

**Russell H T Stephens**, *The Road to Kardinia: The Story of the Geelong Football Club* **Playright Publications, Sydney, 1996. pp. 317.**

Anyone who has spent any time in Geelong, particularly during a relatively successful September, will understand the significance of football for the local population. A successful September can mean only one thing in Geelong: the Cats have won a final or two. When the grand final is included in that success, that September (and in some cases, October) enters the register of special times for Geelong.

History is also important to the residents of Geelong. The city is served by the excellent Geelong Historical Records Centre which, on my visits there, has always been buzzing with activity. Geelong also boasts one of the longest-serving local newspapers in Australia. The *Geelong Advertiser* has operated continuously since 1840. Throughout this century, it has given weight to history by including reminiscences, historical features, and biographies of past heroes and characters of the town. Often

football and history were combined, the past playing an important role in the identity of the football club and, hence, the community.

It is quite surprising, then, that the first genuine and comprehensive history of the Geelong Football Club, *The Road to Kardinia*, by Russell Stephens, should take until now to appear. Although Colin Hutchinson's *Cat's Tales* (1984) includes a collection of newspaper reports, provides a record of successes and failures, and gives a list of outstanding players and their biographical details, it does not constitute a comprehensive history. Other brief outlines have appeared from time to time and informative longer brochures have sometimes been made possible by sponsors' funds.

In *The Road to Kardinia*, Stephens faced an enormous task. He had to research a period of 137 years and present it in a way which was detailed enough and yet did not dwell on the mundane. Somehow he has managed to achieve this.

The book contains a mountain of information about the Geelong Football Club (GFC), and as such, acts as something of a reference book. (An appendix containing where Geelong finished in the competition each season would assist in this regard.) But he has attempted to do more than this. Stephens places the history of the GFC within the broader history of Geelong giving weight to the argument, both implicitly and explicitly, that the GFC has had a significant effect on the community. At times he places it into the context of Australian history. Although some of his writing is a little awkward, and the link is somewhat forced, the attempt is genuine.

Stephens also tries to show the importance of focusing on people and has included biographical details both within the general text and in the many 'boxes' throughout the book. These 'boxes' stand alone as essays in themselves, some very detailed, which give the reader further insight into a player (1500 words on T W Wills), an administrator, a sponsor, or a family (the Rankins, the McShanes). The book is very well-presented. The text is assisted by the collection of outstanding photographs which are liberally included through the pages.

The work is a club history. It makes use of a light, chatty style which seems appropriate considering the popular character of 'the target audience. It tells the story of the club from its beginning in 1859 to the present day in a celebratory tone which will satisfy the true Geelong fan, a species itself, by reliving the glories and wallowing in the misery, but

confirming once and for all that Geelong has always had a brilliant side which has failed to play to its potential. It will satisfy others as well.

In some ways, *The Road to Kardinia*, needs to be read by the academic historian as an enormous primary source document. Stephens, with the assistance of the history committee at the GFC of which he is part, has uncovered much useful information, from a variety of written and oral sources. While the presentation of it is largely narrative, Stephens occasionally makes comment. However, the quality of some of that material begs further analysis from those interested in the role of a sports club in the community. His evidence, for example, hints at the importance of place, family and history to the people of Geelong, but he does not address such topics directly. He is adamant, however, in stating that the GFC has been central to the life of Geelong.

Indeed, the work is crying out for a decent conclusion. Perhaps, also, it could have been edited more effectively, particularly in the latter stages where long accounts of recent seasons seem to labour. However, it would be an oversight not to have this book on the sports history shelves of the library. After all there are some terrific photos of that 'man', G Ablett.

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