

**Martin Flanagan, *The Call*. Allen & Unwin, 1998. pp. 181. \$16.95**

With the lid having slammed shut on the AFL's centenary celebrations in 1996 it is no coincidence that a number of significant publications on Tom Wills have appeared in the last 12 months. Thomas Wentworth Wills was born in 1835 and suicided in 1880. He was the dominant cricketer of his day, captaining the upstart colony of Victoria to victories over the older NSW. Although Wills was one of the instigators of Australian football, it was the imperial game of cricket that was his centre stage. An elusive and restless man, his life was defined by the playing field and this provides a perfect drama to critically examine the life of a fallen sporting hero.

*The Call* is an historical imagining into the life of Wills. One of the technical difficulties is how to wed the disparate morsels known about Wills into a meaningful whole. To do this, Flanagan takes us through a collage of actual and fictitious snapshots pasted together with evocative

essays of people, images and aromas of the time. It is not orchestrated in strict chronological order. He sketches a life based on newspaper reports, family documents and his breadth of reading of the time period. Wills is introduced as the 14 year old adolescent dispatched around the world to attend the Rugby school in 1850. On his return to Melbourne in his expansive Zingari cricket costume, every bit the strutting male peacock with sexual colours on display, both magnificent and vaguely threatening, he warps the cricket space-time grid with his transcendent sporting gifts. Even when not directly quoting documents, the text is informed by and commonly utilizes the same words used by Wills and his contemporaries. Although the reader is cautioned that the quoted material has been in cases forged and shaped to the authors' desired inclinations, many indeed are iceberg chunks of verbatim material. These are selected to highlight and fashion caricatures and to blend with Flanagan's writing style. For example, the large slab of imported material from the 1858-9 *Victorian Cricketers Guide* illustrates this. Written by JB Thompson, a man not totally unlike Wills in disposition, he also was an instigator of Australian football and a significant contributor to cricket. Thompson's prose is urgent, abrasive, heroic and almost indistinguishable from Flanagan's own writing.

This story traverses different time zones. From the past, to the present, and into a nether region of spirits and passerbys. Snatches of fact are elaborated with evocative images and fantasies to create a Wills mythology. Its self-revelatory words inform us as much about the author as the intended subject. At times Flanagan and Wills fuse into a single being and speak as one. Or at least it is ambiguous as to whose viewpoint is being expressed. Flanagan draws parallels with his own life in a personal voyage as he reflects on Wills and their shared human frailties. Once dispensed with, this hybrid divides like a cell in mitosis. The author emerges in the here and now reflecting on contemporary life while Tom Wills is teleported back to the nineteenth century. One gains the impression that Flanagan uses this opportunity to reflect and cry out on issues, not just sporting, that inspire and aggravate him about contemporary Australian life.

Of the numerous defining threads that run through Wills' life, Flanagan skews it towards his connections with indigenous Australians. Tom Wills coached the black Australian team that toured England in 1868. His father was also slaughtered by aborigines in 1861 while on trek in

Queensland. Tom, also on this trek at the bidding of his father, was fortunately away from the campsite at the time of the attack. The novel could equally have been written from other directions such as the role of alcohol in his life and that of colonial sport. It is however this link with aboriginal Australia that is the life force of the book. The timing of a Wills mythology could not be more exquisite as this country struggles with an awareness of its colonial and aboriginal past, while a Prime Minister stumbles over innocuous verbal offerings. Flanagan indeed makes it clear Wills was probably unaware of the broader cultural and social issues surrounding the aboriginal cricketers. He was someone who at best seemed to have only periodic flirtations with how his manner and behaviour impacted upon others. Certainly he was not beyond blacking his face and playing cricket in fund raisers for local clubs.

By the late 1870s his health declined, his drinking increased and his sporting prowess was no longer the celebrated dreams of the spectator. In May 1880, while withdrawing from an alcoholic state, he collapsed into delirium tremens with its chaos of delusions and hallucinations. In response to these taunting, menacing apparitions he suicided by stabbing himself in the heart. If one is looking for a balanced analysis of the factors that led to the suicide of Tom Wills this is not the book to read. *The Call* pursues its own free wheeling trajectory in a boisterous long distance run. This is not an academic history. But then this is not the intention. The book is also not a comprehensive history of his life (eg. the last decade of his life is little touched upon). It is rather an assemblage of key episodes in a life informed by accurate and detailed historical research. It is possible, therefore that those not familiar with the story in detail might skid past some of the vignettes without appreciation of the research. As the story climaxes in the last chapter, the author reaches deep into the readers gullet and with a visceral tug at what moves us, Flanagan reveals himself in homage to Wills and in a crusade for the reader to share in the inspiration of the Wills legacy.

Gregory de Moore,  
School of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance  
Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne.