

**Terry Keenan, *A Taste of Port: Personal Profiles, Snapshots and Statistical Records Drawn from the History of the Port Melbourne Football Club*. Eucalyptus Press, Melbourne, 1999. Index. pp. 191. \$20.00. [Copies available from the author at 135 Page Street, Albert Park, Victoria, 3206]**

It is understandable that the culture and traditions of the Australian Football League (AFL), formerly known as the Victorian Football League (VFL), loom large in football historiography. However, a preoccupation with the history of the highest profile sporting competition in the nation has meant that researchers have largely ignored the “second tier” of the game. The Victorian Football Association (VFA) was formed in 1877, but the massive popularity of the code, and the inevitable addition of further teams to Melbourne’s suburban-based competition in the latter part of the nineteenth century, created a number of economic and administrative tensions. As a result, the more affluent clubs deserted their parent association at the end of the 1896 season and clandestinely established a new “super” league which “kicked off” in the following year. While

nearly all of the constituent clubs of the League have survived, with their achievements recounted in various publications over the years, the rump of Association clubs (and those who subsequently joined the competition) have had to live (and die) in the shadow of their more powerful and wealthy rival. This is not to suggest that histories of the VFA or its clubs have not been written. However, given that many of these works, including the official centenary publication of the Association and five individual club histories, have been authored by one journalist in particular, it should be acknowledged that interpretations of VFA history have generally lacked depth, variety and academic rigour.

Local historian Terry Keenan has therefore done the football research community an immense favour by publishing his labour of love, the history of the Port Melbourne Football Club. As the subtitle indicates, and as Keenan admits in a warmly written introduction, the book is not a conventional football history. Indeed, the format and style of the "narrative" might seem a little disjointed and disorientating to those more familiar with the season-by-season accounts offered in most traditional football histories. But Keenan's non-sequential focus on the players and officials of the club, by way of biographical vignettes arranged in a loosely thematic manner, is strongly grounded in a wealth of local newspaper sources and self-reflective interviews. It is the skillful blend of this material that enables Keenan to present the reader with unique insights into the character and operations of one of the most famous football clubs in Australia outside of the VFL/AFL.

It is worth noting, too, that Keenan, unlike some club historians, is no mere publicist. He is not afraid to explore both sides of perceived injustices against the club, and Port Melbourne players and officials, as well as their opponents, receive harsh criticism where it is warranted. Other aspects of the social history of this working class, seafront club receive due consideration, namely bribery allegations, the club's reputation for violence, the involvement of women, and, importantly, developments surrounding the reserve grade and junior teams. To conclude his study, which focuses much more heavily on the sixty years prior to 1945, Keenan laments the demise of the VFA, ruing what he claims is the "ultimate indignity" of the AFL's recent takeover and re-naming of the competition. The 'shrivelling soul' of the club in the face of suburban gentrification is also discussed and Keenan even ponders whether it might be better for the club to 'call it a day' rather than to 'pretend that nothing has changed, and, in so doing, insult the deeds of their forefathers' (p. 109).

Poignant reflections such as these, combined with close attention to detail in the form of notes at the end of each chapter, ensure that that Keenan's work is something more than a descriptive chronicle of the past. In fact, somewhat unintentionally perhaps, the material in the book can be seen as a useful case

study in terms of recent sport history literature that seeks to link debates about community identity with notions of mediated nostalgia. In this respect, it is encouraging to note that not all of Keenan's research endeavours concerning the Port Melbourne Football Club have been published. Fresh insights that challenge the accepted orthodoxy of football history may yet still emerge from Keenan's ongoing study of sport, class and culture in the Port Melbourne community.

**Rob Hess**  
**School of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance**  
**Victoria University**