on our own modern code is obviously going to be far more immediate than the Romans, Mayans or Chinese ever could be. Unless of course it is just part of the Terra Nullius tradition of denying that Australian culture has been influenced in any way by our Aboriginal heritage.

Some historians have also tried to dismiss that Marngrook was a universal game, citing that it was only recorded as having been observed in Victoria at a few places like Melbourne, Warrnambool, Bairnsdale and Swan Hill. However this assertion ignores the notes and observations of many other settlers right across Victoria and in other states. It also completely ignores the fact that the game was played at intertribal corroborees where tribes from great distances apart had congregated. They were hardly likely to agree to play a game they were not closely familiar with.

The assertion has also been made that there were different forms of tribal football played, but again this is completely uninformed. The rules of tribal football were the same right across Australia, the only difference from region to region was what the ball was actually made from. Historians who claim the game was different in different regions have produced absolutely not one shred of proof to support their claim and cannot state in any way how the game differed from region to region. It is simply an assumption based on their erroneous belief that tribes were so xenophobic they never left their own areas.

The socially integrative significance of Marngrook

Whilst the tribal children's games of Parndo and Bidi encapsulated the fundamental skills of the adult football game, Marngrook could not be formally played until initiation at about age twelve. Like the children's games though, Marngrook was open to women as well as men. It was however a tool of social integration way beyond gender inclusion.

The socially integrative function of Marngrook was achieved because it reflected the universal structures embedded in Aboriginal society throughout Australia. Games were therefore not played by pitting clan against clan, tribe against tribe, or nation against nation. The game instead was

played by observing the totemic rules that governed social structure across all Aboriginal tribes in Australia. When tribes from the Melbourne and Geelong areas played it was therefore not an earlier version of Geelong Vs Melbourne.

The first thing that needs to be understood is that all tribes are divided into two halves termed as 'moieties'. These two halves are then divided again into quarters called 'skin groups' and each individual skin group has a unique paired relationship with each of the other three skin groups. These skin group pairings, or classes, are designated as either a spirit, flesh or skin relationship, with spirit representing the paternal relationship, flesh representing the maternal relationship, and skin representing the marital relationship.

These four skin groups could be further divided into totals of eight or even sixteen sub-categories of skin groups on the basis of gender or affinity, but the basic four categories were nevertheless consistent across Australia. The third section of this book will extend this discussion further and show how understanding the rules of Marngrook have allowed the skin totem system of the Kulin and other nations to be uncovered.

Some anthropologists have disputed that the skin totem system was originally a universal four class system by pointing to various anomalies in the number of skin groups and variations between tribes as being either 'male descent' or 'female descent'. This confusion arises for two reasons.

First, European ideas of linear descent, either paternal or maternal, are entirely inappropriate concepts to use in trying to understand the totemic system. As indicated, the concepts that apply are not matrilineal or patrilineal. The concepts relate to spirit and flesh and they work in unison. No tribe can therefore be adjudged as either 'male descent' or 'female descent', but only whether the spirit relationship or the flesh relationship is the basis for the first moiety division. As indicated, this will be discussed fully in the third section.

The second reason for anomalies in the skin group structures is that in the 1789 and 1828 there were pandemic outbreaks of smallpox across Australia. The two smallpox plagues killed nine out of ten in the indigenous population and caused changes to the traditional social structure in order to survive. In the Gunditjmarra tribe for instance the Tiger Snake skin group was virtually wiped out by the smallpox plague, so an anomaly was forced into the marital rules.

The near elimination of the Aboriginal population by smallpox

The utter devastation caused by the smallpox plagues is simply not recognised in our history books. Research has indicated that Australia has on average a capacity to support a hunter-gather society to an average of one person per square mile. This of course varies from an average of one person per thirty-five square miles in arid areas, to five or more people per square mile in coastal areas, but the overall average for the whole of Australia is one person per square mile. Certainly the figure of five people per square mile in coastal areas is not inconsistent with the earliest estimate by settlers of indigenous population in the Sydney area.

Given that the area of Australia is three million square miles, this means that prior to British settlement there were three million Aboriginal people living here. Whilst three million will be seen as an extraordinary estimate by some people, it is nonetheless supported by other contextual factors. If previous population estimates of about 300,000 were taken post-smallpox and were accurate, then that would mean the death rate due to smallpox was in the order of 90%.

This could well be so. Essentially, marsupial animals cannot communicate diseases to humans and therefore prior to European settlement, Australia was virtually a disease free environment. The indigenous population therefore had no resistance to European diseases and there are countless tales of people dying of the common cold, let alone smallpox. The estimate of a 90% death rate is therefore quite understandable when compared to the 50% or more European death rate from

bubonic plague and an estimated 30% European mortality rate from smallpox at the time of first settlement in Australia.

On this basis then, over two and a half million people would have died from smallpox alone. Even if the population estimate is halved to one and a half million people and the smallpox death rate taken as only 66%, this puts the loss of life at one million people. Even if a most conservative original indigenous population estimate of 300,000 people **prior** to the plague was accepted, along with a two thirds death rate, then 200,000 people died.

Whatever statistic you prefer, **it is still the greatest disaster in Australian history**, yet it rates no more than a passing mention in our history books. As well as this, the profound dislocation to indigenous society that this massive depopulation caused is scarcely appreciated by colonial anthropologists and historians, or indeed even by contemporary historians

The social dislocation following the smallpox plague

The impact of this sudden massive depopulation in indigenous society resulted in enormous social dislocation. In the coastal areas where the population was greatest and the disease spread fastest, one of the four skin groups often became virtually extinct in some tribes, as was shown with the Gunditjmarra. When this occurred the traditional marriage rules had to be amended, thus giving rise to the ‘anomalies’ frequently noted by anthropologists. In some areas the innovation of skin group sub-categories was adopted in order to tighten the marriage rules and cope with the threat of inbreeding caused by the massive depopulation.

The original situation that applied across Australia before the smallpox holocaust was therefore that of four skin groups in each tribe. Each of the four skin groups had a particular structural relationship to each of the three others. Whatever group you belonged to your father belonged to the second group, your mother belonged to the third group, and your marital partner belonged to the fourth group.

Each skin group was symbolised by a specific animal or bird totem. These moiety and skin group divisions were always in terms of four or multiples of four and this was a common feature in Aboriginal arithmetic systems. However these systems were not purely verbal. Aboriginal people often used sign language mixed with verbal symbols and when this was missed by settlers, it sometimes led to the dumbly erroneous perception that Aboriginal people could not count past four.

How Marngrook reflected social structure

As already indicated, at intertribal corroborees the tribes would merge together to play Marngrook. They would divide into the two moiety groups, commonly represented by pairings such as Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo in the Mara Nation of western Victoria, or Eagle and Crow in the Kulin Nation of the Port Phillip area.

Players would first be opposed strictly in accordance with the skin group totem to which one’s present or future marital partner belonged. The opposing skin groups of the Gunditjmarra were for instance Python Vs Pelican, and Quail Vs Tiger Snake. In the case of the Wurundjeri people, the opposing skin groups were Feathertailed Glider Vs Nankeen Kestrel and Swamp Hawk Vs Brush-Tailed Phascogale.

These opposing marital skin groups were known as ‘skin classes’ and were also colloquially referred to as ‘cousin classes’. In structural tribal terms, your opponent was therefore always a ‘tribe cousin’, but this did not necessarily mean that they were a cousin by kinship. This difference between ‘tribe cousin’ and ‘family cousin’ also gave rise to another false belief by some settlers and anthropologists that Aboriginals practiced incest because they had to marry their cousins. The problem is basically that Aboriginal people usually have some half-dozen terms for each specific

category of cousin, whether you were eldest or youngest, married or unmarried, or your totem relationship to others, but the English language only offers one undifferentiated word which cannot translate these nuances.

It is also worth noting that these opposing cousin classes also included the brothers and sisters of your actual or future marital partner. Given the special mentoring relationship that existed between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law and indeed generally to those in your cousin class, there was more than just a duty of fair play to your opponent. Any hint of spiteful or unfair play was likely to bring severe social approbation.

Also, to make sure that each individual contest in a football game was on a physically fair basis, individuals were not allowed to line up and play against just any tribe cousin. Players first had to match up against each other before the game in terms of age, height, weight, gender and skin class.

How Marngrook was played

This preparation for the game would have seemed like just aimless socialising to European observers, but it served a vital function of social cohesion within and between tribes. Before the game the players would all mingle searching out a suitable opponent. The moiety group (spirit class) to which each individual belonged would already be obvious by the red or yellow ochre face or body stripes they wore.

Personal introductions would be made to those of a similar size and gender in the identified opposite group. Each person would cite their nickname and skin group, with the object being to find someone from the same 'skin class'. That is, someone who was in Aboriginal terms 'right skin' and therefore belonged to the group they were theoretically related to by marriage. Even if someone was from a different tribe that had different skin group totems, the appropriate relationship was established simply by the person not being in the same 'flesh class'. That is, if your skin totem was a bird, your opponent would usually have to have either a reptile or marsupial as a skin totem, not a bird.

Finally, by midday the process of sorting out suitable individual opponents would be finished. One of the foremost players from each moiety would be designated by the Elders as captains and the game would begin. As these games of Marngrook were played on linear firestick farms created for kangaroos and other animals to graze, the playing field might be a couple of kilometres long by a hundred or so metres wide. Players would line up in pairs around the central area and radiating out all around. Play would begin with a 'ball-up' where an elder kicked the ball high in the air and a ruck contest would follow.

Whoever won possession would throw or kick the ball clear and it would be moved on successively by hand or foot. No spoiling or tackling was allowed and any player who took possession of the ball was allowed to dispose of it unimpeded. The object of each player was to kick the ball as high as possible in the air, and everyone has to cooperate in keeping the ball in the air. There were no forwards or backs, so the objective of opponents would be to stick together rather than lose each other, and this ensured that the ball was always kicked to a contest. The object of the game was simply to prevent the ball going to ground and to help your team to win as many contests and possessions as possible. It was essentially a non-contact sport in the manner of netball, in that any contact was incidental to the contest for the ball.

There were no goals in the indigenous game and the winning side as well as the best player, therefore had to be decided by consensus at the end of the game. At sunset, proceedings would be called to a halt by an elder and the two captains would meet, surrounded by a noisy throng. Each captain would then compliment the play of their side, along the lines:

'Black Cockatoo played a good game today.'

'White Cockatoo played a good game too.'

At this point one of two things would happen. First, one captain might agree that the other side played a really good-good game, so the matter would conclude there with considerable cheering by the winning side and congratulations by the losing side. Second, if the game had been evenly contested each captain would again compliment their side along the lines:

'Black Cockatoo played a good-good game.'

'White Cockatoo played a good-good game too.'

In the face of no agreement as to who had won, the Elder would announce that the sides would play again the next day, and this would continue each day until a winner was agreed.

Regardless of whether or not the winner was agreed on the first day, the discussion would move to who had been the best player on the day. Many compliments would be passed and many players mentioned in despatches, but ultimately the winner was agreed by who had not just the most possessions, but also the best value for possessions. That is, the player who won the most contested balls, kicked it highest and longest, took the most marks, and played fair. -Sounds familiar, doesn't it.

Does our language show a link to Marngrook?

On first uncovering pioneer accounts of tribal football, I checked the glossaries of language that both Dawson and Brough-Smyth had included in their books. It was intensely interesting to find that the Aboriginal word for catch was 'mumarkee' or when abbreviated, was similar to the English word 'Mark'.

Given Tom Wills' undisputable familiarity with Aboriginal language and culture, it is interesting that he even put the word mark in inverted commas in the original 1859 drafting of the rules. This was obviously done to signify that the word had a different meaning to any previous usage. The relevant rule stated:

*6. Any player catching the ball directly from boot may call "mark" he then has a free kick.
No players from the opposite side being allowed to come into the spot marked.*

This was exactly the same rule that applied in Marngrook. Clearly the rule similarly meant that the word 'mark' signified a catch and that this allowed the kick to be taken without further tackle. Many explanations have been offered as to why in Australian Rules we refer to a catch as a 'mark', but none of them wash. Of all the various definitions of the word 'mark' in the dictionary, none refer to catching. That meaning of the word only applies in two contexts in the world. These are in the games of Marngrook and Australian football, yet historians opine that the connection between the two games is 'unlikely'.

And perhaps mark is not the only Aboriginal word in common usage as a football term. The word 'barracking' is also one entirely peculiar to Australian football and it has caused considerable speculation as to its origins. This includes the fanciful story that the children in a Melbourne orphanage, which had been converted from an army barracks, used to make a fearful din, or that an Army team had very noisy supporters from the barracks.

On the other hand I have been told by historian Robert Pascoe that the word 'barak' is an Aboriginal word meaning 'cheering'. It is intensely interesting that on either side of this argument there is only oral history for the competing definitions of the word, but when faced with the choice, many historians again prefer see an Aboriginal origin of the word as 'unlikely'.

The contextual arguments linking the two games

Despite on the one hand decrying speculation as not being academically respectable, historians on the other hand often seem to come up with rather fanciful speculations themselves as to the origins of Australian football. For instance the view has been put that the concept of goals is a metaphor

for property ownership and that the presence of an offside rule, like in rugby and soccer, represents the extreme emphasis placed on the protection of property in Western society. The absence of an offside rule in Australian Football has therefore been theorised as representing our society's movement in the mid-nineteenth century to be more liberal, open and egalitarian.

This is surely an esoteric, blinkered and Anglocentric view of our history to say the least. As has already been indicated, Aboriginal tribal life had been quickly extinguished during the gold rush period. Those surviving the disease and dispossession were herded onto Missions where their lives were closely controlled. To say that our new code of football represented a society that was more liberal, open, and egalitarian, is simply to dismiss the Aboriginal experience as irrelevant. It seems that the doctrine of Terra Nullius is still alive and well in the minds of some historians.

But then again it is the winners who get to write history. The descendants of the winners would therefore be more likely to see mid-nineteenth century colonial society as more liberal, open and egalitarian. Certainly that's not how the descendants of the losers see that period of Australian history.

What is just as distasteful is that some historians have also sought to dismiss the possibility of an Aboriginal influence on our national game, by pointing to the fact that no Aboriginal people played it until the end of the nineteenth century. As if they were free to play it in the first place! And if they did, they might well have chosen not to identify themselves as being of Aboriginal descent. Perhaps though, this Aboriginal absence in the first fifty years of our code might strengthen rather than weaken the possible connection between the two games.

How Marngrook survived on the missions

I have been told by many Aboriginal people that after being herded on to the Missions, Marngrook continued to be played. The assumption by the Mission Governors was of course that it was Australian football and it was therefore encouraged rather than suppressed. Once goals had been added to Marngrook, the two games were virtually indistinguishable. The only exception was that the high mark continued to be a distinctive feature of the way Aboriginal people played their football, whereas in the 1860s and 1870s it was not a feature in the developing game of Australian football.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Missions began to close down and Aboriginal people were pushed back into the community under the new policy of assimilation. Only then did they have some increasing opportunity to play the new national game, although not at the highest level. It is therefore an interesting coincidence that it was only after the movement of Aboriginal people off the Missions and back into the community had begun, that the high mark began to be seen in Australian football.

At the time of the inception of our game in 1858 however, it is a matter of indisputable record that many settlers had already observed the indigenous game. Invariably they were thoroughly impressed by what they saw, so it should not be controversial to suggest that, either consciously or unconsciously, they sought to preserve these free flowing and spectacular features in our new national game.

It is also interesting to note that historians struggle to find explanations as to why Australian football spread like wildfire. However if so many settlers had already seen and admired the Aboriginal game, surely it was a preconditioning factor to this acceptance. If Marngrook had been only a regional game played by Aboriginals in Victoria, the development of the code would surely have been restricted to that State. As has been shown however, Marngrook was an Australia-wide indigenous game, and this surely was a factor in the rapid Australia-wide adoption of the new game.

In this regard, it is interesting to note how historians can ignore context. Geoffrey Blainey for instance in his book 'A Game of Our Own' (1990:78) quotes a description of a game of football in Adelaide in 1862 as follows:

'Considerable amusement was created by the antics of a number of aboriginal natives who came from a camp close by and were permitted towards evening to take part in the sport.'

Following this quote Blainey completely fails to pose any questions about it. Why did the Aboriginal people want to take part in the game? Was it in fact familiar to them? What game was it that they saw themselves as playing? What were these 'antics' that were so amusing? Was it again their skill, athleticism and affinity for the game? Was it the way they jumped on each other's backs to catch the ball?

By failing to ask any such questions, we are left to assume once more that the Aboriginal experience is inherently seen as irrelevant to our history. The failure to raise such questions invites that same patronising colonial view to be continued into the present. That is, Aboriginal people were regarded as just simple, primitive and child-like people who had no frame of reference of their own. The report from 1862 implies that all they were doing was amusingly trying to copy the superior white man's game. Recycling this 1862 quote in 1990 without trying to understand the cultural context to the Aboriginal behaviour, only invites the same assumptions.

Official football history continues to ignore context

Going on thirty years ago in 1983, I first proposed that the origins of Australian football might in part be derived from Marngrook, for the reasons I have just explained. Rather than doing an academic article I wrote an article for the popular press. It received good publicity in a number of papers and magazines and received a generally favourable public response. Of course I did also receive some criticism from academic historians for not fully citing my sources.

Not surprisingly, the publicity on Marngrook generated great interest within the Aboriginal community and many more people have since shared their personal recollections and oral history with me. However at the time, several academic historians were quite dismissive of the idea of a connection between the two games.

Twenty five years later in 2008 at the time the 150th year celebrations of the founding of Australian football, I was labouring under the misapprehension that this negative view had long since dissipated. Over this period the Australian Football League had taken enormous strides to recognise the indigenous contribution to football and had put an end to on-field racial vilification.

Racism is however not just a matter of personal racial abuse, there is also *institutional racism*, which involves us failing to question received ideas that have racial assumptions embedded in them. Even eminent historians can be seen to have fallen prey to these institutional ideas. It is in fact interesting how racist notions often seek the camouflage of empirical science. Even the ghoulish, repugnant and morally indefensible colonial practice of collecting Aboriginal skulls has been defended right up to the new millennium, with the completely bogus claim that it is 'scientific research'.

Even given these persisting views in some academic circles, it was nonetheless still dismaying to find that the official history of football published by the AFL in 2008, once again dismissed the possibility of a link with Marngrook. More dismaying though, was the erroneous nature of the reasons given for dismissing the possibility of such a connection. Once again, these reasons reflected institutionally embedded, erroneous, and implicitly racist ideas about the nature of traditional Aboriginal culture. The doctrine of Terra Nullius was once again shown to be fit and well in the 21st century and it had insidiously influenced the official AFL history.

The idea of Terra Nullius still influences thinking

Historian, Gillian Hibbins, started out by claiming in the official AFL history that the connection between Marngrook and Australian football was ‘a seductive myth’ and that the idea ‘lacks intellectual credibility’. She then stated that her ‘extensive research’ indicated that Marngrook was not played in the area in which both Tom Wills grew up west of Ararat. That claim has been shown earlier in this chapter to be palpably wrong. The Tjapwoorong language in fact had a whole glossary of football terms of which Hibbins was obviously completely ignorant.

To try and buttress her erroneous claim, Hibbins further stated in the Age newspaper on 17th May 2008 that it was ‘unlikely’ (that word again) that the Marngrook observed in the Warrnambool area would have been imported to the Tjapwoorong area to the north where Wills lived, because:

‘The Aborigines at the time the white man arrived lived within quite clearly defined tribal areas, speaking a language different from those of other tribal areas. Aboriginal tribal strangers were regarded with suspicion and did not trespass without being killed.’

This is a ludicrously uninformed claim that assumes indigenous society was primitive, disorganised, superstitious and xenophobic. Language was in reality no barrier between tribes. Intermarriage between people of different languages was commonplace and as shown in the previous section of this book, rules existed to ensure each individual’s language and culture was protected. Every single person in Aboriginal Australia was therefore multilingual.

A network of travel and trade routes also linked every single tribe across Australia. These travel routes were commonly marked by spiral marker trees, coded into songs and were maintained by annual burning off. People could travel along these routes with complete confidence and safety as long as proper courtesy and protocol was observed when passing through the tribal lands of others. Laws of trespass were essentially no different in tribal society as they are in contemporary society.

Although corroborees tend to be visualised by ordinary Australians simply as celebratory dances, they were in fact intertribal conferences that served administrative, judicial, recreational and cultural purposes. As has already been indicated, Marngrook was invariably played at all intertribal conferences throughout Australia and fulfilled a vital role in reinforcing social cohesion.

This then was the general situation, but the particular situation of the Tjapwoorong also needs to be understood. They were geographically situated at the borderlands of four cultural nations. To their east was the Kulin Nation of central Victoria and Port Phillip. To the north-west was the Wotjo Nation of the Wimmera. To the south-west was the Mara Nation of the Western District and to the north was the Jaara people of the central highlands and upper Loddon Valley. To maintain peaceful diplomatic relationships and an affinity with each of these four nations was no mean feat, and it would certainly have involved playing a lot of football.

More than this though, the sacred site of Bunjil’s Cave at Gariwerd (the Grampians) was in the northwest corner of Tjapwoorong Country and on the border of four specific tribal lands. Bunjil’s Cave attracted pilgrim Elders from all over South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria and probably even further away. Any Elders from Gunnai Country in Gippsland or Kulin Country in the Melbourne region, who were making a pilgrimage to Bunjil’s Cave, therefore had to pass through Tjapwoorong Country.

There has never been any evidence or even suggestion that such pilgrims were given nothing else but open hospitality and safe custody in crossing Tjapwoorong lands. So in reality, Hibbins’ views that Aboriginal people did not venture outside their own lands for fear of being killed, simply does not accord with the facts. Her views are just prejudicially based historical stereotypes. She has failed lamentably to question the validity of these received definitions and in doing so has continued to give currency to institutionally racist ideas.

It was therefore extremely sad the way in which the official AFL history published in 2008 decontextualised the Aboriginal influence on the origins of Australian football and how this

stripping away of Aboriginal context to our history is strikingly similar to the social attitudes at the very time the game was founded in 1858.

The measure of a civil society

These colonial attitudes invariably equated ‘civilisation’ with technological achievement, economic power and military might, rather than equating it with how civil a society actually was. That is, we should instead be measuring ‘civilisation’ by the level of civil cohesion, equality of wellbeing and environmental harmony that a society demonstrates, not on its ability to militarily and culturally subjugate others.

By these measures of civility, Aboriginal society would have to be seen as the longest lasting civilisation that the world has ever seen. Instead however, indigenous society was regarded by colonial Australia as the most primitive on Earth. Unfortunately, this attitude continued well into the twentieth century and we still see more than just vestiges of it today.

Such attitudes are long past their use-by date and should not be reflected in the official history of our national game. As we have seen however, long entrenched received ideas of European cultural superiority can still be seen today to colour the views of some eminent historians. Such views were of course far stronger back in the days of Tom Wills, so it is no wonder that he gave no indication of his familiarity with Marngrook. The fact that he did not acknowledge Marngrook should not be trumpeted as intellectually credible proof that there is no connection between it and Australian football.

It instead should be seen as part of the continuing history of ideas that has its roots in nineteenth century notions of European cultural superiority. These ideas have become so institutionally entrenched that even some respected academic historians have failed to question them. In my mind the contextual arguments in favour of Marngrook being a progenitor of Australian football are just too great to ignore. There may well be no direct documentary proof written by white people that Marngrook was a parent to our new national football code, but in contextual terms it was at least a midwife that facilitated its birth. Colden Harrison, who was himself touted earlier on in the history of the game as ‘the father of Australian Football’ famously quoted his cousin Tom Wills as having said ‘we should have a game of our own’. Perhaps the unspoken rider to this famous quote attributed to Wills should have been:

‘We should have a game of our own...more like the football blackfellas play.’

A postscript to the football history wars

Over recent decades the Australian Football League has taken laudable strides in stamping out on-field racism and supporting indigenous players. However the failure of its 2008 official history to recognise the contextual role of Marngrook in the genesis of our national game showed that the AFL still only saw racism in a limited way. As I indicated in the preceding essay there is the much more insidious and pervasive problem of *institutional racism*.

Many good-hearted and high-minded people can unwittingly express racist ideas without even knowing it, because of the nature of the received ideas that have insidiously shaped their assumptions. This leads to a very real conundrum. On the one hand most Australians are not racist and we meet and greet people as individuals in a spirit of mateship. On the other hand however we are subject to received ideas that have racist origins and we simply do not understand the history of ideas that has shaped what we might have flippantly or innocently expressed.

For instance, in mid-2013 Collingwood Football Club President Eddie McGuire found himself mired in controversy for suggesting that Swans champion Adam Goodes could help promote the musical ‘King Kong’ in Sydney. Most people, including Eddie are blissfully unaware of the history of ideas that make such references so bitterly distasteful to Aboriginal people.

Back in colonial times it was seriously debated whether Aboriginal people were fully human. It was posited that they were much more closely related to primates than Europeans, who were held to be the highest evolved form of life. I have seen 19th century postcards of Aboriginal people where the images were altered to make their teeth protrude in an ape-like manner. In 1872 Robert Brough-Smythe, the Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Board produced a monumental two volume work titled 'The Aborigines of Victoria'. In one of the appendices, he had an artist superimpose a sagittal crest onto an Aboriginal skull so that it would show a favourable comparison with the skull of a gorilla.

I have also seen 19th century welfare reports justifying the taking of Aboriginal children from their parents, saying that while the parents show immediate grief at their loss they soon forget them, like when other lower forms of life lose their offspring. Aboriginal people are not being 'precious' when they refuse to accept such dehumanising references, it is the rest of society that should understand the generations old bedrock of racism such references rest on.

Most people are for instance blissfully unaware that terms such as 'half caste', 'quarter caste', 'part aboriginal' or 'full blood' are racist because they are based in Hitlerian ideas of racial purity. In reality the basis of human identity is culture rather than race, and it is not for anyone else to prescribe another's identity on the basis of what we might perceive as their degree of racial purity. These terms are the very embodiment of racism, but are so institutionalised that we give it no thought and keep recycling these racist descriptors.

Hopefully the issue of institutional racism was amply demonstrated in the preceding discussion on how the idea of 'Terra Nullius' continues to shape erroneous perceptions amongst ordinary Australians about the nature of traditional Aboriginal society. The AFL itself clearly fell victim to institutionally racist ideas that were expressed in the reasons given for dismissing the proposition that Aboriginal football might have influenced the development of Australian football.

The nature of the public discussion that ensued after Eddie McGuire's gaffe in 2013 actually began to address the issue of institutional racism or 'implicit racism' as it was referred to. Hopefully the AFL itself will become more aware of the larger issue that racism is not just a problem of personal prejudice, it is about how embedded ideas continue to be supplied oxygen without us even being aware that the ideas are racist.

Jim Poulter, Melbourne 2015