

THE ORIGINAL AUSSIE RULES

The tribal Aboriginal football game, now known universally as Marngrook, was played all over Australia right up to the early colonial period. To my knowledge the last time it was played at an intertribal gathering, was at Pound Bend in Warrandyte in 1852. My great-grandfather Tom Chivers, his brother Willie and father John attended and watched, so I grew up hearing vague references to this game.

In my secondary school days in the 1950's, I attended Scotch College and there heard about how Tom Wills had invented Aussie Rules. Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar had played the first game in 1858, with Tom Will as the umpire, so it was a key part of the school's folklore.

It was not until the early 1980's when I learned something about Tom Will's childhood that I realised it closely mirrored that of my own great grandfather, Tom Chivers. Tom Wills was born in 1836 and grew up near Ararat. He became fluent in Tjapwoorong language, songs, dances and games.

At age 14, Tom Wills went to Rugby School in England, and became Captain of its football and cricket teams. He returned to Victoria seven years later in 1857 at age 21 and immediately established himself as the finest cricketer in the colony. He declared that if Victoria was ever to beat New South Wales at cricket, they needed to keep fit by playing football over the winter, but that it should be '*a game of our own*'.

With some others, Wills then drafted the first Australian Football rules in 1859. Historians have always jumped to the conclusion that he was inspired by having played Rugby in England. It is a fairly typical reaction that springs from the pervasive effects of the idea of '*Terra Nullius*'. In other words, there is an implicit assumption that Aboriginal culture is vacuous and incapable of influencing white society.

The reality is that when he was at Rugby School, Tom Wills inspired the playing of the game of Rugby in new ways that came directly from his experience of Marngrook, or Mingorm as it was called in Tjapwoorong. Evoking images of the high mark in Marngrook, English newspapers reported how '*Wills, to the admiration of the spectators, rose above the swarm of boys...*'

In 1983 I therefore published my proposition that Australian Rules was derived from Marngrook. Rather than writing an academic article that would only reach some elite, I instead utilised the popular press. The idea consequently gained strong support with ordinary Australians. So I was therefore quite stunned when the AFL produced an official history in 2008 that completely dismissed the connection with Marngrook as being just '*a seductive myth*'.

With some hubris, the AFL historian, Gillian Hibbins, asserted that there was no evidence that Marngrook had been played where Tom Wills grew up. She of course meant

documentation written by white men. More than this, she asserted that the game would not have been imported from elsewhere in the Western District, because tribal people *'never left their own areas for fear of being killed'*. I responded promptly to this ludicrous assertion and the exchanges became known as **'the 2008 football history war'**. However, it soon petered out to a cease-fire with the AFL continuing to support its historian.

Well, after a nine year cease-fire the war resumed in 2017. Professor Jenny Hocking of Monash University uncovered an Aboriginal eye-witness description of the game right where Tom Wills grew up. However despite the obliteration of its official history by this discovery, the AFL has been very tardy in formally acknowledging and redressing the situation. In many ways the situation the AFL refuses to face, typifies the paradox confronting the Australian public.

In recent years the AFL has done a most commendable job of denouncing on-field racism, but this tends to see racism as just a problem of poor individual attitude. In reality, Australians overwhelmingly are not personally racist. We are probably the most egalitarian society on Earth. The real problem is that we have received ideas with racist notions embedded in them, and we have not yet learned how to challenge these received ideas. This is called institutional racism and it still runs deep.

Our nation was founded on the notion of Terra Nullius, and this totally spurious, legally vapid notion proposes that Australia was a vast empty continent, that is, of course, apart from a few simple, primitive, pagan, nomadic, stone-age, hunter-gatherers. In reality, all these pejorative terms still underpin our perceptions and make it very hard to see the achievements of traditional Australian society.

If civilization is assessed on the degree of civil cohesion, and an absence of poverty, hunger, pestilence and war, then traditional Australian society was the greatest civilization the world has ever seen. And this is part of our fabulous heritage as Australians.

Wouldn't it be good if the AFL took less of a tokenistic approach and actively embraced the Aboriginal origins of Aussie Rules football? This could perhaps also involve organising demonstration games of Marngrook during its Indigenous Round each year. Or am I Dreaming?