

**Martin Flanagan**, *Southern Sky, Western Oval*. **McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1994, illus. pp. xiv + 191. \$14.95.**

If this is not the best book written on Australian football it would take some beating. It is not necessarily the best history but it casts its net wider.

Martin Flanagan is well known as an *Age* journalist and a wonderful collection of his journalism (including many marvellous sporting pieces) was published as *One of the Crowd* in 1990. Flanagan, however, is also a law graduate from the University of Tasmania, a novelist, and a poet, and he brings these diverse skills to play in providing a spiritual feel to his story of the Footscray Football Club (FFC).

The 'Scrays haven't had much to brag about in their years in the VFL/AFL—one premiership way back in 1954—but as Wray Vamplew has commented, 'losers are more interesting than winners'. Flanagan certainly uses this very lack of success to discuss Footscray under the battler tag.

For the 1930s the voice of Bernie Leunig (father of the cartoonist) conveys the mood of the working-man's club. Many of the players worked at Angliss' meatworks but when there was a strike and strike-breakers were brought in from outside 'not one local bloke scabbed on his mates'.

Writing of two decades later Flanagan stated that 'the sweetness of the '54 premiership can only be imagined'. Charlie Sutton coached that side and his words 'Forget about yourself, play for your guernsey and your supporters', can easily sound banal if they were not so heart felt. Flanagan's language is unadorned. The supporters follow the club because the players are 'ours'. It is this spirit which keeps the club alive and the 1989 Fightback for survival is treated almost like a second coming with

the 'Sons of the Scray' supported by (among others) Vietnamese stall holders in the Footscray market.

The basic structure of the book is built around the progress of the club throughout the 1993 season and in this respect there is some similarity to John Powers' *The Coach* (1978), on North Melbourne under Ron Barassi, but more to Hunter Davies' *The Glory Game* (1972), on Tottenham Hotspur. Like Davies' book it is a fascinating study of a club at work, although seen through the eyes of the key figures—coach, president, captain, players—as well as supporters.

Flanagan addresses a wide range of issues—racism, professionalism, commercialism, community and so on—by setting FFC not only in the context of suburban loyalty but the wider world football now embraces. The FFC is distinctive but not unique and one of my favourite stories is the quote from 'Butch' Gale, a former stalwart of similarly embattled Fitzroy, who sums up the football world we have lost. To him, playing football as a young man 'meant being a god in your street'.

Local history, social history, sports history are all here but while this is an insider's book it is objective. Flanagan has a special skill of listening to his informants and relaying their feelings. His observations concerning the transformation of Australian football are acute and passionate, and should be heeded by everyone who claims to care about its present.

Take a paragraph like the following, near the end of the book. On reading it I was deeply moved.

On the other side of Punt Road, surrounded by its great light towers, was the MCG. The great stadium was empty. It needed people; we all did. Directly opposite was the Punt Road oval, former home of Richmond Football Club, another grand old Melbourne institution which refused to die. I'd gone to Footscray to learn about the game. I had ... I'd learned about the character of teams and the demands of the game, but as much as anything, I had learned about clubs ... The clubs are the hub of the game and, from what I could see, they were irreplaceable. Australian football is a product of the nineteenth century. The modern world is too transient, too individual, to create new clubs, great clubs, clubs that will live for one hundred years. And thus with every game

that ceases to exist in the country or the city, the game is diminished (pp. 182-3).

This surely is literature!

Bernard Whimpress  
Flinders University