

Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own : The Origins of Australian Football*, (Melbourne: Information Australia, 1990), pp. 111. \$29.95.

Geoffrey Blainey's ability to choose an engaging title and his flair for superb presentation are at their best in this book. The title's longest word has four letters, so in simple terms he conveys a clear message with warmth and a sense of belonging. This is indeed the story of our Australian game - the only one which is truly Australian. Furthermore there is a pleasing balance between narrative and illustrations which are aesthetic and arranged to give a sense of movement which flows from left to right in harmony with our reading practice. The use of sepia provides the feel of history, the text is easy to read, footnotes are kept to a minimum acknowledgements are placed where they should be, at the end of the text, and the quality of the paper is superb.

The narrative is confined to about 100 pages and so hundreds of general readers, who delight in relating to the game, will have this book on hand for quick and easy reference to prove a point, settle an argument, or simply to air their knowledge. A book with the imprimatur of Blainey will surely be seen as authoritative, reliable, and the last word on the origins of Australian football. Therein lies the strength and weaknesses of this fine book.

The book will certainly put to rest the arguments that our code originated other than from the games of football played at the various English public schools. At last the theories, based on hunches and intuition, that Australian football was copied from an Aboriginal game, or started on the gold fields, or was based on Irish football, can now be dismissed and scholarship concentrated on the main thrust of developments after 1858-59 when the small group of Melbourne gentlemen devised a code which suited local conditions and took what was thought to be the best features of the English school games. How

it developed from there is, at times, based on conjecture and Blainey's interpretation, together with Hibbins' and Mancini's *Running with the Ball* are the best available sources for further study and debate.

Other than occasional errors in the text, the weaknesses in the book include an overemphasis on the game as played at Rugby school, a lack of precision as to what is meant by 'Rugby' throughout the narrative, a failure to deal with the development of uniforms, which is accentuated by having illustrations which are 20-30 years later than the narrative in which they are placed, and some confusion about the 'off-side rule' which came into Rugby and Soccer after Australian Rules was well under way.

One important point which has escaped notice is the fact that for about ten years after 1885 (following the fire which destroyed the reversible stand - see pp. 56-57) the M.C.C. and the M.F.C. established the Melbourne Football Ground in the Friendly Societies' Gardens. Hence the caption to the fine panoramic view of Jolimont and Yarra Park on p.8 needs to be amended accordingly. The V.F.A. appeared to use that ground not only for Melbourne home matches but also for special occasions. However, when the Yarra River was 'straightened' in the mid 1890s the new course ran through the oval and the grandstand. After that, the M.F.C. transferred its headquarters to the M.C.G. where it has remained.

Overall this is a fine addition to the literature on Australian Rules Football and must now take its place beside such works as *Up Where Cazaly*, *Kill for Collingwood* and *Running with the Ball*. Hopefully it will not be long before librarians are compiling bibliographies of such literature.

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