

Another Look at Marn Grook¹

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ABSTRACT: For the last 30 years or so, there has been discussion and dispute as to whether or not Australian Football as we know it today was originally based on an Aboriginal game of football known as Marn grook. Those who support the Marn grook argument may have been too imaginative, while those who oppose its possible influence on the beginnings of Australian Rules football may not have given sufficient consideration to that possibility. In this article I consider the evolution of the Anglo/Australian game and discuss and compare the references to Aboriginal hand-ball and football. As all of the references to Aboriginal ball games come from Anglo/Australian observers, I will particularly note the background to these references and discuss their relevance and validity.

KEYWORDS: Marn grook, Aborigines, Australian Football

The earliest recorded Aboriginal football games appear to have been those played by children. Pioneer William Kyle recorded in his later years that, when Aboriginal clans gathered in the area that would become Melbourne, the children played with a football made from a piece of possum

1 My grateful thanks to Dr Marie Fels who read and commented on the manuscript; it remains the case that any error of fact or interpretation is mine. I also acknowledge the assistance provided by the Manuscripts Division, State Library of Victoria.

skin tightly tied with sinews.² And an 1857 drawing by naturalist William Blandowski of the Latjilatji near Merbein, shows children in the background kicking a ball. The image is inscribed, 'A group of children is playing with a ball. The ball is made out of typha roots (roots from the bullrush). It is not thrown or hit with a bat, but is kicked up in the air with a foot. The aim of the game — never let the ball touch the ground'.³ The discovery of this sketch in 2007 by a Museum Victoria curator in an archive in Berlin provoked comment 'proving' the existence of an Aboriginal football game,⁴ even although it was only children playing with a ball.

The favourite game of adult Melbourne Aborigines, according to the contemporary missionary, George Langhorne, was throwing the warewite, and 'great nicety and care' in the preparation of the warewite was exhibited. A twig of tea-tree was cut with a joint at the end, the latter scraped with a knife or stone into the shape of a cue about three inches in length. To play the game, five or six young men would stand in a line and by a jerk of the wrist, throw the warewite. He who threw the furthest won the game.⁵ This game was also one of those recorded by the Assistant Protector of Aborigines, William Thomas.⁶ But the recreation of note post-settlement was the celebrated corroboree, 'used alike on mystic, festive, and martial occasions', according to the editor of the *Port Phillip Gazette*, George Arden.⁷

Marn Grook

The first known dated mention of the football game *Marn grook* is a piece entitled 'Aborigines: Amusements and War Implements' dated 15 June 1858, and written by William Thomas. It exists in manuscript form and is held by the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. It was originally sent by Thomas to [Sir] Charles Gavan Duffy, who was in charge of the

2 Charles Daley, 'Reminiscences from 1841 of William Kyle', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 39, 1928, part 1, p. 165.

3 Reproduced in Harry Allen (ed.), *Australia: William Blandowski's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2010, Canberra, Image no. 41, p. 60.

4 Chris Johnston, 'Does this Picture Prove that Footy has its Roots in Aboriginal Culture?', *Age*, 22 November 2007.

5 'George Langhorne's Recollections of Aborigines of the Time', in Ian MacFarlane (ed.), *The Aborigines of Port Phillip, Melbourne*, Victoria Public Record Office, Historical Records of Victoria, v. 2A, p. 176.

6 William Thomas, 'Brief Remarks on the Aborigines of Victoria, 1838–39', Australian Manuscripts, MS 7838, State Library of Victoria.

7 [George Arden], *Latest Information with Regard to Australia Felix*, Melbourne, Queensberry Hill Press, Melbourne, 1977 [facsimile of the London edition of 1840 plus index], p. 95.

Lands Department in the O'Shannassy ministries of 1858–59.⁸ Duffy was a significant collector of information and published a great deal, mostly on Victorian land law and Irish history.

Here is the account:

The Marngrook (or the ball) is a favourite game with boys and men. A party assemble: one makes a ball of opossum skin or whatnot of a good size. The ball is kicked up and not thrown by the hand as white boys do. The ball is kicked into the air and not along the ground. There is a general scramble to catch it in the air. The tall blackfellows stand the best chance. When caught it is again kicked up into the air with great force and ascends straight up and as high as when thrown by the hand. They will play at this game for hours and fine exercise it is for adults or youths. The girls play at Marngrook but throw it up as white children.⁹

This account is obviously of an event/s which Thomas witnessed prior to the date on the document. His comparison with 'white boys' football, does not necessarily refer to Anglo/Australian matches for Thomas was born at Westminster (part of London) and came to Victoria at the age of 45.

There is another Thomas' description of *Marn grook* recorded by Robert Brough Smyth, a civil servant who became honorary secretary to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in June 1860. In 1866, Smyth began collecting information for his monumental *Aborigines of Victoria*, published in 1878. The informants included Thomas who provided the following information, apparently the year before his death in 1867, although the records indicate that Smyth and Thomas had been in communication for some years prior to that:

The men and boys joyfully assemble when this game is to be played. One makes a ball of opossum skin, or the like, of good size, somewhat elastic, but firm and strong. It is given to the foremost player or to someone of mark who is chosen to commence the game. He does not throw it as a white man might do, but drops it and kicks it with his foot, using the instep for that purpose. It is thrown high into the air, and there is a rush to secure it — such a rush as is seen commonly at foot-ball matches amongst our own people. The tallest

8 A list of the documents which Thomas sent to Duffy is in Pauline Byrt, *The Thomas Papers in the Mitchell Library: A Comprehensive Index*, Monash University, Melbourne, 2004, p. 192.

9 William Thomas, 'Aborigines: Amusements and War Implements', 15 June 1858, Microfilm CY 3131, frames 37–38, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, in Marie Fels, *'I Succeeded Once': the Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula, 1839–40*, ANU EPress and Online, Canberra, 2011, p. 139.

men, and those who are able to spring to a great height, have the best chances in this game. Some of them will leap as high as five feet or more from the ground to catch the ball. The person who secures the ball kicks it again; and again a scramble ensues. This continues for hours, and the natives never seem to tire of the exercise.¹⁰

The original of the document which Thomas supplied to Smyth is probably the manuscript now held by the State Library of Victoria and entitled, 'Brief Remarks on the Aborigines of Victoria, 1838-1839', for the information and headings appear to match the information sought by Smyth. The document clearly was not written during the dates 1838-1839, since it contains, for example, a reference to 'Gipps Land' which was not officially so named until 1843. Thomas also notes that 'the young blacks now are not near so clever at the wonguim and spear as the last generation nineteen years ago' that is, *c.* 1847. So from both this description and the first, the date Thomas witnessed *Marn grook* is uncertain.

Thomas noted Aboriginal ball games in his journal, but does not designate them as football, and nowhere in the large three volumes of his published journal does he mention *Marn grook*. On 18 November 1844 he recorded:

Early at the Nth Ent [encampment] many of the Yarra Blks [the Wurndjeri] had joined them [Bonnyong 'Blacks'] at about 10 o'clock they shift to about 1 mile N of the jail, the Ent E of Melbourne break up. I remain with them to 12 the 2 tribes have a fine day Corroby after which about 35 fine young men of various Tribes have a fine game at Ball among them were most of the Native Police.¹¹

On Sunday, 8 December 1844, Thomas recorded that 'after going about endeavors to get a congregation commence at 11 by Billibellary's Miam so many of them engaged in Playing at Ball etc. that I commence with only 10 but before the close of singing many more attend'.¹²

Other Accounts of Aboriginal Ball Games

There are published accounts of Aboriginal ball games from other parts of Victoria and one of the first was provided by settler Peter Beveridge on the

10 Robert Brough Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria; with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania, compiled from various sources for the government of Victoria*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009 [facsimile of the London edition of 1878], v. 1, p. 176.

11 Marguerita Stephens (ed.), *The Journal of William Thomas, Assistant Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip and Guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria 1839-67*, Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, Melbourne, 2014, vol. 2, p. 56.

12 Stephens, *Journal of William Thomas*, vol. 2, p. 61.

central Murray, but even although the game began with a woman kicking the ball up for the men to play, the rest of the game appears to have been hand-ball:

Ball playing is another game to which they [the Aborigines] are extremely partial. They make it much more boisterous and noisy than are the wrestling bouts, although it results in much fewer serious mishaps. The women participate in the game as well as the men. We have seen as many as two hundred — including sexes — engaged in it at one time.

The ball is composed of old opossum skins, tightly rolled up, and covered over with a fresh and strong piece of skin, nice and firmly sewn together with opossum tail sinews. Before they begin to play they arrange sides, each side having a captain, whose place it is to guide his often times unruly squad.

When all is in order, a Lyoore starts off with the ball in her hand. She walks a little way out from her own side, and toward that of her opponents, drops the ball with seeming carelessness, but 'ere it has time to reach the ground, she gives a dexterous, and by no means gentle kick, which correctly aimed, sends the ball spinning high into the air. Thereupon the fun begins in downright earnest. Such screaming, jumping and frothing at the mouth, we are certain was never seen at any other game outside the walls of Bedlam; and then again such intermingling of bronze limbs, nude and glossy; or such outre grouping was never yet beheld under any circumstances other than those attendant on an Aboriginal ball match.

They have not any goal to which the ball has to be driven, the whole of the play is merely to keep the ball in motion, and to prevent its coming to the ground ...¹³

An account of adult Aboriginal football was published by Western District settler James Dawson in his *Australian Aborigines* published in 1881, three years after Smyth's book, when the account of *Marn grook* contributed to it by Thomas would have been known: Smyth's book had been reviewed at length by the *Argus* on 7 September 1878, and by the *Saturday Review* on 5 April 1879.

It is debatable whether or not Dawson saw the game he described being played, for subsequent to his retirement from pastoral pursuits in 1866, he and his daughter (who spoke local languages) personally discussed customs with Aborigines who they had known for a considerable length of time. Dawson

13 Peter Beveridge, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1889, p. 50.

was adamant that his methodology in obtaining information was impeccable but admitted that, 'The natives, in their anxiety to please, are apt to coincide with the questioner, and thus assist him in arriving at wrong conclusions', an observation which has been made across the continent by inquirers into other cultural matters.¹⁴ And, as I have noted elsewhere, Aborigines sometimes played on Anglo/Australian gullibility by providing false answers.¹⁵ It is, after all, turning Aborigines into robots to suppose that they always gave totally straightforward responses: in reality, they could tease, they could lie, they could be mistaken, in precisely the same ways as any other race.

Dawson also notes in his introduction that 'by agreement among themselves, each [Aborigine] was allotted a fair proportions of questions to answer',¹⁶ so the following could have been provided by one man about whom we know absolutely nothing:

One of the favourite games is football, in which fifty, or as many as one hundred players, engage at a time. The ball is about the size of an orange and is made of opossum skin, with the fur side outwards. It is filled with powdered charcoal which gives solidity without much change in weight, and is tied hard around with kangaroo tail sinews. The players are divided into two sides and ranged in opposing lines, which are always of a different 'class' — white cockatoo against black cockatoo, quail against snake etc.

Each side endeavours to keep possession of the ball, which is tossed a short distance by hand, and then kicked in any direction. The side which kicks it oftenest and furthest gains the game. The person who sends it highest, is considered the best player. And has the honour of burying it in the ground till required next day.

The sport is concluded with a shout of applause and the best player is complimented on his skill. This game, which is somewhat similar to the white man's game of football, is very rough; but as the players are barefoot and naked, they do not hurt each other so much as the white people do; nor is the fact of an aborigine being a good football player considered to entitle him to assist in making laws for the tribe to which he belongs.¹⁷

14 Ruth Gooch, *The Wildest Bit Along the Coast: A History of Cape Schanck on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria*, Warrangine Word, Hastings, 2013, pp. 127–28.

15 Gooch, *The Wildest Bit Along the Coast*, p. 167.

16 James Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1881, pp. iii–iv.

17 Dawson, *Australian Aborigines*, p. 85.

That account has never been questioned by supporters of *Marn grook*, yet unsourced material can pose more questions than it provides answers. A possible clue to the date of the above description could be the fact that when the Scots Dawson (unlikely to have witnessed football in Scotland) says the game was 'somewhat similar to the white man's game of football', that may date these indigenous matches as the latter 1850s or later, for the Anglo/Australian game (as will be shown later) probably did not involve punt kicks and leaps for the ball until then. If, in this instance, it was Aborigines who did the copying, they were known everywhere as brilliant mimics, a facility which included their ability to imitate the British, right down to every lisp and limp. In the Western District, they excelled at cricket at a time when Anglo/Australian play was undistinguished, and it was an Aboriginal team that first toured England in 1868.¹⁸

Marcus Seivwright, son of Charles Seivwright, Assistant Protector of Aborigines for the Western District during January 1839 to March 1843, replying in writing to questions asked by the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines in 1858, made no specific mention of football:

The writer was a spectator about eighteen or nineteen years ago of a variety of athletic sports, games and dances among the Melbourne, Geelong, Colac, Lakes Kilambeet and Tarang tribes, in the Portland districts, as well as at Mount Kolor near the Grampians. At Kilambeet, the younger men would engage in the morning in wrestling matches, and at night on the occasion of tribes meeting, would have a dance called a corroboree [*sic*] ...¹⁹

Seivwright also noted that:

The only remarkable sports among the boys is their indulging in throwing round pieces of thick bark along a row of playfellows, who are armed with miniature spears, and as the round piece of bark rushes past, they endeavour, and often succeed in striking the dart into the middle of the bark. Another game indulged in by the children of some tribes, as well as by the men, is making a piece of wood shaped like a long-pointed walnut, with a long thin wooden handle. This is held by the thinnest end of the handle; then they make the knob on a knoll of grass, and send it flying through the bush in a hopping style. The children have also miniature corroborees in the day time.²⁰

18 John Mulvaney, *Cricket Walkabout: The Australian Aboriginal Cricketers on Tour, 1867–68*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967.

19 *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1858–59, p. 74.

20 *Report of the Select Committee*, p. 73.

At the same inquiry, a circular dated 27 October 1858 was sent to other respondents and it included the following question:

Have the people [Aborigines] any prevailing characteristics or remarkable modes of amusement, such as dances and games, exhibiting agility, strength or skill?

Of the thirteen respondents, nearly all nominated the corroboree, and some described it in detail. Beveridge nominated wrestling. None mentioned ball games, although one respondent noted 'many' games. Thomas replied, 'They have games which, while they act as amusements, are well adapted to strengthen and give agility to the frame'.²¹ When asked at the inquiry about the 'sports and amusements' of children, Thomas had replied that, 'Their sports and amusements all tend to prepare them for the bush and chase'.²² Yet it was only a few months prior to this that Thomas provided Duffy with a detailed account of *Marn grook*, so why did he give such an apparently desultory response to the inquiry? That had me baffled, for Thomas must have known that the findings of the Committee would be published. So his response would seem to have been inadequate, but ethnohistorian Marie Fels has suggested that when Thomas gave evidence to the Committee, he was referring to the present, a time when Aboriginal numbers had been seriously diminished, whereas when he provided Duffy with documentation, it was intended as an historical record.²³

Alfred Howitt

During the 1880s and 1890s, Gippsland police magistrate and amateur ethnographer Alfred Howitt, distributed questionnaires to Anglo/Australians in contact with Aborigines. The responses in regard to the ball games played indicate the games were not football, but hand-ball. Howitt published his *Native Tribes of South-East Australia* in 1904, and in it he describes a game which he notes was played by three clans, the Wotjobaluk (the Wimmera area), Wurundjeri (Yarra River), and the Kurnai (Gippsland) '[T]he object [of the game] ... was to keep the ball from the other side as long as possible, by throwing it from one to another', The Ngarigo (Mount Kosiosko area, New South Wales) played a similar game, he said, 'and when many people were present the women and children took part in the game'. The ball used by the Wotjobaluk 'was made of strips of opossum pelt rolled tightly round a piece folded up and covered with another bit sewn tightly with sinews', and linguists have recorded the name of *tarn* for

21 *Report of the Select Committee*, p. 57.

22 *Report of the Select Committee*, p. 52.

23 Marie Fels, personal communication, 7 March 2015.

the ball game in this area.²⁴ A similar ball to that used by the Wotjobaluk was used by the Wurundjeri. That used by the Kurnai was the scrotum of an 'old man' kangaroo, stuffed tightly with grass, and it was called *Turta jiraua*. The Wurundjeri called their ball *Mangurt*, from whence presumably Thomas derived the term *Marn Grook*.²⁵ The Wurundjeri name for hand was '*Marnung*',²⁶ which seemingly bears a relationship to the name of the ball.

Howitt names his informant for the Wurundjeri as J. Shaw, presumably Joseph Shaw, appointed a teacher at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in 1882, and subsequently, manager.²⁷ Presumably Shaw obtained his information from clan head William Barak (c. 1824–1903) who had been at Coranderrk since its inception in 1863. Howitt had published a journal article on message sticks prior to his book and in the former he noted this from Barak:

Suppose being a Ngurungeta [headman] I desire to call the people from all round to come to a corroboree and for ball playing, I should, after I had talked with my friends, say to one of the young men, you go to such and such people and take this Kalk [wood] and give it to the Ngurungeta there and tell him this message ...²⁸

Howitt contradicts this slightly in his book when he says:

If the message was to call the people together for a corroboree or for ball playing, a ball made of opossum pelt, cut in strips and rolled up tightly, was sent. This was called Mangurt, and was sent also from one person to another as a friendly mark of regard. For ball-playing, the ball, made from the scrotum of an old-man kangaroo, stuffed with dry grass, was also sent.²⁹

But there is only ever mention of a ball game, apparently not football, for Howitt adds a footnote to his journal article, containing somewhat similar information to that which he subsequently recorded in his book (the first quote above). In the footnote he says that this game 'was probably known

24 Nick Thieberger and William McGregor (eds) *Macquarie Aboriginal Words*, Macquarie Library, Sydney, 1994, p. 107.

25 Alfred Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010 [facsimile of the London edition of 1904], p. 770. A search conducted by the author of the Howitt Papers at the State Library of Victoria failed to locate any responses to Howitt in regard to ball games.

26 Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, vol. 2, p. 90.

27 Diane E. Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk*, Aboriginal History Inc., Canberra, 1998, p. 257.

28 Alfred Howitt, 'Notes on Australian Message Sticks and Messengers', reprinted from *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, 1889, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1998, p. 316.

29 Howitt, *Native Tribes*, pp.700–01.

to most tribes of south-eastern Australia'.³⁰ Those who support *Marn grook* have usually turned this game into football,³¹ but that is not actually what the Howitt records say. It is also the case that Barak's recollections sometimes referred to comparatively recent events rather than the distant past, so it can be difficult to establish a time frame.³² As historian John Hirst has pointed out, time did not have the same relevance to Aborigines as it did to Europeans.³³ Nor can the extent of Barak's inter-tribal message stick and gift-ball diplomacy now be measured, when in some areas, inter-tribal fights and slaughter are known to have occurred: on the Mornington Peninsula, Thomas noted that 77 Boon wurrung persons were murdered by Gippsland Aborigines in a revenge attack in 1836.³⁴

Curiously, Howitt does not mention Thomas' account of *Marn grook* contained in Smyth's book, although Howitt and Smyth were in touch, and the latter makes grateful acknowledgement to Howitt in the preface to his book. Howitt, however, did not return the courtesy when he published. Howitt's omission in regard to Thomas is a moot point. On the one hand, Thomas' description of *Marn grook* is not open to question; but neither is Howitt's zeal for information: on his own cognizance, he contacted some 60 informants.

Anglo/Australian Football

The first record of Anglo/Australian football was published on 25 July 1829 when the Sydney *Monitor* reported that, 'The privates in the barracks are in the habit of amusing themselves with the game of foot-ball. The ball may be daily descried repeatedly mounting higher or lower, according to the skill and energy of the bold military kickers thereof. It is a healthy amusement, and much played in Leicestershire'. The rules of this game are unknown, for no historical record has been found.

Subsequent to the settlement at Port Phillip, cricket and horse-racing soon became established, but the first recorded game of football, said historian J. Alex Allan, 'was played by Irish hurlers on 12 October 1843'. He described it as an 'impromptu contest'. One of the earliest organized football matches was played at Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) on August 26, 1850. The sides, according to Allan, numbered 11 men each, and the rules were Rafferty's — 'not wonderful when one considers the name of the locality and

30 Howitt, 'Notes', p. 316.

31 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marn_Grook, accessed 26 January 2015.

32 Gooch, *The Widest Bit along the Coast*, p. 127.

33 John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2009, p. 101.

34 Fels, '*I Succeeded Once*', pp.255–56.

the nationality of most of the local inhabitants'.³⁵

With the separation of the Port Phillip district from New South Wales due to occur in 1851, the soon-to-become colony of Victoria celebrated for five days in November 1850. The activities included a sports meeting which concluded with a football match between two sides of twelve men. Not much was reported about the match, but there were 'no unseemly incidents'.³⁶

The references to football during a considerable part of the 1850s are sporadic and not detailed, but as historian Roy Hay has pointed out, it is 'clear that the game was embedded in the social lives of migrants as it was in their homelands'. Football was often numbered as just one of a list of planned sporting events, probably with varying rules, drawn up before an individual match.³⁷

It is not now usually known that hand-ball was also played by Anglo/Australians. A match to be played between Melbourne and Ballarat advertised in the *Argus* of 31 December 1868 promised, 'the finest and most scientific play ever beheld in the colonies will be witnessed on this occasion'. Hand-ball persisted until well into the 20th century, perhaps under Scots influence, as it was a game played in Scotland.

The Blainey View

If those who support *Marn grook* have been rather too imaginative, then I suggest that those who oppose its possible influence on the beginnings of Australian Rules football have not given sufficient consideration to that possibility. Historian Geoffrey Blainey, who published a book on the origins of Australian Rules football in 1990, did not mention *Marn grook*, and in an additional chapter to the edition of 2010, he describes as 'myth' the supposition that *Marn grook* had any bearing on Australian Rules. His rebuttal includes the denial of the high mark being copied from *Marn grook*. Referring to the rules of 1866 he says that 'the high mark had not been born and the little mark — famous in its day — was probably still unknown. Even the stock-in-trade of today's footballer, the drop-punt kick and the quick punching of the ball to a player on the move, was probably unknown'.³⁸ But the Melbourne Football Club's rules published in 1859, has Rule 6 with its '*directly*' in italics, and it apparently describes the punt kick: 'Any player catching the ball *directly* from the foot may call 'mark'. He then has a free

35 J. Alex Allan, *Men and Manners in Australia: Being a Social and Economic Sketch History*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1945, pp. 151–53.

36 Roy Hay, 'Football in Australia in the 1850s', <http://australianfootball.com/articles/view/Football+in+Australia+in+the+1850s/113>, accessed 26 January 2015.

37 Hay, 'Football in Australia'.

38 Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2010, p. 206.

kick, no player from the opposite side being allowed to come *inside* the spot marked".³⁹ Rule 6 was repeated with only a slight variation to the wording in the Victorian Rules of 1866 and the Victorian Rules of 1874. But the 1874 rules were followed by the following definitions: 'A drop kick is made by letting the Ball drop from your hands on to the ground, and kicking it the very instant it rises', and 'A punt consists in letting the Ball fall from your hands, and kicking it before it touches the ground'. As these definitions can only relate to Rule 6, and as Rule 6 goes back to 1859, then it follows that the drop/punt kick relates to the original rules. Confirmation in regard to the drop kick comes from an article by journalist/footballer James Thompson who wrote in the *Argus* of 14 May 1860 in regard to a match of the previous Saturday that, 'The numerous vicissitudes of the game we cannot undertake to chronicle, nor yet to relate and who made the best 'drop kicks ...' With regard to the high mark, on 28 May 1859, just over a week after the new rules were drawn up, a scratch match was reported in verse by *Bells Life in Victoria* which had this to say in regard to Hammersley:

Swift as an eagle on the wing
Holds fast the ball, then with a sudden spring
He leaps high in the air and kicks the volume round.⁴⁰

And an article by Mr Pip in *Bell's* in 1862 described a match in which 'one Melbourne youth jumped wonderfully high in the air and caught the ball ere it came near the others and called "Mark"'.⁴¹ Even although the rules of the game continued to evolve and change, the evidence says that the drop/punt kick and the high mark were there from the beginning and were apparently among the game's distinguishing features.

Football and Tom Wills

The events leading up to those distinguishing features go back a few years. On the 23 December 1856, the celebrated sportsman, young Tom Wills, stepped from the *Oneida* in Melbourne, having returned from England where he had played Rugby football. Before he left for England, he had been a star cricketer, and on his return, he continued to play cricket. About 18 months after his return from England, on 10 July 1858, he wrote his often quoted letter to *Bell's Life in Victoria*, suggesting that cricketers should be active in the winter by forming a football club with a committee to draw up

39 Blainey, *A Game of Our Own*. The 1859 rules are set out on p. 122.

40 *Bells Life in Victoria*, 4 June 1859, in Gillian Hibbins, *Sport and Racing in Colonial Melbourne; the Cousins and Me: Colden Harrison, Tom Wills and William Hammersley*, Lynedoch Publications, Melbourne, 2007, p. 101.

41 *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 6 September 1862, in David Thompson, *The Rules That Made Australian Football: The Evolution of a Unique Game*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 2013, p. 27.

the rules. If it was not possible to form a football club, then he suggested a rifle club. As professional historian Gillian Hibbins has pointed out, Wills was not interested in forming such a club himself, for he concluded by saying: 'Trusting that someone will take up the matter, and form either of the above clubs, or at any rate, some athletic games, I remain, Yours truly, T. W. Wills'. His suggestion of football was indeed taken up by others and the *Herald* for 23 August reported that, 'The game of football promises, as it deserves to be, one of the popular amusements of the ingenious youth of Victoria. Hitherto, a modification of the Rugby rules has been adopted, which, in the opinion of some, might be altered for the better'.⁴²

The following month, the *Argus* reported a match between South Yarra and Melbourne played on the afternoon of Saturday 25 September 1858. The match took place on the Richmond Paddock between 26 players of both sides, and was 'very animated':

Among the antagonists on either side were several well-known public characters whose presence tended not a little to enhance the vivacity of the game, while it certainly increased the curiosity and amusement of the spectators. The game was most keenly contested for nearly three hours, and terminated about half-past 5 o'clock by the Melbourne men kicking through the goal of their opponents in capital style.

It was a notable game, commented on not only by the *Argus*, but also by *Punch* (which wrote a poem about it).⁴³ One could speculate that this is the sort of match likely to have been witnessed by Aborigines from the Western District. Aborigines liked to attend European festivities and are known, for example, to have attended race meetings in Melbourne during the latter 1840s and 1850s.⁴⁴ Some 22 men of the native police were recruited at various times from the Western District and native police provided duty at the Melbourne races of 1847 (and at other times) besides travelling widely elsewhere.⁴⁵ Dawson's book has an appendix which gives indigenous terms for hand-ball in three dialects although no hand-ball games are described in the text, suggesting they were the precursor to football, as they may have been with other clans. Two of the three dialects retain the same word for football as that for hand-ball, but the third dialect gives a different word for

42 *Herald*, 23 August 1858, in Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 85.

43 *Melbourne Punch*, 30 September 1858, in Greg de Moore, *Tom Wills: His Spectacular Rise and Tragic Fall*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008, p. 82.

44 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, pp. 104–05.

45 Marie Fels, *Good Men and True; the Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District, 1837–53*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 123, 249.

hand-ball to that of football, the latter designated *Man'guart*, although that apparently is not a Western District term. Dawson was not quoted by Howitt — we do not know why, for Dawson was still writing letters to the press in his 90s and lived until the year 1900⁴⁶ — so as with Howitt's failure to quote Smyth, it is a matter open to conjecture, although Howitt is known to have treated at least one perceived rival with disdain. Responding to Howitt in *Nature*, surveyor-anthropologist, R. H. Matthews observed:

It is asserted by Mr Howitt that he has only seen two of my articles on the Australian blacks. I contributed five articles to the Royal Society of Victoria, of which Mr Howitt was a member, and I was told that he took part in the discussions upon some of them. They were all printed in the Proceedings of that society...and these volumes were issued to Mr. Howitt in virtue of his membership... Numerous articles of mine have been published by the anthropological societies of the following places: London, Berlin, Washington, Paris and Vienna.⁴⁷

It was Howitt's contention that Mathews was too late in the field to collect unsullied evidence, but even had that been the case, it does not explain Howitt's neglect of his predecessors. However, Howitt cannot be dismissed as only interested in his own views. He published widely — including papers on geology — and one of the most distinguished twentieth century anthropologists, W. E. H. Stanner, said of him that, 'His scientific mentality was excellent, cautious towards the possibility of "false facts" and ready to see his own theories toppled'.⁴⁸

The Codified Melbourne Game

The Melbourne Football Club was formed around the end of 1858 or the beginning of 1859, and so were others. The *Argus* reported on 18 April 1859 that, 'football clubs in almost all the suburbs are either being formed or re-organized ... Football, like cricket, has become an institution in and about the metropolis, and it would not be surprising if the epidemic spread wider'.

46 Raymond Madden, 'James Dawson's Scrapbook: advocacy and antipathy in colonial Western Victoria', in Lynette Russell and John Arnold (eds), *Indigenous Victorians: repressed, resourceful and respected*, La Trobe Journal, no. 85, 2010, p. 55.

47 R. H. Matthews, 'Literature Relating to Australian Aborigines' (Letter to the editor), *Nature*, vol. 77, no. 1987, 1907, p. 81, in Martin Thomas, *The Many Worlds of R. H. Matthews: In Search of an Australian Anthropologist*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011, p. 345.

48 W. E. H. Stanner, 'Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howitt-alfred-william-510>, accessed 25 May 2015.

The same paper reported on 9 May 1859 that:

... several clubs have already commenced playing. The South Yarra were to have had a practice match on Saturday, and the ranks of the Melbourne Football Club are assuming respectable proportions, owing probably, to its being no longer confined to members of the Melbourne Cricket Club.

Yet despite its growing membership, the rules of the Melbourne Football Club were formulated by only four men who met at the Parade Hotel on 17 May 1859: Tom Wills, William Hammersley, James Thompson and Thomas Smith. The rules included, of course, Rule 6, for the drop/punt kick. But how did this rule come into being? James Thompson subsequently wrote that, 'The Rugby, Eton, Harrow and Winchester Rules ... came under our consideration',⁴⁹ while William Hammersley noted that, 'Tom Wills suggested the Rugby rules, but nobody understood them except himself'.⁵⁰ With regard to Rugby, the first rules drawn up in England on August 1845 had as its Rule 1, 'Fair catch is a catch direct from the foot', but does that really underpin Rule 6 of the 1859 rules? And why did only *four* of the Melbourne Football Club members formulate the rules? Why did the secretary, treasurer, and the other committee member not attend this all-important meeting? Was there a pre-conceived agenda? The three committee members who did not attend the meeting were *signatories* to the new rules, which suggests that despite the subsequent comments of Thompson and Hammersley, the new rules had been virtually agreed upon before the meeting.

It is interesting that apart from the Melbourne Football Club, the other team of note at the time, South Yarra, had been described in September 1858 as having 'the prestige of old Winchester and Rugby experiences',⁵¹ yet it endorsed the subsequent Melbourne Football Club rules which it apparently regarded as superior, only insisting that for a match between themselves and Melbourne on 9 July 1859, a free kick only be allowed when 'the ball is received from an opponent's foot'. James Thompson, one of the formulators of the new rules, enthused in the *Argus* prior to this match that 'its equal, in its especial department, in all probability has not been witnessed in Victoria'.⁵² The following year, Thompson wrote, 'Football, as played in Victoria, is now fit to run alone ... because we seem to have agreed on a code of our own'.⁵³

49 T. W. Wills (ed.), *Australian Cricketers' Guide 1870–71*, J & A. McKinley, Melbourne, 1871, p. 114, in Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 409.

50 de Moore, *Tom Wills*, p. 94.

51 Hibbins, *Sport and Racing*, p. 86.

52 *Argus*, 7 July 1859.

53 Gillian Hibbins, 'The Founders: Men of Purpose', in James Weston (ed.), *The Australian Game of Football Since 1858*, Geoff Slattery Publishing, Melbourne, 2008, p. 43.

That that 'code of our own' resulted in a spectacular game which resulted in an 'epidemic' was presumably due at least in part, to Rule 6. Wills was talented and flashy, perhaps capable of drawing a crowd, but the popularity of the game as a spectator sport is unlikely to have resided entirely with him.

Support for Marn Groom Derived from the Western District Game

Those who consider that *Marn groom* formed the basis of the rules of 1859, say that Tom Wills saw the game played in the Western District, for he was brought up there. Journalist and novelist, Martin Flanagan says in relation to Wills:

You spoke an Aboriginal language, you knew Aboriginal songs, you played with blackfellers as a kid. There are white historians who want to argue that you didn't know their games. I find it hard to take them seriously.⁵⁴

Author Jim Poulter has had considerable influence on *Marn groom* being accepted by many and he says:

Marn-Groom could not be formally played until the age of initiation, at about 12 years, but like the children's games it was open to women as well as men. It would have been a sad day for Tom when he was sent to school at age 11, before he and his friends became eligible to join in the adult game. However, he would nonetheless have had time for this in vacation periods, before being sent to England at age 14 to complete his education. The conclusion by some historians that because there is no documentary evidence of Tom Wills being exposed to such games, this therefore proves that there was none, is just arrant nonsense. It is tantamount to saying that Wills spent the first 14 years of his life locked in his bedroom and saw nothing of indigenous tribal life and culture.⁵⁵

When and Where did Thomas Witness Marn Groom?

The answer to that is debatable. Thomas provided a very different answer to Smyth *c.* 1866, than he did to Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe when the latter sent out questionnaires to settlers and others in July 1853 requesting information for a proposed book. Thomas' response to La Trobe was undated but was presumably written during 1853 or 1854. Regarding 'Aborigines', he recorded under the heading of 'Games' that,

54 Martin Flanagan, *The Last Quarter: A Trilogy*, One Day Hill, Melbourne, 2008, p. 543.

55 Jim Poulter, 'Marn-Groom's Contextual Link to Aussie Rules', http://www.foxsportspulse.com/assoc_page.cgi?c=1-5545-0-0-0&SID=220493, accessed 26 January 2015.

'They have many, all admirably adapted to strengthen and expand the corporeal powers, as running, jumping, throwing, etc., but the most manual is wrestling ...'⁵⁶ There follows an extensive account of wrestling, but there is no mention of *Marn groom*, yet he attached such importance to it in the documents he subsequently sent to Duffy in 1858, and in his reply to Smyth *c.* 1866.

However, the State Library of Victoria holds a notebook in the hand of Thomas, mostly consisting of excerpts on Aborigines obtained from other sources. But at the end of the notebook there is a 13-page draft which the notations suggest Thomas intended to expand into a 40-page document. It is undated, but because it refers to the document he sent to Duffy, then it is post June 1858. It is almost a paraphrase of the response he gave to La Trobe in 1853/54, but it has a very interesting last line:

Their games are calculated to excite and improve their physical energies. They delighted in running, jumping, climbing, throwing, swimming, etc. Wrestling is also a favoured exercise. In this they exercise great fairness, good humour and bodily energy. They are exceeding expert at a game which consists in kicking a ball etc. etc.⁵⁷

That suggests Thomas had not seen *Marn groom* played when he replied to La Trobe in 1853/54 and that he subsequently saw it played before he replied to Duffy in June 1858. But it would have to have been an inter-tribal game/s for no clan at that date would have had sufficient numbers to field two football teams. Thomas lived on the Merri Creek north of Melbourne from 1843 until some years before his death, and the Merri Creek location brought him into close contact with the Wurundjeri whose guardian he became in 1850 (officially, guardian for the counties of Bourke and Mornington, and subsequently, Evelyn). A latter 1850s game would also accord with Howitt's information that the Wurundjeri game was originally hand-ball.

During 1859, remnant Wurundjeri and the remnant of some of the other clans removed to the Aboriginal Station at Acheron and subsequently to Coranderrk, and Smyth said that he had seen *Marn groom* played at Coranderrk in the latter nineteenth century. Apparently it was a non-scoring game for a photograph of indigenes playing cricket on the sports ground at Coranderrk (1877) shows no goal posts. This is the first description of a

56 Thomas Francis Bride (ed.), William Thomas (undated) to Lieutenant-Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe in C. E. Sayers (ed.), *Letters from Victorian Pioneers: a series of papers on the early occupation of the Colony, the Aborigines etc.*, Lloyd O'Neill, Melbourne, 1983 [1898], pp. 402-03; Papers of Charles Joseph La Trobe, MS 10749, Box 60, Australian Manuscripts, State Library of Victoria.

57 Robert Brough Smyth Papers, William Thomas notebook, MS 8781, Safe 3, Australian Manuscripts, State Library of Victoria.

live indigenous football game and Smyth said expansively that it was 'truly a native game'.⁵⁸ If that was not quite the case, then Thomas' account indicates it was Aboriginal men who first practiced those incredible leaps for the football. Because the ball was kicked from the instep with bare feet, then this was a considerable accomplishment if no real surprise, for Aboriginal men used their feet in ways that European men never did. The Boon wurrung (as did other clans) picked things up with their toes: putting an object between his big toe and the next, a man would bend his leg up behind him and place the object in his hand. A spear was carried between the toes rather than held in the hand.⁵⁹

Nor can the Boon wurrung be excluded as the possible originators of *Marn grook*. Thomas was the protector of the Boon wurrung during the period 1839–49 (and subsequently their official guardian) and Fels has noted a list of Thomas' translations of Boon wurrung phrases published in the Victorian Legislative Council Votes and Proceedings for 1858-59; one of the phrases (published together with the original) is as follows: 'We will play at ball, you make it up, very high, don't you see one? Very good that one, go on kick'.⁶⁰ There is also the fact that the document of reminiscences Thomas apparently supplied to Smyth *c.* 1866 with its description of *Marn grook*, has in its title '1838-1839', the period of his arrival and the first year of the Boon wurrung protectorate, but as already noted, some of the events in this document, refer to a later date. It may be significant that Howitt did not obtain any information from the Boon wurrung, for by the time he began collecting information, they were gone.

But one has to continually balance the snippets of information that have survived, with the lack of corroborative evidence. There is no mention of either ball or football in Thomas' journal in regard to the Boon wurrung, even although some of his early entries are quite extensive. Nor is there such a mention in the 'Reminiscences' of his son, William Jackson Thomas. Adventurer George Henry Haydon, who was at Port Phillip during the early 1840s and subsequently wrote an account, knew Boon wurrung people and travelled with them, but recorded no reference to games. Robert Jamieson and Samuel Rawson, who took up the Cape Schanck run on the Mornington Peninsula in 1839, both left written accounts, and both mentioned Aborigines, Jamieson saying that he 'saw a great deal of the natives', but again, neither man made any mention of games.

Had *Marn grook* been played in a systematic way anywhere at Port Phillip by either the Boon wurrung or the Wurundjeri in the first two

decades after settlement, then in my view, it would have been as obvious and inescapable as the corroboree, which many contemporaries commented on, although it is possible that the game could have been played as a pastime without any settler thinking it remarkable. The matter is complicated by the fact that Howitt's research indicated that the original Aboriginal game was hand-ball, but that game was not usually commented on in the written accounts by settlers either. Although so much has been read into the Western District evidence, *Marn grook* cannot reasonably be linked to Tom Wills, and it could be inferred from the available information, that hand-ball there preceded football. So, while we are certain that the Anglo/Australian game of football evolved, there is insufficient evidence to draw any firm conclusion regarding Aboriginal football, but the evidence does suggest that there may have been borrowing of football techniques from time to time by both races.

58 Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, vol. 1, p. 176.

59 Gooch, *The Wildest Bit along the Coast*, p. 199.

60 Fels, 'I Succeeded Once', p. 393.