

REVIEW ESSAYS

FOOTBALL IS MORE THAN A GAME: COMMENTS ON SOME RECENT HISTORIES OF VICTORIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE CLUBS

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Col Hutchinson, *Cats' Tales: The Geelong Football Club 1897-1983*. The Geelong Advertiser, Geelong, 1984, Illus., pp.336. \$12.99 (club members), \$14.99 (non-members). Available from the Geelong Advertiser, P.O. Box 91, Geelong, 3220.

Mile Maplestone, *Flying High: The History of the Essendon Football Club*. Essendon Football Club, Essendon, 1983. Illus., pp.329. \$14.95.

Mike Sutherland, Rod Nicolson and Stewart Murrehy, *The First One Hundred Seasons: Fitzroy Football Club 1883-1983*. Fitzroy Football Club, St Kilda, 1983. Illus., pp.204. \$14.95.

Every club in the VFL has had a special relationship with the community it represents, but club historians tend to ignore this. Geelong, as the only League club outside metropolitan Melbourne, might provide a unique example of how the performances of a football team can personify the attitudes of local residents. Hutchinson, unfortunately, never touches upon the legend of Sleepy Hollow. Essendon, which played at Flemington Hill during the first four years of Association football and thereafter at the East Melbourne Cricket Ground, only shifted its home matches into the town it represented in 1922. The outlook of Essendon's local politicians and supporters was necessarily different from that of any other League club, therefore, and warrants investigation. Maplestone provides information on where the Bombers originally played (McCracken's paddock), but the barest of details on the 1881 move away and the 1922 return (which dispossessed VFA side, Essendon Town). His book contains nothing between or since on Essendon's community of supporters. Fitzroy was an inner industrial suburb whose residents had special needs to be satisfied and aspirations to be attained through a football club. Sutherland et.al. look at the role these factors played in the foundation and early years of the Fitzroy Football Club, but they emerge infrequently in later

years. By the time Fitzroy's football team left the Brunswick Street oval the authors limited discussion to the legalities of the matter rather than effects on community or supporters. The book asserts that the move from Princes Park to the Junction Oval was possible since the Fitzroy club 'was an incorporated body' (137), and therefore the club's commitment to Princes Park in 1967 could not bind its committee or members two years later! Surely, this raises more questions than it answers as Fitzroy currently contemplates yet another move, this time to Victoria Park.

The Geelong book is a statistician's dream, and no wonder since its author has been the club's chief statistician since 1976. The three largest sections of the book consist of: season by season highlights (largely verbatim from the Geelong Advertiser); a listing of the players in, and results of, every Geelong League match to 1983; and about 100 words on each of 256 Geelong players out of 831. The latter is actually the most informative part of the book, although a listing of rule changes is also helpful. The highlights of the Geelong history are the brief chapter on the club's six premierships, half of which resulted from Collingwood defeats, and the many photographs and Wells' cartoons. Scads of other statistics are scattered throughout the book, including all brother and father-son combinations at Geelong, but no attempt is made to write the history of the club. Despite interviewing 300 Geelong players and officials over the years, *Hutchinson* has merely compiled a chronicle of events.

The Essendon book is more sophisticated. In the first half, *Maplestone* describes events at the club year by year. The balance consists of statistics, listing year by year all players, games, and scores. Like *Hutchinson*, *Maplestone* provides all other imaginable statistics, such as goalkickers, captains, best and fairest, etc. One interesting feature is a set of five composite best sides for each twenty year period in Essendon's history.

Maplestone ignores the development of the game, the League, and everything else extraneous to parochial concentration on the Essendon Football Club. He deliberately eschews controversy and club politics, although he does deal with two events in the early years which demonstrated Essendon's defiance of the rules. The

Webb case in 1892 provided evidence of Essendon's illegal player payments. Though Maplestone correctly admits that professionalism was rife he does not fully explore such practices in which Essendon was certainly in the forefront. In the Thurgood incident of 1902, Essendon flouted the League's suspension of their star by playing him under the unimaginative alias, 'Goodthur', for two matches. Nothing more damaging to the integrity of the club is cited, and allegations of bribery in the 1924 charity match against VFA premiers, Footscray, are glossed over. Similarly, coaching controversies in 1939, 1960 and 1967 are barely touched on, and one would never know from this book that Essendon made a habit of poaching players, especially from North Melbourne, prior to the anti-trafficking agreement of 1923.

Although Maplestone has provided an entertaining account, it is suitable only for club consumption. He has written a typical club history in a vacuum, somewhat reminiscent of Percy Taylor's chronicle of Collingwood matches from 1892 to 1948, albeit with more style. Unfortunately, photographs are limited to the twelve premierships sides (the most recent one excluded, of course), three Brownlow Medalists, and two other champions.

The Fitzroy book is the best club history produced to date. Although not as thorough as Maplestone in citing every incident in the club's history, Sutherland *et.al.* attempt to integrate the development of football, a consciousness of community, and events outside football within the framework of one club's history. The book contains a number of splendid photographs, some in colour, and condenses the club's significant statistics to twenty pages by not laboriously listing every match Fitzroy ever played. Even a smattering of membership figures and revenues are presented.

Club politics come within the scope of the book, and the upheaval of 1911 is examined extensively. Not surprisingly, however, controversies up to world War II are scrutinised whereas those since are taboo. The best investigative reporting in a club history concerns the enticement of, and illegal payments to, Haydn Bunton. Sutherland utilised League records particularly well in this episode. The book also incorporates the memories of players and officials in an eminently readable and informative manner.

The Fitzroy history is certainly the most probing of the club histories, but even this book tends to rely on newspaper accounts too much, which allows errors to creep into the narrative.

Because one umpire, albeit a noted one (Jack Elder), claimed that the decade preceding the first world war was a golden age for football, Sutherland, et.al. accepted and projected the concept uncritically. In reality those years were tarnished silver. Player loyalty had ebbed, and culminated in the revolts which forced the League to legitimise payments in 1911. Violence on the field was at its height, typified by the 1910 grand final between Carlton and Collingwood, which Elder umpired! That match was labelled by contemporaries as the most disgraceful ever and resulted in suspensions of up to a season and a half. Attempts to curb the violence in the game had prompted the League to allow boundary umpires to report players (1908), and then goal umpires too (1910); finally stewards were introduced from 1912 to 1918. Allegations of bribery were more rampant between 1908 and 1911 than ever before, and there were several League investigations into the problem. Moreover, attendances stagnated until the introduction of the Saturday half-holiday, and not until 1913 did they accelerate.

The authors of the Fitzroy history admit that the club 'had worked closely with the Britannia Football Club 'during its own early years' (11), implying the mid-1880s. As the historian of the Collingwood Football Club, I found this particularly interesting because Britannia was the nominal precursor of Collingwood. Fitzroy had been even closer to Britannia than the Fitzroy authors might have been aware, and still in 1890 were a patron of the club and actively recruited its players. Collingwood's first two captains, Delahunty and McPherson, had graduated from Britannia to Fitzroy in 1889-90, but returned to their own suburb when the Magpies were created. Nonetheless, when Britannia disbanded in 1892, only a handful of its current players joined the Collingwood Football Club, whereas Britannia's secretary and many of its players joined Fitzroy or the Fitzroy juniors.

Though the Fitzroy history makes a valiant effort, none of the three books show that football is more than a game. It is a way of life that permeates Victorian society and affects the destinies of those involved in it, whether as players, supporters, or

officials, The social, economic and political forces that shaped each individual club remain largely uninvestigated. Perhaps the new history of the Collingwood Football Club, currently being written, will fill the void.