

# Footscray, Identity and Football History

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on the problem of identity as confronted in writing a history of the Footscray Football Club. Club stalwarts assume that the written club history will mirror their own personal identity with the club. Clearly, no written history can satisfactorily capture this personal sense of identity with a club's fortunes. Nor ought that be the driving force in the construction of the history. Histories are equally required to define the empirical character of the club; especially in statistical form. The statistics are intended to present a chronological, as against narrative, record. They rarely are capable of doing so.

Sometimes histories are supposed to reflect the mutuality of identity between player and spectator. This is especially significant in the history of Footscray, given the popular success of the Footscray Fightback. Defining significance and actors in such a way as to accommodate subsequent history often overrides underlying class characteristics of a popular event like Fightback. Mass action is detached from its roots in the political economy of football and reshaped by the ongoing politics of the club.

Histories are expected to promote the club as a successful institution. If measured conventionally, Footscray has been an entirely unsuccessful football organisation. Footscray has disappeared from the League with a level of failure surpassed by only University and the Brisbane Bears. A history that seeks to identify success at the Western Oval must concentrate on the club's survival against the odds. Yet that is not enough to satisfy those who want the club to be seen as the equal of the giants of the League. Finally, a history is supposed to extend 'tradition' into the future. With the Footscray Football Club now identified as the Western Bulldogs, the sense of tradition emerging from the club history does little to sustain a new corporate identity. Unfortunately I have to conclude that, if Footscray is in any way typical, football club history has almost nothing to do with football club identities in the 1990s.

Doug Hawkins introduced his autobiography with this claim: 'everything in it is true and it all happened' (Hawkins, 1991, p. ix). Few historians are brave enough to stake the same claims for truth, especially historians of football clubs. Anyone foolhardy enough to tackle the history of Doug's club, Footscray, soon realises that, while many around the club claim special insight into its 'true story', one person's truth is another's falsehood. For Footscray is transforming itself into the Western Bulldogs and this contemporary transition colours almost all reflections on the club's past.

Histories directed towards public rather than academic audiences, and which tell the story of voluntary associations or corporate entities, will always face incompatible demands for the exact truth (Davison, 1991, p. 7). And, since football clubs like Footscray were once voluntary associations and are now almost completely corporatised, readers of Footscray's history will inevitably bring a sense of nostalgic ownership to their reading. Others will insist that the story of past glories be told in a manner consistent with contemporary visions for the Western Bulldogs. Football club supporters do expect that a written history must demonstrate consistency with their own recollections of the club's past, so that anyone writing, and hoping to sell, a club history, is obliged to meet those expectations. At the same time, research into the history of community institutions such as football clubs, will almost certainly uncover events lost to memory, moments which many connected to the club would prefer not to see revived. 'People who live in communities with secrets know that history matters...they care enough about history to fear it' wrote Robert Weyeneth, of his research into the submerged and violent past of Centralia, Washington (Weyeneth, 1994, p. 63). The secrets of the football community are a little less dangerous than the violence which Weyeneth exposed. Nonetheless, football-club history will almost always dredge up unsettling secrets.

These difficulties, among many others, were encountered by the writers of the recently-published history of the Footscray Football Club (Lack *et al*, 1996). The history was almost constructed by its readers, so many were the demands placed on authors and so great were the distances in approach between the authors and the publication's managers. The eventual written history no doubt falls short of telling the true story of Footscray and thus satisfying those in key reading positions around the club. Its real relevance may well be to those in the Footscray community seeking to shape a new local identity, rather than to anyone actively identifying with the Western Bulldogs. This paper reflects on the process of history-writing, using the history of the Footscray Football Club as an example. It identifies those figures occupying key positions in reading the history and suggests some of the failings and some of the significances in this form of public history-writing. the history of a football club.

### **Stalwarts, Statisticians and Communards**

The Footscray Football Club, largely because its suburban connections have endured longer than those of other clubs in the Australian Football League, brings some distinct demands to the club history. It may be my imagination, but club stalwarts seem to have a lot more to say in Footscray than in other clubs. The club's statistical record seems to be more zealously guarded. And of course, Footscray shares, with Hawthorn and Melbourne, a body of supporters who successfully fought off a club merger. Readers of the club history will often be

drawn from one of these three categories, the club stalwart, the guardian of club statistics and the rebel or communitard who fought against a club merger. All will find grounds for disagreement with the published club history.

The first typical reader who may fail to identify with this book is the club stalwart. All football clubs, especially those like Footscray which have maintained a strongly local management structure, will have their stalwarts. Often an ex-player who did not quite make it all the way to a permanent position in the seniors, the stalwart stays around the club, occupying frequently menial positions. Just as he didn't make it to the senior side, he never manages to ensconce himself on the match committee or as coterie president. Nonetheless, the stalwart pictures himself as central to the club's successes. He constructs history from personal experience, or perhaps personal ambition, outwards. The club history is read from his era of centrality backwards to failure prior to his prominence, and forwards to subsequent victory, so that, eschewing both chronology and the explanatory devices of the author, he sees any success of the club as unproblematically dependent on his own work. The history of the club is really a backdrop to a personal sense of identity. As a consequence, the historian fails the stalwart by placing his personal actions within broader circumstance.

The written history can never satisfy that personal identity by which the club is the creature of one individual. At the same time, the history does present the balance of forces on committees and the circumstances which prevented club officials from making the ideal decision at crucial turning points in the club's history. As such it may well serve as vindication for those condemned by popular opinion as failed administrators, the men who 'let the club down'. By rescuing reputations, or at least setting out the background to unpopular decisions, the written history widens the ranks of stalwarts and will give belated satisfaction to men and women whose contributions to Footscray have been too readily dismissed in the recent past. Even the men reviled for their support of a merger in 1989 may be more fairly recognised, once the problems which they inherited are set out in an historical pattern.

At a distance from the stalwart and normally even less powerful in many football clubs, is the statistician, the institutional positivist. The statistician is the self-styled custodian of the past and thus of a club's identity. To the statistician, history is a pure and myopic empiricism. Any historical identity can be expressed in names, dates and scores, an all-encompassing numerical catalogue which can directly convey past experience. The statistician does not want narrative, loathing the historian's technique of selecting and emphasising some statistics at the expense of others and in so doing abandoning any quest for completeness. So the custodial statistician employs dates, names, scores and injuries in an anti-narrative. The 'stats' are presented in strict chronological order, be they scores, ankle injuries, games won or matches attended. The standard historiographical

technique of linking these events, by, for example, drawing a connection between games lost and injuries, or attendances and games won, is detested. A numerical chronology rather than a narrative tells the true story and needs no interlocuting from the historian. The statistician identifies with the minutiae of the past, reducing any complex, qualitative narrative to names and numbers.

A listing of names and dates form the standard appendices of any institutional history. Such lists seem to assume greater importance in sports history and a vast army of supporters of clubs in almost any sport have these numbers at the ready. In contrast, a cautious historian must treat numbers, names and dates as problematic. Their significance is questioned. As the one who has all the facts at his or her fingertips, the statistician has a special identity, someone supporters and officials can turn to for the final answer. A written history which jettisons some statistics and questions the significance of others, destabilises the identity of the positivist as custodian. No doubt the triumph of the positivist will come on the day that hard copy-text is replaced by the club's electronic site. All statistics, however pointless, can then be stored and displayed with no attempt at linkage or interpretation. Until then the written text must leave the statistician unsatisfied, for any text, and especially an historical text, queries the worth of statistics and can be counterposed in its selectivity to the compendium approach, standard in the historical statistics of football clubs.

Distinctive amongst the supporters of the Footscray Football Club are a third group, the communards:- those who joined in the Fightback campaign of 1989 and who successfully staved off their club's merger with Fitzroy. Their story has already been told in *Too Tough to Die*, by Kerrie Gordon and Alan Dalton (1990). John Lack referred to their history as 'properly one-eyed' (Lack, 1991, 403). Now that the club has altered its identity without a merger, it is probably time to review the Fightback in less partial manner. Unfortunately there remain significant aspects of these events, which never, despite the endeavours of the club's historians, appeared in the final written history of the club. For Fightback, in the years leading up to the end of the Footscray Football Club and the birth of the Western Bulldogs, remained an extraordinarily potent symbol. To the historian, the significance of Fightback lies not so much in any explanation of its success, the task carried out admirably by Gordon and Dalton, but in questions raised about Fightback's interpretation and ownership after 1989.

This struggle to own the event extended to the manner in which it was retold in club history. Difficult questions were raised in planning the book, only to be cast aside as somehow improper. These included: which political movements in the western suburbs sought to own the Fightback? Which groups around the club assumed that Fightback's success gave them rights of decision-making and positions of authority? Which individuals have been forgotten in the various retellings of the events? Fightback furthermore had its echoes in factional

competition within the western suburbs' branches of the Australian Labor Party, in embryonic leadership tensions within the Victorian Labor government and in more localised political campaigns, for example, when social worker, Les Twentyman, already identified with the club through his work in Fightback and in the Care for Kids program, ran as an Independent in Victorian state elections. For Fightback had far broader implications than the survival of a football club itself. The state funeral accorded by a Liberal government in Victoria to Footscray hero, Ted Whitten, and queries within state Liberal circles about loan arrangements between the club and the Footscray City Council, were all part of the politics unleashed by Fightback; politics unresolved in debates surrounding the writing of the history of the club.

The Footscray communards who took part in the 1989 Fightback remain justifiably proud of their efforts in saving, at least for a time, the distinctive identity of the Footscray Football Club. Yet no sooner had the club been saved than their success was absorbed by other, more structured political forces. These processes were not explored in the club history, Readers with any understanding of the contemporary political and social networks of the western suburbs will no doubt question that absence and must assume that the historians stopped short of asking hard questions about one of the most significant events in the history of the club (Lack *et al*, 1996, 248-265).

### **Foot-Soldiers, Stars and the Bribe**

Many readers of the Footscray history will have vivid recollections of the Fightback campaign. And all club histories will be read by stalwarts and empiricists. However the majority of readers will identify with the club simply as supporters. Whatever their working and personal lives beyond the football club, on weekends, each shares an identity as a loyal supporter of the Footscray Football Club. Written history can easily fail this third critical reader:- the foot-soldier/supporter. Experiencing redefinition in contemporary sports writing as a 'fan', the foot soldier clings to that more powerful identity of supporter and knows that the club would collapse without his or her continuing support.

Having watched game after game, season after season, and in the case of Footscray, experienced the few moments of triumph in the club's League history, the foot soldiers seek to relive past glories. For them, history is supposed to cement that mutuality of identity between spectator and player. No written text can do justice to such an imagined identity, for it was almost certainly never experienced in an identical fashion by both player and supporter. And in the case of the Footscray Football Club there were three critical moments which demonstrated the absence of any mutuality between player and supporter and which thus preclude the expectation of a shared identity expressed through the pages of a written history.

In the great days of the club, when Footscray won a string of Association premierships, Vernon Banbury had thrilled supporters. 'There are few footballing dodges of which he is not a master', reported the Footscray *Advertiser* (Footscray *Advertiser*, 29 August 1914). At the same time, Footscray officials knew Banbury as a man with problems. He was one of five players sacked after Footscray lost the 1914 Grand Final (a match in which it was claimed, more money changed hands than in any other VFA game) (Lack *et al*, 1996, 71). When he again played for Footscray in 1919 his drinking problems were so great that he had to be locked up on a Friday, so that he could appear sober on Saturday afternoons. After the 1922 VFA Grand Final between Footscray and Port Melbourne, Banbury was disqualified for life on suspicion of bribing Port players (Lack *et al*, 1996, 71). The hero vanished into a tragic off-field decline. Vernon Banbury's marriage fell apart, he drifted from job to job in country pubs, was only reunited with his son on his deathbed and was buried in Preston cemetery, in an unmarked grave. The pathos of Banbury's life suggests something of the difficulties which players face when supporters demand consistent heroics. Yet for supporters looking back on the champion, Banbury's sad decline means little. They want the on-field star. Their true story pictures an heroic Vernon, running rings around opponents and leading Footscray through a glorious reign as the dominant club in the VFA.

Not wanting reminders of a champion's humanity, supporters are doubly anxious about the portrayal of Footscray's transition from VFA to VFL in 1925. Understood as a recognition of the club's great achievements and of industrial Footscray's pre-eminence amongst Melbourne suburbs, the club's ascension was tainted from the first. Footscray's post-war dominance of VFA opponents had derived in large part from the aggressive recruiting of George Sayer. Sayer had been born in Eaglehawk, near Bendigo in central Victoria. He came to work in Footscray in 1902 and had risen from cart driver to owner of Boon-Spa soft drinks and cordials, eventually transforming his Geelong Road factory (near to the Western Oval) into a showpiece of industrial modernism (Butler, 1989, vol 4, 66). Sayer's rise in the soft-drink business followed his climb through the ranks of football club officialdom. In 1922 he bought the Buckingham Hotel, from where he conducted, and with surprising consistency, won, his Footscray (Little Tattss) Lottery (Collins, 1995, tape; Roberts, 1995, 188-189). George Sayer transformed the neighbouring Footscray Football Club as well, taking players from Collingwood like Con McCarthy, before being charged by the Association with bribing Port Melbourne players to 'play stiff' in the 1922 Grand Final against Footscray.

Footscray's elevation to the 'charmed circles' of the VFL was thought to hinge on victory in these Grand Finals and ultimately, on their success in the Champions of Victoria match between Footscray, VFA Premiers, and Essendon,

VFL Premiers, in 1925. The Inter-Premiers Match was sponsored by the *Sun* newspaper and promoted by Dame Nellie Melba as a fundraiser for the Limbless Soldiers Fund (*Evening Sun*, 2 October 1924). Again Footscray won and again questions were raised about bribery. Sayer's name was once more mentioned. More than a decade later the Essendon captain in that game, Tom Fitzmaurice, called the game a 'frame up'. Charlie Hardie, another Essendon player, described the match as that 'charity fiasco' (*Sporting Globe*, 3 June 1935). Even a Footscray champion like Jack Collins had heard from his father, an Essendon player, that Essendon had been paid to drop the match (Collins, 1995). Partly on the strength of that victory, Footscray were accepted into the League, however the VFL refused to fully ratify Footscray's entry until Dr Kevin McCarthy replaced Sayer as president. Sayer was appointed vice-president in 1928 and was again forced to resign. Eventually the League agreed that he could hold office in 1929 (*Footscray Advertiser*, 7 December 1929).

Criticism of Sayer by League officials from other clubs, and lingering doubts about Footscray's VFA victories and Champion of Victoria tag, still unsettle a few supporters. Others remain unhappy about the fiasco which dampened celebration of the one completely glorious moment in the club's history, Footscray's victory in the 1954 VFL Grand Final.

All Footscray supporters remain proud of the great triumph of 1954. More interesting in an historical sense than the victory, is the disaster which followed. Footscray players were booked to go to a city pub for a celebratory dinner after the match. The generous publican evidently forgot about the arrangement and Ted Whitten, one of the stars of the 1954 side, recalled that the team set off from the MCG to the pub, only to find that no preparations were made for them and that they had to sit on the carpet in the corridor to the lounge, or else they stood near the fireplace, juggling bowls of soup and sliced bread (Molnar, McConville & Magee, 1993, taped interview Ted Whitten). The players then set off for the Footscray Town Hall for what they expected would be a lavish civic reception, announced for nine o'clock that Saturday evening. By seven o'clock the streets around the Footscray Town Hall were already filled with a near-hysterical crowd.

Two hours later and the whole event had degenerated into farce. The Council's sound system died and the City abandoned their great gala, leaving the crowd to surge towards the Western Oval. A *Sporting Globe* journalist had promised the week before the Grand Final that, if the Bulldogs won, people had only to turn up with a beer glass and 'the grog would flow' at the Western Oval. So thousands milled around with empty glasses waiting for the non-existent supply of beer. Crowds pulled down gates and stormed through onto the ground. Their heroes retreated to the caretaker's house. By ten o'clock all the lights were off inside the Western Oval and players and supporters drifted home (see the description by John Lack in Lack *et al*, 1996, 187-190).

Instead of a summer of triumph, the Grand Final victory ushered in months of recriminations between club, players, supporters and Council. The club secretary suffered a nervous breakdown and the president's health declined. Only ten players made it to the end-of-season trip and no photograph of the team was ever taken. By the opening of the 1955 season, that mutual identity of player and supporter had been fundamentally destroyed. The club never fully recovered from the disaster.

The non-celebration of 1954 makes an important counterpoint to the Grand Final victory. It reveals, for the historian, more than the victory itself. For the long-time supporter it raises awkward questions about the loyalties which supposedly existed between player and supporter. At three key stages in the club's history: the triumphant years of the VFA, the entry into the VFL, and in the club's only League Premiership celebrations, events are recounted which do not fit well with expectations of a glorious tradition preserved in print. Again the role of the written history becomes ambivalent. Whatever was the true story of Sayer's part in player payments, or the truth about bribery allegations against Banbury, or the blame for the fiasco of 1951 and the decline which followed, the written history will inevitably expose a story unwanted by many loyal supporters.

### **The Locality and the Vision Thing**

Finally and more problematically, there are those football administrators who would happily class themselves as men and women with a vision for the future. For many the latest marketing survey provides a far more sound guide to action than a detailed club history. As teams are shaped by corporate management practices and as the term 'club' itself becomes anachronistic, there are some sophisticated football managers who do comprehend the significance of the suburban pasts of their teams. On the one hand, they can respond to public interest in club history by publishing, usually with the aid of a public relations officer, a hastily-written historical survey. In attempting to shape the past in this way, so that it conforms with contemporary 'vision', clubs will more than likely narrow, rather than widen, support. On the other hand, and perhaps in clubs which feel quite secure in reviewing triumphs of the past, a more thorough and critical history can be, but rarely is, produced. For football clubs, like other corporations, too often see history as a device to win support for unrealised 'vision', rather than, as club history might be read, a review providing unique insight into the recurrent management difficulties of a large business.

Football clubs often seek to bolster a brand loyalty by reminding supporters of 'tradition', vaguely considered as some inheritance from the past. Tradition is not history, although a successful tradition depends on historical authenticity. In an era of failing mergers and complex relocations, an historically-aware administrator might reassure supporters by reminding them that Melbourne

football clubs usually began life through an amalgamation of street or factory teams and that changing home grounds (admittedly within suburban boundaries) has happened at several stages in the history of most league clubs. Besieged administrators, on the boards of the Melbourne and Hawthorn clubs in 1996 might also have taken solace from club histories. Every club has its cycle of on-field failure, attack on the club administrators and great promise from reform groups, followed almost inevitably by, yet again, on-field failure.

At Footscray, any manufacturing of a glorious tradition becomes quickly transparent. For Footscray's league history is overwhelmingly a story of failure. It has proved far more difficult for the club to shape an authentic and glorious tradition than has been the case at Collingwood or Carlton. Perhaps the most meritorious aspect of Footscray's history is that, despite the many catastrophes of the past, the club has survived. In this circumstance, a club administrator might adroitly use authentic aspects of the club's history, emphasising sacrifices made and, still to be made, in ensuring survival. A tradition constructed around the notion of survival might help overcome resistance to ground and name changes.

In changing the name of the Footscray Football Club and in playing games at Princes Park, the Bulldogs are responding to rapid transitions in suburban identity. The Footscray and District Hospital has recently reidentified itself as Western General. The City of Footscray no longer exists and its former wards now make up the major part of a new City of Maribyrnong. Even the Footscray Institute of Technology, once a strong supporter of the Footscray Football Club, and indeed a club sponsor after Fightback, has now been absorbed into a broader entity, the Victoria University of Technology. In a globalising world, local identities are changing.

Not so long ago football clubs were significant, if not central, institutions in maintaining a localised identity. In the virtual arena of televised sport, such suburbanism counts for little. Soon AFL teams will have only the most residua ties to suburban, as distinct from metropolitan, place. The unplaced identities of club mascots, Magpies, or Kangaroos will count for more than the locales, Collingwood and North Melbourne, to which they were once subordinated.

As football clubs lose their localised identities, people in distinct localities go on creating a new sense of place, perhaps hastened by global communications (Featherstone, 1993, 167-170). Central to these renewed local identities remains a collective public awareness of history. Featherstone argued, for example, that 'a sense of home is sustained by collective memory, which itself depends upon ritual performance, bodily practices and commemorative ceremonies' (Featherstone, 1993, 177). The football club was once central to ritual performances, physical activity and public ceremonies in industrial Footscray. It is no longer. Nor can a club playing in a national league in the 1990s hope to have any great role in local ritual and commemoration. Although Port Adelaide,

Geelong and Fremantle may prove exceptions, it is difficult to see how AFL teams, now aspiring to metropolitan identity, can ever replicate the intensity of that local sense of place fundamental to the old VFL. Instead they must compete with other codes and non-sporting events to claim a cyclical recognition in metropolitan identity

Doug Hawkins concluded his Footscray story in hope: 'Above all my biggest wish is a personal one... I hope that someday in the future my daughter, and further on my grandchildren and their children can watch the Bulldogs play football at the Western Oval as the Footscray Football Club' (Hawkins, 1991, 224). Many who read the history of the Footscray Football Club will have shared Doug's wish and will know that it must remain unfulfilled. In that light, what will they make of the club's history? No doubt the illustrations and the statistics of the book will keep some identity with place alive. The text may be read as a source of reflection on the nature of the club and identity with it. More likely, readers will feel that the history is somehow incomplete. For while the authors have sought to be truthful, the history is not, after all, the true story. Insofar as the authors were able to tell a truthful story, we may have produced a useful story. Although, professional academic audiences will probably have little use for the story, even if historians are coming to reject the deterministic theorems on which much social history has relied (Stedman Jones, 1996, 20-24). And the history may have little use in the new team, the Western Bulldogs, for professional football is moving rapidly away from suburban roots.

Globalisation not only took league football away from Footscray. It also destroyed local industry and broke down an enclosed suburban culture. I suspect that the club history may appear most useful, and truthful, to those former football supporters whose identity now stems from wider cultural networks, rather than from the narrow arena of the Western Oval. In the face of the massive transitions wrought by globalism, a history text may, in some small way, aid in the construction of a new sense of place

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