

THE AUSTRALIAN

AFL's native roots a 'seductive myth'

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LONG-HELD romantic notions - inspired by the sublime skills of modern-day indigenous players - that Australian rules football is directly linked to an ancient ball game played by Aborigines has been debunked in a new official history of the game.

There is no evidence, according to *The Australian Game of Football Since 1858*, that Marngrook (a Gunditjmara word meaning "game ball"), which was played by local Aborigines and observed by early European settlers, influenced the rules of the new code.

This is despite a view held by some historians and football enthusiasts that William Hammersley, James Thompson, Tom Wills and Tom Smith - the original members of the 1859 Melbourne Rules committee - found inspiration in the game Aborigines played with a ball made of possum skin.

Wills, in particular, is often sentimentally described as a hero who connected Melbourne's young men with the blackfellas' game. A gifted sportsman, Wills's childhood was spent on a remote property in northwest Victoria, where he played with Aboriginal children from a nearby tribe.

This theory gained further credence after the publication of writer and journalist Martin Flanagan's *The Call* in 1998, which focuses on Wills, his empathy for indigenous people, and his contribution to the national code.

The Australian Game of Football, published this month, describes the indigenous link to Australian rules as a "seductive myth".

Produced by the AFL to mark the 150th anniversary of Australian rules, it includes an essay by Melbourne historian Gillian Hibbins, which examines the Wills- Marngrook connection.

"Understandably, the appealing idea that Australian football is a truly Australian native game recognising the indigenous people, rather than deriving solely from a colonial dependence upon the British background, has been uncritically embraced and accepted in some places," Hibbins writes. "Sadly, this emotional belief lacks any intellectual credibility."

This week, Hibbins told *The Weekend Australian* that while many football fans - herself included - would like to believe there was a direct link to indigenous culture, her research proved otherwise.

"It's absolutely highly unlikely," she said.

The argument that Wills was inspired by Marngrook is based on three assertions. The first is that Aborigines played near his childhood home at the northern end of the Grampians mountain range.

Hibbins's extensive research in the area revealed no signs the game was played by the local indigenous community, although there were definite sightings in Port Fairy, about 150km south of the Wills family's Lexington station, as well as around the Melbourne region.

Could the Port Fairy community have transported their ball game north? Unlikely, said Hibbins. "Some Aborigines were playing a form of foot-and-ball, but they were living in different tribes, speaking different languages and dialects. One tribe would hesitate before going into another tribe's territory."

The second assertion - that Wills observed and possibly played the game as a child - is therefore also improbable.

Finally, it has been suggested that Aboriginal football included jumping for the possum-skin ball - an early version of the high mark. As Hibbins points out, high marking is generally considered to be a later

development of the 1870s.

The 71-year-old grandmother and respected sports history scholar has relied on primary evidence such as letters, newspaper reports and official records to support her research. She suspects Wills was influenced more by the ball games he learned during his time at the Rugby School in England than by any practice he allegedly observed among Aboriginal communities.

Hibbins, who knows Flanagan and admires his writing, acknowledged football's connection with indigenous Australians was powerful and compelling.

"Because Martin's a good writer and is well promoted, a lot of people read the book and have taken up the idea that Tom was influenced by Aboriginal children," she said.

Hibbins added that the drama of Wills's own story had added to footy folklore. An outstanding young cricketer who played for Victoria in the 1850s and 1860s, Wills was keen to develop a winter sport.

His life ended tragically in 1880 when, aged 44 and an alcoholic, he stabbed himself three times with a pair of scissors.

What is undeniable is the game's capacity to enthrall people of all races.

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