

Richard Stremski, *Kill for Collingwood*. Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1986. Appendices, illus., index. pp.339. \$29.95 hardcover; \$16.95 paper.

Kill for Collingwood ends on a note of hope. Richard Stremski looks ahead to the 1986 football season as the year in which the Collingwood Football Club might call a halt to back-stabbing and blood-letting and get on with the job of winning a Victorian Football League Grand Final for the first time since 1958. Some hope. No sooner had the self-styled 'CLUB' launched the book than out came the cutlery again. Mortally wounded this time were president Randal McDonald, manager Peter Bahen and coach Bob Rose. A one-time press magnate, a former manager of ballet dancers and the most revered of the famous Rose family together joined the heap of cast-off Magpies. A lot of killing went on in the opening rounds of the 1986 football season, but very little of it was for Collingwood.

Had he been at all interested in working class recreations, Karl Marx may well have joined the worshippers at the Magpie shrine. For around Victoria Park 'all facts and personages of great importance...occur... the first time as tragedy' - only to be endlessly repeated in black-and-white farce. Football followers no longer see a tragedy in the Magpies' modern history. Now the Collingwood fiascos seem comic. In the latest farce, *The Fall of the New Magpies*, there are constant calls for Stremski to come forward - and play the oracle - raising a sordid tale of swollen pride into majestic tragedy.

And apart from the present crisis, Stremski's history of 'THE CLUB' points to a majestic tale. His book might not appeal to the Marxist or to the theorist of popular culture, but as the history of one great Australian institution, the Collingwood Football Club, it does trace changes in football both on and off the oval. Stremski makes certain that all of the Collingwood triumphs get due notice. Most magnificent of all was Collingwood's run of four premierships (1927-30). Famous Collingwood champions are remembered, from each of distinct football eras. So we read about Jock McHale, the 'king of coaches', Albert Collier 'who may well have been the toughest player in football's toughest era' or about the Pannam dynasty, a family represented in Collingwood teams for more than 50 years. Off the field Stremski has tracked down the club's

beginnings on the despised Collingwood Flat. He stresses the role of local businessmen in forming the team and supporting it through early crises. As well he exposes the seamy internal wranglings of the mighty 'CLUB' pointing to officials who embezzled funds and players who bargained for extra cash before they would pull on the famous guernsey. The relations with Collingwood City Council have been carefully exposed. Robert 'Sugar' Roberts, the larrikin Mayor of Collingwood, becomes a key figure in the Magpies' fight for control of their ground. The internal politics of the immediate post-war years have been reconstructed carefully and Stremski is able to show how the creation of a Social Club altered the nature of club politics setting the scene for present strife. The modern era figures highly in the book with a stab-by-stab retelling of the battles of the 1970s and 1980s. Out of all this, famous Magpies both players and officials emerge with a lot of mud on the black-and- white.

In some ways this is a book which deliberately debunks the cherished traditions of 'THE CLUB'. Collingwood was never a team of local boys. Long before modern nation-wide recruiting the Magpie team included many players who had not grown up in Collingwood. Collingwood, according to Stremski, has never been a club dominated by Catholics, despite the role played by the Wrens and the Galballys. And what of the most valued of Magpie Myths - Collingwood as the working-class club giving stick to the silver-tails of Essendon, Carlton and Melbourne? Stremski demonstrates quite clearly that the club has always been rather bourgeois. True many of its professional and entrepreneurial leaders looked back to childhood in the working class. But a place on the Collingwood committee meant a stamp of approval for their rise up through the social ranks rather than a chance to defeat the blue-bloods from across the Yarra. So this is a history which may offend the one-eyed Collingwood supporter. And it no doubt might leave more radical historians feeling badly done by as well.

But then this is not really as debunking as all that. Beneath the exposes and the smashing of myths, *Kill for Collingwood*, footnotes apart, is your traditional club history. The club is supreme. Club champions have clay feet, but they remain champions. The future will be glorious, present disasters notwithstanding. Club

failures can be put down to all sorts of unkind gods. It is not because of Collingwood's weakness that premierships slip from the Magpies' grasp. A blind boundary umpire, wild kicks from packs, exotic injuries and the occasional traitorous scapegoat all conspire to pull the great Magpies down. The book offers all sorts of reasons for Collingwood failures and it manages to paint other League clubs as a bunch of ingrates. Collingwood, it seems, helped both Richmond and Carlton in their early struggles to survive in League ranks. These lesser entities only repaid Collingwood with 'treachery' - in Richmond's case by stealing the great Dan Minogue after the First World War. Carlton it seems always tried to beat the Magpies by brutality even though munificent Collingwood had sponsored the Blues through their lean years, handing out free passes to games and always making sure that Collingwood captains did the right thing and visited the Carlton rooms after the game. How could the rest of the football world hate the marvellous Magpies?

From within Victoria Park the answer rings out - the rest are jealous. We are the 'CLUB' and they are the also-rans. We are football. Kill for Collingwood is written from within this tradition. Not only that but the book appears to reflect the myth's modern variants. The recent back-stabbing has been reconstructed stab by stab. Certainly Stremski notes the embezzlers and traitors of the pre-war club. But the book reveals his unfamiliarity with the game which existed before the 1970s. So, the flick pass becomes a two handed throw - when the art of the flick pass was to hit the ball with the open palm - and perhaps make it into a throw in the process. Stremski claims that the Magpies invented the stab pass and tells of Condon and his team-mates passing the ball over the heads of hapless opponents in 1902. But the stab kick, as anyone who has seen one or attempted to kick one knows, was a kick with a low trajectory, never passing over shoulder height. Again Stremski has Collingwood bringing the punt into football and so rebutting claims for the inventive genius of Jack Dyer. But Captain Blood supposedly invented the drop-punt, a different weapon altogether. Stremski has pulled several skeletons from the Collingwood cupboards but he writes without any perspective on the Magpie Myth. This is an insider's history. The wealth of detail only merits analysis from the point of view of someone committed to the truth as understood

in Victoria Park.

Stremski not only fails to question the self-image of Collingwood. He also makes only occasional reference to the world outside Victoria Park. True, he begins by making some remarks about the football club and the community of Collingwood beyond the football oval. Yet the more the book proceeds, the more the outer world disappears. The club and the businessmen who control it along with the players are the real focus. We get little sense of the part which football has played in the lives of the Collingwood working class. The focus is fixed firmly on the grandstand and the committee room. The fans in the outer have all but disappeared.

In *Kill for Collingwood* we have a useful account of the internal politics of a football club. We can read of the club's glorious deeds on the field. We get some sense of how this particular club became 'THE CLUB'. At least we get the Collingwood version of this ascension. Here and there popular myths are called into question. But ultimately Collingwood and its traditions are never challenged in a thorough manner. Missing from this history are the Collingwood boot workers on whom all the Magpie legends were founded. Missing is any critical analysis of these legends. It is one thing to show that Collingwood has never been a Catholic club. It is a much more challenging task to analyse the whole mystique of Victoria Park and its champions. This is a history for those who live inside the 'CLUB' and who never pause to question the broader conditions within which it prospered. Again this is a history which is shaped around the immediate past. The wealth of detail about the battles of the 1970s and 1980s, though fascinating, crowd out some of the themes central to the club of the pre-war era. *Kill for Collingwood* is a history of the football business. The fans and their understanding of the game have all but disappeared. One reading of Collingwood's history would stress, as this book does, the parts played by Randal McDonald, Robert Roberts or Ern Clarke. An alternative account might begin with the view from the outer. There the Collingwood champions arise from the late afternoon mud. Through the smokey haze they fight back while men in dropping hats roar and women in black and white rain jackets scream. As the crowd rattles the fence the Magpies fight on. Certainly this book is full of champions, but they are watched from the stands. Some

day, a football history must recapture the game and its emotive appeal - the game as it was before salary caps, New Magpies and marketing managers. Stremski has failed to revive that unique quality. But no doubt this book will satisfy many thousands of long-suffering Magpie followers. Richard Stremski will have done more for them than any Collingwood coach, player or official for nearly three decades. Who could ask for anything more?

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*[Editor's note: for a ripost by the author
see Barrackers' Corner]*