

# *A Thought Provoking History for 'Non-Specialists'!*

Rob Hess  
Department Of Human Movement,  
Recreation and Performance  
Victoria University

It is important to note that this slim volume forms part of the 'Australian Retrospectives' series published by Oxford University Press. As David Walker explains in the series Foreword, the aim was to 'examine formative issues in our national history in a style accessible to non-specialists', with major questions to be addressed in a 'brisk and intelligently speculative manner'. With this brief in mind, Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew have written a thought-provoking book which deals thematically with a number of important issues in the history of Australian sport. The bulk of the text is devoted to familiar topics such as the sports industry, politics, women, minorities and elite sports performance. More speculative and original perspectives are contained in the first chapter, 'Sporting Belief, Historical Record', and the final section, 'State of Play'.

The attractive feature of this book is clearly the succinct manner in which the authors draw together major issues, controversies and arguments related to sport throughout Australian history. This thematic approach obviously works best for chapters with a broad focus, such as 'Political Football' and 'Sporting Women', while the penultimate chapter on problems in sport also allows the authors to examine issues in a lively and eclectic manner. Another strength of the text is the way in which statistics are unobtrusively and cleverly used to either question or support various arguments concerning the role and function of sport and leisure in Australian society. For example, the methodology and empirical data used by Marion Stell to support her analysis of women and sport is exposed as inadequate by the authors, and their call for more 'statistically informed historical studies' is appropriate and timely given increased public scrutiny of sport.

The major theme of the book, and the issue likely to cause most discussion, is the rebuttal by the authors of the so-called 'obsession

thesis', that is, the prevailing notion that Australians have a distinctive obsession with sport. As they explain, this obsession is part myth and part reality, since the origins and development of sport in Australia can be shown to be both derivative and imitative. Even the perception that Australians are unique in their strong desire to watch sport is questioned, and the authors' call for more international comparative studies to counterbalance the often tiresome rhetoric of journalists and others is well justified. However, the fact that much of this debate has been previously stimulated by the publication of Richard Cashman's *Paradise of Sport* (OUP, Melbourne, 1995), and by Adair's lengthy critique of the book (and particularly the basis for the title) in *Sporting Traditions* (Nov. 1995) needs to be acknowledged. Indeed, Cashman's book is the springboard for many of the ideas expressed by Adair and Vamplew, a fact reflected in the endnotes, which rely heavily on Cashman's material. One third of the 31 notes in Chapter 3, for instance, relate specifically to *Paradise of Sport*, while Cashman is referred to by name in the text more than any other author or historian. The brevity of the book is therefore both its strength and its weakness, as Cashman's more substantive work offers a depth of analysis which cannot be matched by the condensed thematic overview provided by *Sport in Australian History*. In this sense, the general appeal of the book to established sports historians will be somewhat limited. However, as a compact introduction for the specified target audience of 'non-specialists', the style of writing and the arguments put forward by Adair and Vamplew serve their purpose well.

To conclude, more pedantic scholars will perhaps be dissatisfied with the lack of a substantive and alphabetically arranged bibliography, and the occasional typographical error in the endnotes, while the casual tone of some phrases in the text (for example 'goodness knows' and 'duck into the men's loos') may annoy some readers. On a more parochial note, and a note of some significance given the arguments espoused in the book, it is both surprising and disappointing that the crucial role of Tom Wills and Henry Harrison in the 'invention' of an indigenous football code receives no specific mention. Despite oversights of this nature, the book as a whole represents a useful addition to the field of sports history, but in terms of the new audience it intelligently targets rather than the information it presents.