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Football in Australia before Codification, 1820-1860

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Though the focus of this article is Australia, it is intended as a contribution to the debate about what was happening in the UK and elsewhere before football was codified by the Football Association in 1863. There is mounting evidence that a football culture existed far beyond the public schools and universities and that small-sided predominantly kicking games, often for monetary or other rewards, were being played by migrants to Australia who drew on their British heritage. Not only that but the game was being presented and encouraged by public authorities who would not have countenanced doing so had there been a risk of a breakdown in public order or violence accompanying the games. The article provides support for the arguments developed by Adrian Harvey in the UK.

Keywords: football; Australian history; history of football; origins of football; football culture

Football in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

By the 1850s football practice in the UK had diverged into three distinct forms. Village folk football still continued in a number of areas, though attenuated and confined by the authorities.¹ In the public schools and the universities, a number of variants of the game were played which had distinct and specific sets of rules.² Small-sided games of football, sometimes for monetary or physical rewards, were being played in various parts of England and Scotland.³ The third type of football can also be found in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. Most of the examples uncovered so far were not the rough, village games but something much closer to association football as it was codified in England in 1863.⁴

If something like association football, a small-sided kicking game (almost certainly with some handling), was widespread in Australia before 1863, then this has implications for the story we should be telling about the early history of football. This story is quite different from the one being advanced by the modern custodians of the various codes whose founding myths have been neatly skewered by Tony Collins and others.⁵ Modern research sources, particularly the digitisation of newspapers and material in other archives, allow improvements in searching capacity and hence the discovery of popular football cultures dispersed across the world by generations of nameless migrants to the Australian colonies and elsewhere. Moreover, at a time when football was being constrained in the UK by industrialisation and legislation, it was being encouraged by governments in Australia.
What is missing, as Gavin Kitching has noted in the case of the UK, are really detailed descriptions of patterns of play and sets of specific rules of the kind which were drawn up in Sheffield and London, and in Melbourne for what became Melbourne, then Victorian and finally Australian, football. But rules must have existed since gambling and monetary prizes were at stake, and what we know about later games makes clear that debates over infractions of the rules were highly common in the 1860s and 1870s.

Can we be sure that games were closer to soccer/association football than the mayhem in the villages so lovingly rediscovered by Hugh Hornby and company or the violent practices of the public schools? Working back from the codes as they were developed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards is a dubious way of analysing what was taking place. Devotees of each of the codes usually wish to claim that each game they have discovered is the ancestor of their own variety. After John Bale’s inquiry into Tutsi high jumping, we need to be aware that not every cultural practice evolved into a modern sport, but also that, in the absence of clear descriptions of the game taking place, it is always risky to assert that any particular example is more like soccer than rugby, Australian rules or gridiron.

In his influential history of football, David Goldblatt has the game in England in decline in the first half of the nineteenth century as the aristocracy turned to other sports. Religious groups, industrialists, shopkeepers and local authorities combined to inhibit popular forms of the game because of their inherent violence and disruption of business and social life. ‘Informal and traditional forms of football were on the decline.’ Only the public schools preserved and nurtured the game before releasing a more civilised version on another generation. Despite the careful empirical work of Adrian Harvey, this remains the powerful underlying view of the trajectory of football in the metropolitan centre.

In the periphery, however, a different story is beginning to emerge. The Australian colonies in the early nineteenth century were dangerous, often lawless, places and local governments maintained a very precarious control. The last thing they would do would be to encourage any event which could lead to a breakdown in public order. Yet we find them sponsoring football matches at public celebrations and holidays, not clamping down on football as a murthering practice. They set aside grounds to play on, they advocate the game as a healthy practice for their people and they contribute to prizes for success in games. All of this implies order, exercise and entertainment, not violent battles. Of course some games got out of hand, but most did not and they were repeated with no word that risks of disorder were being incurred.

Just nine months after the Eureka Stockade uprising in Ballarat in which miners and soldiers fought a pitched battle and 22 defenders and five of the military were killed, some of the survivors were involved in a football match in the Commisoner’s Camp on the nearby Castlemaine goldfield. A report in the September 1855 Castlemaine Mail noted:

On Saturday last a match at football came off on the camp reserve between Lieut. Paul, Mr. Naylor and 12 soldiers of the 12th and 40th regiments and an equal number of diggers. Owing to the extremely wet state of the ground, the running was very precarious and no end of upsets ensured, some of them of rather a forcible nature. After kicking some two hours with no advantage on either side the ball burst and so the match terminated. The return ‘kick’ comes off on the same ground tomorrow and we cannot refrain from expressing our gratification at the good feeling evidently subsisting on this gold field between two parties lately so antagonistic on others. During the whole afternoon we did not hear one hasty or angry word on either side and a parting glass ‘all round’ testified the continuation of the evidently predominating feeling.
With very few exceptions, the football games so far identified were played on open paddocks or multi-purpose recreational areas such as the domains in Sydney and Hobart. These were not manicured soccer pitches but rough areas of ground with all sorts of obstacles. The balls used were often far from the spherical productions of modern times, more ovoid than round and much given to bursting. So it is not surprising that this would have an impact on patterns of play, for example allowing handling to bring the ball under control, as was done in the first clear codification of football rules in both England and Australia. Throwing the ball up to restart a game makes sense as a way of getting movement into a game which otherwise might consists of rolling mauls.

It is worth exploring the evidence now available about what was taking place in Australia for the light it throws on football in the first half of the nineteenth century and the implications it has for the story we tell about the origins of the modern game.

**Football in Australia: The Evidence**

What follows is highly empirical and sets out the bulk of what has been turned up so far about the football games being reported in newspapers across the colonies from the 1830s to the 1850s. Besides indicating what was going on there, however, this material demonstrates that the games being played were ones which were believed to be totally familiar to migrants from the UK and Ireland; so familiar, indeed, that they did not have to be explained to a readership in both urban and rural Australia. That readership increasingly consisted of people born and brought up in Australia, so it seems that they, too, must have understood what was being written. And there is no hint that the games being mentioned are in any way tainted because they originated in the UK or Ireland. The pillorying of association football as a ‘wicked foreign game’ originates many decades later.12

A notice in the *Port Phillip Herald* of March 30, 1850, under the heading of ‘Old English Easter Sports’ and advertising a ‘Grand Football Match for a Silver Watch’, is not untypical.13 This game was sponsored by a publican, but local authorities also organised games. In late 1850 the Port Philip District of New South Wales marked its separation from its northern neighbour when it became the colony of Victoria with effect from July 1, 1851. Celebrations began in November and lasted five days. The final day, Saturday, November 23, was given over to a carnival of gymnastic games at Emerald Hill on Beach Road, Melbourne, and the last event was a football match.14 The Argus reported:

**FOOT-BALL** – A match at foot-ball between two sides of 12 each concluded the sports. The game was all on one side from the beginning, and won easily by Mr Barry and his 11.15

Local historian Alf Batchelder found an account of this game in the *Melbourne Morning Herald and General Daily Advertiser* of November 19, 1850, 4, a supplement to The Argus, but it had very few details:

**Foot Ball.** – A match of twelve a side for £15 was set going immediately after, on the M.C.C. ground, which had been lent for the occasion. The lists were soon made up, and the ball set in motion by Mr. Dal. Campbell. To attempt to describe the state of the game at any particular period would be impossible, the play being all on one side. Instead of being tired out by the previous exertion, it appeared that new life was infused into the players and the winners were cheered loudly and heartily at the last ‘kick’.16

The crowd watching the games had started small but had grown throughout the day and, despite the provision of alcohol, the newspapers reported that there had been no unseemly incidents. The football match appears to have been a small-sided game for which no special explanation was necessary for the readers. The original aim had been for a
15-a-side game with an entry fee of 2s6d. The match took place on the then Melbourne Cricket Club ground south of the Yarra, not the present MCG. Batchelder speculates that this might have been the first football match on an enclosed site in Australia.

Earlier, on August 26, 1850, an 11-a-side football match had been played as a delayed item in the Victoria Gymnastic Games originally scheduled for August 12, but actually played over two days. The advertisement for the games was clear. Event number 16 was ‘Football, Prize £11. Entrance 10s. The Prize to be awarded to the first eleven at the goal’. Then on August 26 The Argus noted: ‘The game of Foot-ball postponed from the late Gymnastic Games, has been appointed to come off today, at the Race Course . . .’ So the following day the match was reported along with other events held on the Monday:

SPORTING – A very fair muster of the lovers of a little recreation, took place on the race course yesterday . . . After a little trifling in the shape of a pony race, the long talked of game of foot-ball came off, and excited very considerable interest and amusement, and led to a struggle which thoroughly used up several of our leading athletes.

On this occasion we have a list of the players who took part, though no more detailed account of the play. Garryowen lists the two sides as follows:


Messrs. Dalmahoy Campbell (Captain), C. Campbell, Barry, Dowling, W. Warman, Brodie, Pender, Wilson, Carew, Hinton, Cain.

More than 200 men turned up to play and the sides were selected by the captains who tossed for first pick. Stephen was the City Solicitor, while ‘Dal’ Campbell was a stock and station salesman and City Councillor. He also played handball.

An 11-a-side football match was on the agenda the following year on similar terms and, though the entry fee had been reduced to 5s, the prize remained at £11. The match was scheduled for Wednesday August 27, 1851, but both the quoits match and the football were postponed on account of the weather. Thursday started fine but then turned foul, yet The Argus reported that ‘the day’s sports were concluded by a Football Match, at which several competitors contended, and, in spite of the rain, were engaged till a late hour in the evening’. Garryowen recounted that Dal Campbell and Mr Were chose 10 others for their respective sides. ‘Sometimes the apple, or rather ball of contention, was flopped into the middle of a pool of water, and the whole lot got a good ducking. The event was not concluded, owing to the bad weather and the stakes were returned.’

In Geelong, about 50 miles from Melbourne in Victoria, in November 1850 a three-day athletic festival included a six-a-side football match for a wager:

The game of football came next, Mr Hobson being the umpire on one side and Mr M’Gillivray on the other. There were six players on each side. The arena was the cricket ground in the centre of which the ball was placed and the players stood facing each other at opposite angles of the ground. As the play proceeded, it looked 10 to 1 in favour of Mr Hobson’s side, but one of M’Gillivray’s party happened to give the ball a turn, it was taken up by Giles, another of M’Gillivray’s players, who managed to kick it through the proper panel, and so won the game. Prize – £3, entrance 3s.

John Little in Ballarat was advertising cricket equipment just arrived from the best makers in London, but he also had ‘foot balls, boxing gloves, foils and masks’, for sale in October 1859. Platts in Hindley Street in Adelaide offered ‘leather-covered India rubber foot-balls’ among their fresh supply just unpacked. That year the Portland newspaper reported: ‘A match at football between the town and country inhabitants at Hamilton is to come off next Friday’.
The St Patrick’s Day games of 1856 in Melbourne had a football match as well as wrestling and athletics. The football match offered a prize of £20 against an entry fee of 5s, with the note that the prizes would be increased if funds permitted. In 1861 there was a small-sided game in Warrnambool on Victoria’s west coast. The advertisement for the game was for three a side, but when it took place there were 20 players in all. In its modern history this game is seen as the foundation of the club which went on to take up Melbourne and Victorian rules, but in its initial iteration it was ‘the good old English game’.

There is every prospect of the good old English game of football becoming quite a popular institution in this District during the winter time. On Saturday last there were about 20 players assembled on the cricket ground, and away they went to work kicking with all their might. Unfortunately, however, two goals had been attained, before bang burst the ball, and as no substitute could be obtained, the players were obliged to give up just as they were getting nicely warmed to their work. The meeting ultimately resulted in the formation of a football club, entry, etc. Twenty-four members joined and the following officers were appointed: President, Frank Frost; Vice-President, Richard Osbourne; Hon secretary and Treasurer, J Matson. The club will meet for exercise on the cricket ground every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, and a supply of bladders will always be ready in order that the game may proceed. We understand there are three matches already on the tapis, viz. Town and Country, Volunteers and Civilians and the Married and Single.

In Castlemaine, Victoria, the local correspondent for The Argus bemoaned the absence of public celebration of the Queen’s birthday in 1855 but reported that a football match had taken place:

The Queen’s birthday has been kept here in a fashion, the public offices have generally been closed. Some of the officials and of the townsmen have kept up a game of football in the Camp. There have been no parade, no salutes, no grand dinner nor ball and supper – no money for ammunition to fire a salute.

Football also caught on in Sydney and New South Wales. In 1846 the Queen’s birthday had been marked by the troops of the 11th Regiment in Sydney taking part in a day of athletic sports concluding ‘with a game of football between the grenadier and light companies’. Much earlier, three newspapers at least reported on an outbreak of football among the military in their barracks in Sydney in July 1829. The Gazette reported that two of the regiments were Irish and they were taking part in one of their national recreations; the Monitor argued that it was a healthy amusement and much played in Leicestershire; and the Australian referred to it as an ordinary practice and a healthful exercise.

That theme was taken up by a correspondent referring to the western outpost of Sydney at Parramatta who wrote about the value of sports to the youth of Australia:

At all events, one thing is clear, that whenever a new township is formed, several portions of land should be set apart in the immediate vicinity of the town for the public benefit. Cricket, quoits, football, etc., are manly exercises, and ought to be encouraged if we wish Australian youths to grow up as a strong and athletic race.

The local newspaper in Bathurst, about 100 miles west of Sydney, reported on sports at the Bushman’s Inn, on Monday October 14, 1850. A cricket match between the Bathurst gents and the bushmen of the neighbourhood ‘was succeeded by that healthy and invigorating old country game – a football match, at which a few of the sinewy sons of the soil showed themselves adepts’. On Easter Tuesday, 1853, a fete at Booral, Port Stephens, north of Newcastle, had games of cricket and football for the young men. A match race for two pedestrians, Lynch and Cheeseman, was scheduled to take place in Hyde Park in Sydney in June 1854 and ‘after the match it is expected a game of football will take place between
two elevens to be picked on the ground’. The Easter Monday recreations at the Waterloo Retreat Hotel on Botany Road on April 13, 1857, were to conclude ‘with a football match, sides to be chosen on the ground’. The Oddfellows fete and picnic at Newtown in May 1860 included ‘good sports such as cricket, foot ball, running, quoits, dancing and swinging’. Footballs and hurling sticks were on sale at the Hyde Park Toy and Fancy Bazaar a decade earlier in 1844. J. Grimm was selling ‘Victoria and football lamps, with cut glass’, from 95 York Street in 1855.

Much earlier, in 1841, a major debate occurred in Sydney over a bill to ban the shooting of birds on a Sunday. During the course of the discussion of what became known as the Sabbath Shooting Bill, the Governor, Sir George Gipps, made an interesting observation about football:

After having searched through the mass of enactments which had been made on the subject, he had come to the conclusion that they would not gain any assistance on the subject from the English laws; the principle, therefore, that he would proceed upon with respect to shooting on a Sunday would be to attack it as a nuisance, and by that means it could be put down, and so could any other sport, such as skittles, or football, if they were practised on the Sunday in such a manner as to become annoying to the religious feelings of the colony; they could always be put down as nuisances, without attacking them as being done on the Lord’s day.

Gipps went on to argue that the workers should be able to enjoy themselves on their day of rest and not have their legitimate amusements put down on religious grounds:

He would venture to express a hope, however, that, so long as the higher classes of society continued to ride in their carriages and employ their servants on a Sunday, not from necessity, but from mere needless ostentation, neither in this nor in any other christian country would the legislature attempt to deprive the poor of those necessary and lawful recreations and amusements on the Sabbath day which were their right, and which the rich themselves enjoyed.

But the relevant point here is that football was acceptable in his eyes, provided it did not become a nuisance. The English legislation he had researched and perused ‘expressly allowed amusements and recreations after the toils or the week’.

Australian journalists were aware that restrictions on ‘nuisances’ were being extended in England. The editor of the Sydney Gazette glossed something he had come across in the English newspapers which arrived on the Lady Faversham covering the period from the beginning of March to April 8, 1830:

Some people here complain of restrictions, what will they say to the information, that by an Act lately introduced ‘for the better lighting, watching, and cleansing of parishes in England and Wales’, is constituted an offence for any person, to ‘fly any kite, drive any hoop, or play at foot-ball, or any other game, or games to the annoyance of passengers or travellers’. The juvenile portion, we presume, of the community, will by no means relish this clause.

So in England the constrictions on football were being extended while in Australia there seems to have been much less concern about the game.

References to football in what is now Queensland in the early period are scarce, but Ian Syson found this advertisement from 1849, probably from the publican of a well-known hostelry across the river from the centre of Brisbane:

ANNIVERSARY.

TO the SPORTING BLADES of BRISBANE.

BEING determined that the Anniversary shall not pass over without a little fun, in addition to the usual English Sports, the Lads of Kangaroo Point

CHALLENGE
all comers to a Game of Foot Ball – preliminaries to be settled at the Commercial Inn, Kangaroo Point, on the evening of the 24th.

Parties willing to make Matches at Quoits, are requested, to attend – three sets will be provided.

Commercial Inn, Kangaroo Point. Preliminaries almost certainly included the stakes and the rules. The anniversary was that of the settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788, usually celebrated on January 26. Queensland did not separate from New South Wales until 1859.

In Tasmania a Grand Fete Champetre on Boxing Day 1850 was advertised to be held on the Regatta Ground in Hobart: ‘Different Amusements, including Football, Hurling Matches, Dancing, and running for the Pig will be prepared on the Ground’. Earlier in the year, a correspondent to the Colonial Times was exercised about the desecration of the Sabbath on Sunday September 1, 1850, ‘by a party of 70 or 80 composed of boys, youths and children and some of a larger growth, men of somewhat respectable exterior, devoting themselves to a game at foot-ball; and what made the matter worse, the language – cursing and swearing, and shouting were such as would be considered infamous on a market day’. This might have been an example of the old villages game, but it is equally likely that it started as a small-sided game among a group of players and grew as others joined in. The following year, after the election of Mr Gregson as representative for Richmond, just north of Hobart, ‘in the afternoon a match at football took place in a large paddock near the township’.

Football cannot have been associated with violence in the minds of the Tasmanian authorities for when the committee organising the Richmond Jubilee on August 10, 1853, wanted to celebrate the cessation of transportation to Van Diemen’s Land, they did so with ‘games of cricket, foot-ball, quoits, pigeon-shooting, running and jumping and other sports’ for prizes. Nobody had to instruct the young people who attended:

The youngsters were very early, and while the guns (fifty) were yet discharging to collect the people, set to foot-ball, and one or two pretty cricket-matches were played.

The Sorell Jubilee on September 7, 1853, also had ‘general sports of the day: cricket, football, etc.’. The following year the advertisement for the Ploughing Match at Richmond had a final offering: ‘A foot-ball and other sports will take place during the day’. The football matches (plural) at this one turned out to be more like the village games, as a couple of players finished up in a creek and another ‘tumbled into the midst of a group of gentle dames’. The Queen’s Birthday celebrations in Longford included several prizes for juveniles: ‘Foot Ball, cricket, jumping in sacks, throwing the hammer’.

There is an interesting set of references to early football in South Australia in John A. Daly’s Elysian Fields: Sport, Class and Community in Colonial South Australia, 1836–1890. In this pioneering work Daly treats football unproblematically, assuming that the folk and Irish games of the early period morphed seamlessly into Victorian rules in the 1860s and 1870s. Prior to that, there was Irish football and another undifferentiated variety which derived from the village mayhem antecedents. Meanwhile, the public schools and their acolytes were ‘gentling’ football to prepare it for the modern form.

However, he cites a number of games and events which at least raise issues to be explored about the nature of what was going on. For example, he writes that the first mention of football in South Australia is a Saint Patrick’s Day game in 1843:
ST. PATRICK’S DAY.
A FEW of the Colonists from the Emerald Isle intend this day enjoying themselves in honor of their Saint

WITH A GAME OF FOOT-BALL.

After which, with their friends, they hope to regale themselves with a portion of an ox, to be roasted whole opposite the Market-house, Thebarton, this day at 2 pm.59

But he goes on, ‘Some reference to football having been played by the troops garrisoned in Adelaide must also be noted but in all cases including the one above the games were derivative of primitive village football played with a round ball.’ He provides nothing to substantiate this assertion. His next reference is to the introduction of football to Adelaide by John Acraman, an English public school product who imported five footballs shortly after his arrival in Adelaide in 1847.60 Later Acraman was credited with providing goals for the school playing fields of Saint Peter’s College in 1854.61 He also placed the notice in the press which led to the foundation of the Adelaide Football Club in 1860. In an early match played by the Adelaide Club:

There was not a surfeit of rules and goals were hard to score due to the fact that it necessitated kicking the ball between two upright posts and over a nine-foot horizontal bar. The ball ‘had to be marked before it could be handled’; holding the man and ‘hacking’ were strictly forbidden, but ‘there was no check on shouldering’.62

This looks like a predominantly kicking game and the players were mainly cricketers, according to Daly.63

Acraman later became clearly associated with the Australian game and was often referred to as the ‘father of football’ in South Australia, but there are other strands which did not necessarily point in the same direction.

Daly reproduces the programme for the Commemoration Festival at Glenelg, Adelaide, on Monday December 28, 1857, celebrating the 21st anniversary of the proclamation of the colony of South Australia. The second item on the programme is for a football match for a prize of £1 1s with an entry fee of 1s. The match is to be handled by the same judge ‘as last’ and on the same site ‘as last’. Whether this refers to the previous event at the festival, a foot race or to the previous football match is not clear.

Another advertisement for football appeared around 1853:

TWELVE MEN of Westmeath offer to PLAY at FOOTBALL twelve men from any of the counties in Ireland, or six each from two counties, at Thebarton on Easter Monday. Play to commence at 12 o’clock.64

In an essay on football in South Australia, the writer purloins some of John Daly’s argument to assert that ‘this game was, apparently, “Caid”, a forerunner to Gaelic football, played by teams of interminable number and with unlimited duration, “or until the players were thirsty”, coupled with intermittent violence’. This flies in the face of the evidence that this was a game between two teams of 12 players and the idea that players from the different counties of Ireland could come together to play under one set of conditions (rules or laws).

The expedition to the Arctic in 1850 by Sir John Ross searching for Sir John Franklin, the former Governor of Van Diemen’s Land, was reported in the Perth Gazette in Western Australia and the Courier in Tasmania and included this item: ‘Ample time was allowed to the crews of both ships to meet each other and games of foot-ball and other exercises relieved the monotony which surrounded them’.65
Discourses of Football

All these references predate the codification of football in Australia and the UK but make clear that the game was embedded in the social lives of migrants, as it was in their homelands. Football is often mentioned as just one of a list of sports which have taken place or are planned. For example, ‘There will be games of all kinds, cricket, quoits, football, throwing the hammer, etc.’ ran a report on the plans to celebrate at a public holiday in Geelong on December 14, 1855. 

The word football was in common use in political and other discourse as metaphor and image. The very fact that football did not have to be explained to readers – it could be taken for granted – reinforces this point. The Geelong Advertiser and Squatters’ Advocate, as the Geelong Advertiser was known for a period in the 1840s and 1850s, carried several articles in which football featured both practically and figuratively. A light-hearted guide for country gentleman, borrowed no doubt from English sources, on the art of ‘Peasant preserving’ included this advice:

The Beer shop is very destructive to peasants; and you must therefore do all in your power to keep them out of it. The peasant, like the rest of his species, is apt to seek amusement, and kill care in the readiest way that occurs to him.

Therefore, he is uncomfortable at home and [if he] has nothing better to do, he is soon off to the Beer-shop. Accordingly you must see he is well-lodged and cared for; you should train him to read, and put a few books in his way to occupy his mind with; you may also encourage him to play cricket, football, and so forth, in his leisure hours; for which purpose you should provide him a little leisure while it is light; and if you give him a holiday now and then so much the better.

For a peasant-keeper, you may employ a parson of the right breed.

Another article purported to be from an Irish soldier before Sebastopol during the Crimean War who wrote as follows: ‘Every one goes to his duty as merry as a lark, caring as little for Russia or his balls as they do for the foot ball they kick for sport’. When being reproved by an officer for whistling an Irish air, a cannon ball flew over their heads, leading the miscreant to say, ‘There goes a boy on duty; and by Japers, hear how he whistles!’ The Geelong newspaper had a long-running feud with The Argus and accused the Melbourne editor of overegging the importance of Louis Napoleon’s coup d’etat in France in 1852 as knocking ‘our little globe about like a football’.

Football, Violence and Temperance

As should be clear by this point, the local authorities across Australia promoted football and tolerated the game, apparently unconcerned about any intrinsic propensity to promote violence. This was important in a frontier society where the risk of protest and insurrection was significant and the capacity of the local governments of the colonies to deal with such matters was quite limited. There is an oft-quoted example of what could happen, however, on the Queen’s birthday in 1840:

A number of Irishmen assembled in Hyde Park to give the Colonists a specimen of the game of hurling, which, as usual, terminated in a row. There was also a game of football attempted which also gave rise to sundry scuffles and broken shins to boot. The climate of Australia is too warm for hurling.

In this case the football incident seems to have been confined to the field of play and the exercise had been pretty rough, but the number of participants remains unknown.

Four years later in Melbourne there was a hurling match which gave rise to concerns about a breakdown in public order. On July 12:
A hurling Match and Picnic was attended by about 200 persons each carrying a shillelagh of formidable proportions. Sixty special constables were sworn in on the morning, duly furnished with batons and authorised to quell any outbreaks that might arise. The fear here was sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants after the Melbourne Morning Herald announced that the Orangemen were going to march through the streets. In the end the day passed off relatively peacefully as the Orangemen postponed their march until the evening after the picnic was over. On this occasion the police stood by and again the only injuries were on the field. There is a tailpiece to the day’s events as ‘the hurlers had a glorious days fun and footballing was for the first time introduced as an afterpiece’. This was almost certainly the contemporary form of the Irish game.

In 1835 an earlier correspondent on the influence of sport on temperance criticised a lecturer at the Sydney School of Arts who argued that:

the principal cause of the comparative absence of intemperance, in several of the continental nations of Europe, was none other than the common practice of adjourning from the church to the innocent Sabbath amusements of the foot-ball ground, the ball room or the card table.

The critic used the Irish to rebut this suggestion, arguing that they were devoted admirers of football and pottheen [sic] rather than temperance. But the relationship between drink and football was more complex than either of the extreme positions allows. The following year the Hobart Town Courier reacted strongly to a proposal that the government domain be parcelled up and sold off on ‘orders from home’:

Where else are your young men to breathe fresh air and recreate from the indoor toil of a long day? Do you interdict cricket, foot ball, golf, and all other outdoor and national amusements? Will you leave no door open to exhilarate but that of the public house?

Hobart teetotallers held their annual festival at new year in 1848, drawing more than 1600 people to the event at which:

the juveniles were encouraged in the enjoyment of sports suitable to their age; the young men and women ‘danced on the green’ to the music of the band; whilst the more masculine engaged in playing at foot-ball and other old English sports. It was a leading teetotaller, William Stitt Jenkins, who tried to set up a Saturday afternoon football club in Geelong in April 1859 in an attempt to curb the influence of alcohol on the young men of the town, and to ‘provide bracing exercise . . . [for] persons cramped during the week by desk or counter service’. The Geelong Advertiser suggested that ‘many such clubs will no doubt be established before cold weather sets in’. The Advertiser had a bit of fun at Stitt Jenkins’s expense, aware that he was given to supporting unpopular causes, including temperance:

We would far rather see the teetotallers forming themselves into rival foot-ball clubs and kicking each other’s shins in good fellowship, than receive ill-natured letters from their rival factions accusing one another of ‘satanic influence’! There is plenty of bile just now in the Geelong Teetotal body for which a good field day at foot-ball or hockey, would be an infallible curative.

But it is interesting that the idea of football clubs (plural) does not strike the Advertiser with the force of novelty in 1859 and they are bracketed with hockey clubs, a juxtaposition which has not been remarked upon before to my knowledge.

The Reverend B. Ashley took up the promotion of health on behalf of the Christian Knowledge Society. Reflecting the contemporary fear that Australians might be atrophying for want of exercise and the seduction of alcohol, he recommended:
Cricket; football; quoits; swinging; trap-ball; leaping over a moveable bar, or with poles; parallel bars to exercise the arms; leap-frog; or shuttle-cock, a number of persons standing in a circle. Such recreation would tend to draw men from the debasing habits of drinking and licentiousness, and the exercise would promote health, diffuse a feeling of lightness through the body, and increase cheerfulness of mind.82

The social composition of the footballers is only just beginning to be studied and it is certain that some of the participants had good, sometimes first-hand, experience of the games being played in the public schools in England.83 When debates about a common code of rules took place later in the decade, the newspapers and the accounts of the deliberations make clear that the rules of these schools were thoroughly considered by the people concerned.84 Nevertheless, the claim by Tom Wills, who was educated at Rugby, to have introduced the game of football to Victoria in 1858 is unsustainable.85

None of these matches in 1840s through to 1859 led, as far as is known, to the establishment of a continuing organisation or the promulgation of a set of rules, unlike the meeting of Wills and three or four others at the Parade Hotel in Melbourne at which a set of rules for the Melbourne football club was drawn up. But then in the 1860s, and probably for some time thereafter, clubs were formed for the duration of the relevant season but had to be reconstituted the following year. Also, it is well into the 1870s before there is anything like general agreement on one set of rules for football, even though sets of rules were debated and written down in both England and Australia.86

There is no claim that similar evidence can be found for every year following the arrival of the Europeans in Australia and there were probably periods when the game disappeared from the printed press sources mentioned here. It is becoming clear, however, that there was much more football being played in areas quite remote from the Home Counties of England in the UK and in its colonies than has been discussed in the literature so far. Any suggestion that this empirical research is driven by a quasi-political agenda to elevate the working-class contribution to the sport misses the point.87 As I have been advocating ever since I began writing on the early history of the game, more empirical research to underpin theoretical analysis is required.

The notion that people had to be taught the game of football by the public school and university men, as distinct from having their games codified and organised on a broader basis by them, has always seemed an inadequate explanation of the processes involved. The explosion of popularity of the game within a generation has always been inexplicable in those terms and it is that which is the key feature of the game both in the UK and overseas.

Notes on Contributor
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Notes
1. Hornby, *Uppies and Downies*.
Sport in Nineteenth Century Scotland: A Regional Study: II – Causes.” Small-sided implies that the matches were between teams of up to say 15 players, rather than the hundreds who took part in the village folk games.

4. Earlier versions of this paper have appeared in Hay, “Football in Australia in the 1850s,” Bulletin of Sport and Culture; “Football in Australia in the 1850s,” British Society of Sports History Bulletin. My thanks are due to the editors of both magazines for the permission to use that material here.

5. Collins, “The Invention of Sporting Traditions.” There is now a large literature on the relative influence of individuals and groups (and historians) on the emergence of what became the Australian game from the late 1850s onwards. See, for example, de Moore, Tom Wills; Hess et al., A National Game; Collins, “The Invention of Sporting Traditions”; and Pennings, Origins of Australian Football.

6. Kitching, “‘Old Football and the ‘New’ Codes.”


9. Harvey, Football: The First Hundred Years.

10. The Castlemaine or Mount Alexander goldfield was about 70 miles from Ballarat. For the role of British troops in Australia prior to 1870, see Stanley, The Remote Garrison.

11. Castlemaine Mail, September 22, 1855, as quoted in Fagan, The First Lions of Rugby, 197. Lieutenant William Paul led the Suffolk Regiment detachment during the battle in December 1854 and was seriously wounded but recovered to play in this game. Fagan, reading back from the 1860s’ experience, argues that the game was a rugby hacking-style one, but there is no contemporary indication that this was so. Lewis, A Day at the Camp, 9, cites the Mount Alexander Mail of September 28, 1855, for this match. Lewis has some good information on the start of Melbourne Rules football in Castlemaine in 1859 through the Butterworth brothers, one of whom was a member of the Melbourne club.

12. Hay, “‘Our Wicked Foreign Game’.”

13. Port Phillip Herald, March 30, 1850, 3. I owe this and several other references to Dr Tony Ward. See also Finn (Garryowen), The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 762–3. The White Hart Inn was in Bourke Street in Melbourne. Trevor Ruddell kindly provided a copy of the relevant section of the Chronicles.

14. The football match was played on the ground which was used by the Melbourne Cricket Club at that date, not the present Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). The club did not move to the site of the modern MCG until 1853 (Dunstan, The Paddock That Grew, 17).

15. Supplement to the Argus, Tuesday, November 19, 1850, 15; South Australian, Thursday, December 5, 1850, 4. Nearly all of the following references taken from the contemporary press are drawn from the National Library of Australia’s wonderful newspaper digitisation project, http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/home. There were several Barrys in Melbourne in 1850. Mark Pennings indicated that the captain of one of the sides which played was David Barry, a publican at the Butchers’ Arms in Elizabeth Street, citing Batchelder, “Football on the Header Melbourne Cricket Ground 1850” (Pennings, Origins of Australian Football, 12).


17. It is not clear whether the entry fees mentioned in this and the next few games is per team or per individual. If the latter, it would have deterred the lower orders, and Garryowen suggested it was on this occasion.

18. The advertisement appeared in The Argus over several days. This one is taken from that of August 12, 1850, 3.

19. The Argus, August 26, 1850, 2.

20. Ibid., August 27, 1850, 2.

21. Finn (Garryowen), The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 667–8; 747–8. The Argus, December 8, 1858, 3, carried advertisements for the sale of thoroughbred horses and cattle by Dalmahoy Campbell and Company.

22. The Argus, August 13, 1851, 4; August 28, 1851, 2.

23. Geelong Advertiser, August 30, 1851, 2.

24. The Argus, August 29, 1851, 2.

25. Finn (Garryowen), The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 749.
26. *Geelong Advertiser*, November 20, 1850, 2; Blainey, *A Game of Our Own*, 12. More than 6000 people attended the first day of the festival, among them 2000 children: “... they were regaled with buns and cakes, and ... a variety of amusements, in the way of cricket, foot-ball, swings, &c., &c. had been provided for them” (*Geelong Advertiser*, November 20, 1850, 2).


29. *South Australian Register*, January 7, 1859, 1.


31. *Port Phillip Herald*, February 26, 1856; March 5, 1856, 8. See also Penningns, *Origins of Australian Football*, 12, who notes sporting events including football being advertised by the publican of Johnston’s Hotel in Prahran in December 1854 in the *Port Phillip Melbourne Herald*.


34. *Warrnambool Examiner and Western Districts Advertiser*, June 4, 1861, 2.


37. *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, July 25, 1829, 2; *Sydney Monitor*, July 25, 1829, 4; and *Australian*, July 24, 1829, 3.


41. *Empire*, Sydney, June 12, 1854, 2

42. *Bell’s Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer*, April 11, 1857, 3.


44. *Australian*, June 27, 1844, 1.

45. The author is not sure what football lamps were, but the name seems to have required no explanation (*Sydney Morning Herald*, March 17, 1855, 10).


47. For an account of Gipps’s life and governorship of New South Wales, see McCulloch, “Sir George Gipps (1791–1847).”


51. Ibid., Hobart, September 10, 1850, 3.

52. Ibid., Hobart, October 24, 1851, 3.


59. Daly, *Elysian Fields*, 58, citing *Southern Australian*, March 17, 1843, 3. See also *South Australian Register*, March 18, 1843, 4.

60. Daly, *Elysian Fields*, 60.

61. Daly, *Elysian Fields*, 63, citing *South Australian Register* of July 25, 1908.


63. Daly, *Elysian Fields*, 60.


66. Report from their own correspondent in Geelong (*The Argus*, December 13, 1855, 6); see also “New Year’s Day – Grand Silver Cup Race and other Matches, Horse and Foot; Skittles, Cricket, Football, Banquet, Concert and Ball, Hawksburn, Enquire Johnston’s Hotel, Prahran,” *The Argus*, January 1, 1855, 7.

67. See, for example, *Inquirer*, Perth, October 9, 1850, 2; *Maitland Mercury*, NSW, April 6, 1850, 2; *South Australian Register*, May 9, 1850, 2; *Cornwall Chronicle*, Launceston, March 18, 1843, 2. Ian Syson has tagged several such references in his research.
68. Many of these references were discovered thanks to Gillian Hibbins who pointed out a typo in an earlier version of this piece. She spotted “foothall” rather than “football”. Given the problems the Optical Character Recognition system has with “b” and “h” in early newspapers, I started searching for “foothall” and found several more examples of football games as a result.

69. Geelong Advertiser and Squatters’ Advocate, May 31, 1852, 2.
70. Ibid., October 9, 1855, 3.
71. Ibid., May 31, 1852, 2.
72. Sydney Herald, Wednesday, May 27, 1840, 2.
73. Ibid., May 31, 1852, 2.
74. Sydney Herald, Wednesday, May 27, 1840, 2.
76. Finn (Garryowen), The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 667–8. The Chronicles were originally published in 1888. Trevor Ruddell led me to this game.
77. Letter to the editor from a member of the Sydney School of Arts, Colonist, Sydney, July 30, 1835, 4.
78. Grow, “From Gum Trees to Goalposts,” 12; Blainey, A Game of Our Own, 3.
79. Geelong Advertiser, April 21, 1859, 2.
80. Brownhill, a later editor and historian of the Geelong Advertiser, made amends for his predecessor’s facetiousness in a neat account of the life and contribution of William Stitt Jenkins, poet, environmentalist, social critic, agitator on behalf of the poor and philanthropist, in Brownhill, The History of Geelong and Corio Bay, 345–7.
81. Geelong Advertiser, April 21, 1859, 2.
82. South Australian Register, Adelaide, May 10, 1850, 4.
83. Mark Pennings and Robert Pascoe are compiling a prosopography of the first generation of footballers involved with the code which became Australian (Rules) football (Pennings and Pascoe, “The Corio Oval Tribe”). See also Hay, “A Club Is Born.”
86. For a comprehensive account of the meetings and deliberations on the rules of game in England and Scotland see Brown, The Football Association. For Australia, see the references in note 84 and Hibbins, “Myth and History in Australian Rules Football.”

References


