

## Book and Film Reviews

**Les Perrin, *Cullin-La-Ringo: The Triumph and Tragedy of Tommy Wills*.  
PO Box 1269, Stafford, Q. 4053, 1998, pp. 166, \$20.00.**

Tom Wills was a dominant sporting personality of nineteenth century Australian sport. He was one of the seminal figures in the evolution of Australian Rules football and a dynamic creative force in Victorian cricket. This is the second book on the life of Tom Wills recently published. The first, *The Call* by Martin Flanagan, was reviewed in the last issue of *Sporting Traditions*. Both Perrin and Flanagan are presented with the same core difficulty. How to piece together the disparate crumbs that are known about the life of Wills. How does one assemble the, at times, motley collection of facts, half-truths and mythology into something that resembles a story? Flanagan takes the historical novel approach. This allows the author to carefully research certain areas, then throw away the cane and embark on creative invention sympathetic with the documented evidence. It means that crevices can be papered over without attempting to provide a more thorough analysis. The chief difficulty in this approach then becomes one of artistic expression rather than of comprehensive historical accuracy. Perrin on the other hand takes a more traditional biographical approach. Creative invention cannot rescue him when the gaps start appearing. His task is a significantly more demanding one than Flanagan's. More demanding in its vulnerability to critical appraisal of historical accuracy and to how well it explains the various forces in Tom Wills' life.

Perrin follows a chronological approach highlighting key points. The book starts with an analysis of the family's background and Tom's early days at Rugby school. On return to Melbourne in 1856 his immediate influence on Victorian cricket and the birth of Australian Rules football are outlined. The book's heart and soul though, are chapters 5 through 12, which concentrate on the period of Tom Wills' life where he joins his father, Horatio, on his ambitious trek to Cullinlaringo in central Queensland. The unfolding events informed by family documentation trace a story that is hard to resist and climaxes in the killing of most of Horatio's party in conflict with local aborigines. The book is clearly at its strongest in this section. After his father's death, we follow him as he returns to cricket and football, his several months of coaching of the Aboriginal XI subsequently taken to England by Charles Lawrence in 1868 and then his demise through suicide. Finally there is an attempt to

assess Tom Wills' contribution to Australian sport.

There are several weaknesses in this portrayal. Despite a bibliography, there is no detailed referencing or index that does not allow for easy cross checking of accuracy. This problem is highlighted by the use of some secondary sources, which perpetuate several factual errors. Perrin importantly adds a number of previously unpublished references. However his writing style rests heavily on extensive quotations. While the advantage in quotations is that of laying before the reader the bare minimum for judgement, the text at times suffers from insufficient analysis. For example, his description of Tom's prickly multi-layered character is simplistic. Wills also had a testy social and playing relationship with the English gentleman cricketer WJ Hammersley. The latter played for the Melbourne Cricket Club and was later an acerbic commentator on matters sporting. To just say that he was close friend of Wills does not convey the complexity of shared English and Australian experiences and the developing strains between the two.

In reality the morsels to be found on Wills are often so frustratingly few that Perrin probably felt that all facts should be recorded. This does lead to strained connections between such facts but I am sympathetic towards the author's difficulties. *The Triumph and Tragedy of Tommy Wills* is a useful addition to the ongoing study of this man though as an academic analysis it falls short. Perhaps, because of the lack of historical detail, another way of analysis is via a thematic approach. In this approach the great influences of his life such as alcohol use, family and his English schooling would be pieced together to provide a context into which the sometimes scant facts on Wills' life could be embedded to provide a focus for study.

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