

The Lost Gasometer

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Geoffrey Blainey

A GAME OF OUR OWN:

THE ORIGINS OF AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL

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AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL HAS LOST its magic, a unique quality existing in the 1950s, and even as late as the 1970s. It derived from the fixed positions that players adopted and from their physical diversity. In their competing forms, they became metaphysical constructs — good versus evil, beauty versus ugliness, benign innocence versus malevolent experience — constructs limited only by the human imagination. Football, then, was more intrinsically theatrical — a physical and metaphorical war — and, in that sense, magical. In the late 1960s and 1970s players needed little ingenuity to acquire nicknames such as ‘Bull’ Richardson, ‘Whale’ Roberts and ‘Gasometer’ Nolan. How the modern game cries out for a player resembling a gas tank.

Geoffrey Blainey rarely comments on the state of the modern game in his accomplished *A Game of Our Own*, but still manages to provide today’s football enthusiast with a rich perspective on contemporary football, as well as an abundance of insights into the way the game developed.

Blainey’s history — sponsored by the Australian Football Council — was first published in hardback in 1990, a book of some 100 pages, with copious photographs and illustrations. The Council had set Blainey the task of investigating the origins of the game and testing the validity of the widespread belief that Australian football was an offspring of Gaelic football. With its publication, the Gaelic theory was effectively demolished. This new version is more compact. The delightful illustrations that accompanied the first edition are mostly still there, informative and atmospheric, though some, necessarily smaller, are a little unclear. The addition of two new chapters has broadened the history by approximately twenty years, taking it from 1858 to 1900 — a nice rounding off.

Blainey’s method is to concentrate on the development of ‘the rules and the style of play’ through a scrutiny of old newspapers, diaries, notebooks, journals and the periodic publication of rules. The evidence, as Blainey acknowledges, is often ‘scanty’, so the words ‘perhaps’ and ‘probably’ recur, although they serve more to remind us of his scholarly approach than to cast doubt on his conclusions. His main

argument is that Australian Rules was not an offspring of Gaelic football, nor a result of past borrowings from Aborigines, but ‘essentially an Australian invention’. The timing of these early games was critical in shaping the game: ‘It arose in the 1850s when various types of English football were still in a state of flux and, at the beginning, it borrowed extensively from these games and especially rugby ... almost at once it was a distinctive game.’

Blainey’s sense of this distinctiveness is combined with the compromises made by adherents to rugby and soccer styles, with the enthusiasm of football-loving colonials, with climate and the availability of parklands in Melbourne to create the main factors that shaped this ‘distinctive’ code. Prompted by comments in newspapers about the state of the grounds in 1858, Blainey shrewdly asks whether the game began in a ‘relatively wet or dry season’. This leads him to statistics for Victorian monthly rainfall from 1840 to 1910 and to a plausible early influence on the style of play: ‘the inaugural football season had the lowest rainfall of any April–August period during the first quarter of the century of the keeping of records.’ Thus, Blainey asserts that the relative hardness of the ground caused much of the roughness, such as tripping — an ‘essential feature of rugby’ — to be removed. His history benefits considerably from this scholarly thoroughness.

We read more of the quintessential Blainey here: the iconoclast in his revisionist downplaying of the significance of Tom Wills’s famous letter suggesting football as a winter pastime; the flair for the striking contrast in ‘Collingwood is as old as the oldest of the senior Italian soccer clubs’; the disarmingly plain prose and rigorous argumentative style — the master craftsman rather than the literary artist — in his debunking of the Gaelic theory.

Moreover, Blainey has cleverly integrated the game with the broader social, economic and even

political changes that were taking place in Victoria from 1850 to 1900. The early rules, or even their absence, were a reflection, in part, of the complacent assumptions of a hegemonic, gentlemanly class which began the game. The transition from craft to factory production methods is linked to the resilience and shape of the ball and, ultimately, to the growth of the game itself: ‘once the process ceased to be the work of the butcher and cobbler and became the task of the skilled craftsman in a small factory a more uniform product was possible.’ As football was variously perceived as a mollifier of class tensions, a training ground for national defence, a determiner of ‘character and morality’, Wills’s call for the formation of a football club is placed in the context of social anxieties brought about partly by the Crimean War (1853–56) and the Indian Mutiny (1857–59). Indeed, the telling contextualisation of the game elevates it as a subject worthy of serious academic study.



The Melbourne First Twenty playing
(*The Illustrated Australian News* ca 1877)

Furthermore, the title of Blainey's book was part of advice, supposedly, given to Henry Harrison by Tom Wills, urging him to 'work out a game of our own'. The origins of the game are thus linked to national assertiveness. The Australian game, then, might be seen as an early manifestation of our cultural nationalism. The student of popular culture might benefit as well from considering Blainey's explanation for our reluctance to adopt the sending-off rule.

The main criticism of the work concerns the question as to whether Australian Rules, while not an 'offspring' of Gaelic football, is more plausibly an offspring of rugby. After all, Blainey refers many times to football's extensive debt to rugby. Might other historians, less nationalistic or less enamoured of Australian rules, infer that rugby 'gave birth' to football? It just depends on one's point of view. It is interesting that Wills, a critical figure in the development of the game, should have argued, as late as 1865, some seven years after the inaugural football match, for the introduction of a rugby crossbar; a motion that was defeated by a 'slender majority'.

Furthermore, it is strange that Blainey mentions only the philosophy of the Rugby School described in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), while ignoring the fascinating details devoted to the style of play at that school around the 1830s. Moreover, the reader would be surprised to read that 'punts' and 'dropkicks' on the move were features of football at Rugby School in the 1830s, as was the ball 'caught beautifully'; surprised, too, by our borrowing of many terms as well,

such as 'bulldogs', 'out of bounds', 'marking the kick'. Even oranges were brought out at half-time. Moreover, as a drop kick was described in the novel, with some exaggeration, as travelling seventy yards, this suggests that they were playing with an oval ball. Curious, too, that Blainey provides two sets of rules for Gaelic football — a code that had no influence on the Australian game — whilst failing to include any for rugby, a game from which we had borrowed 'extensively'. Blainey informs us that 'football at Rugby began to take on its distinctive form in 1823'; unfortunately, the reader is not told quite enough about the nature of this distinction.

Still, for the football enthusiast, *A Game of Our Own* will provide intriguing insights into the way the various rules and styles of play evolved. It had not occurred to me, for example, that the simple rule that one must bounce the ball every ten metres was designed to stop players running the full length of the field with the football. Curious, then, that the Australian game should try to limit a feature that in rugby codes is seen as the pinnacle of delight. And this reflection precisely illustrates how stimulating this book will be to football followers — even, it seems, to the disillusioned. It is ironic, too, that a book about football can remind the reader of the merits of a scholarly method.

Despite Blainey's qualification that some of his conclusions will be provisional, one feels that 'most of the salient events and changes' have been 'pieced together' and that this history is now a definitive work on the subject.