

TIM HOGAN

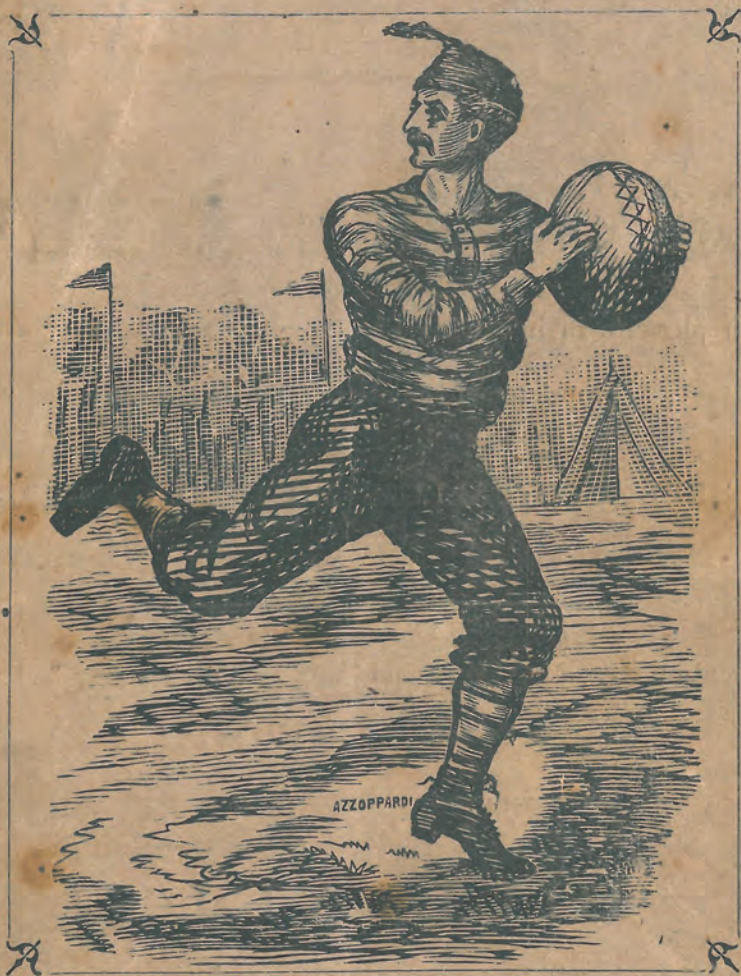
Saints and sinners: local loyalties in early Victorian football

Australian Rules football history is well chronicled. More than 1700 books and articles have been published about the game in Australia. The great majority of these are about the elite level of the game, such as the Victorian Football League or Australian Football League. In the largest bibliography in the game's literature, *Reading Australian Rules Football: The Definitive Guide to the Game*, fewer than 200 of the 2000 works cited were about grassroots or community-level football.¹ Most written accounts of community-level football are individual-club histories. The majority of these do not explore the social and cultural dimensions of football in the community.² Within the collections of State Library Victoria there is material which can provide sources for historians to explore some of these aspects at the community and personal levels. The range of material comprises original diaries and early photographs, football publications and newspapers from the 19th century and early 20th century. A survey of this material provides some insights into the early development of football in country areas of Victoria. It presents some alternative avenues of research to broaden our understanding of football history.

To understand the degree of passion early football generated in country areas it is revealing to explore examples of local football controversies. A match

Opposite: Thomas P Power (comp.), *The Footballer: An Annual Record of Football in Victoria and the Australian Colonies*, Melbourne: Henriques and Co., 1876, Rare Books Collection, RARELT 796.3320945 F73P

THE FOOTBALLER.



1876

played between two Victorian teams, from Bacchus Marsh and Ballan, both west of Melbourne, makes an interesting case study. In late June 1882 these two teams played a match at Ballan. The match was described in the *Bacchus Marsh Express* newspaper as ‘rather rough on both sides’.³ This was nothing unusual for a 19th-century game of football: contests were played with great physicality and vigour and were much more rugged and even violent than those of later decades. Game pioneer HCA Harrison had famously declared in 1870 that football was not a game for ‘menpoodles and milksops’.⁴ The fact that the roughness of the contest was mentioned at all, though, indicates it was a more physical clash than usual. Not surprisingly, the standard of umpiring was criticised. Some things in football never change. The *Bacchus Marsh Express* report concluded with the hope that ‘should the Marsh and Ballan teams meet again it is hoped the game will be played in a more friendly manner’.⁵

The hope was not realised. What followed the 1882 match was a series of highly impassioned and indignant letters to local newspapers by the members of the rival teams, each accusing the other of disgraceful conduct. The Ballan correspondent for the *Bacchus Marsh Express* noted, ‘Both players and spectators agree in saying that the conduct of some of the members of the Bacchus Marsh team (whose names have been noted) was simply disgraceful’.⁶ ‘Sigma’, a correspondent from Bacchus Marsh, countered, ‘It is not in human nature, at a game of football, one side should be all Saints and the other all sinners’, before sarcastically offering that, ‘according to received notions, Ballan is indeed much nearer to Heaven than Bacchus Marsh’. The Ballan correspondent, he observed, must have been ‘got at’.⁷

The opposing captains then continued the written combat in following issues of the *Express*. Much of the dispute centred on who had used foul language. George Cuthbertson, a Bacchus Marsh player, asserted, ‘Another of the Ballan team, who is presumed to be a gentleman, rushed at me, at the same time making use of the vilest of bullock-driving phraseology’.⁸ EG Jones, the Bacchus Marsh captain, accused Ballan players, such as JW Craig, of starting fights but being unwilling to finish them, thereby questioning his manliness and honour. He also accused Ballan representatives of being ‘shoddy aristocrats’ who looked with disdain upon their visitors.⁹ JW Craig replied the following week, vigorously defending the conduct of the Ballan players and challenging the accuracy of Jones’s assertions: ‘The remarks are not only mean and contemptible but the greater part of them are entirely false ... They did nothing but bully right through the game, which was doubtless owing in a great measure to the captain’s utter ignorance of the rules of football’. To add further insult, Craig accused the Bacchus Marsh team of consuming all the

refreshments provided by the match host: 'The Bacchus Marsh team had the start of us, and had emptied the bottles and devoured the sumptuous repast before we arrived, and but for the generosity of our President, Mr. Inglis, who replenished the board, we would have gone short'.¹⁰ From the Ballan captain, TA Dodds, the rebuke was swift, succinct and final: 'With regard to the letters *re* football match Ballan v. Bacchus Marsh, which appeared in the *Express* ... it is my intention ... not to reply, but to treat them with the contempt they deserve'.¹¹

The matter then disappears from the columns of the *Express* save for a witty summing up of the affair by a correspondent with the moniker 'Footballer':

If differences should occur in future on any similar occasion, I would suggest the belligerents 'wash their dirty linen at home,' i.e., settle any disputed point on the spot without further delay, and, once decided, be good friends thereafter. It is to be hoped that things will mend, and neighbours meet, as they should do, in a more friendly spirit in future.¹²

This public slanging match appears to have frozen football relations between Bacchus Marsh and Ballan for several years, with Bacchus Marsh opting to play matches against teams from the outer western reaches of Melbourne and Ballan playing matches against nearby teams to its west, such as Gordon.¹³ The next recorded match between the two teams did not happen until 1894.¹⁴

Intense rivalries such as this were not uncommon in country areas, and numerous examples can be found, such as infamous clashes between Geelong and Barwon in the late 1870s which were noted for their ferocity on and off the field.¹⁵ Although these disputes depict some of the uglier aspects of human behaviour, for the most part the rivalries that were reported played out through more acceptable modes of conduct.

These reports show us that football had already in these early days entrenched itself deeply in rural communities as something that aroused passions and fuelled intense expressions of local loyalties. This in turn indicates that football must have spread from its birth place in Melbourne in the 1850s into the rural districts of Victoria quite quickly. There is evidence of a form of football being played in the central Victorian goldfield districts, such as Castlemaine, as early as 1855.¹⁶ By the early 1860s matches had been played in Maryborough, Ballarat and Bendigo.¹⁷ But this was a time when most matches were arranged on an ad hoc basis between scratch teams. The establishment of formal clubs and football leagues and associations in most rural areas occurred towards the end of the 19th century. This development was to some

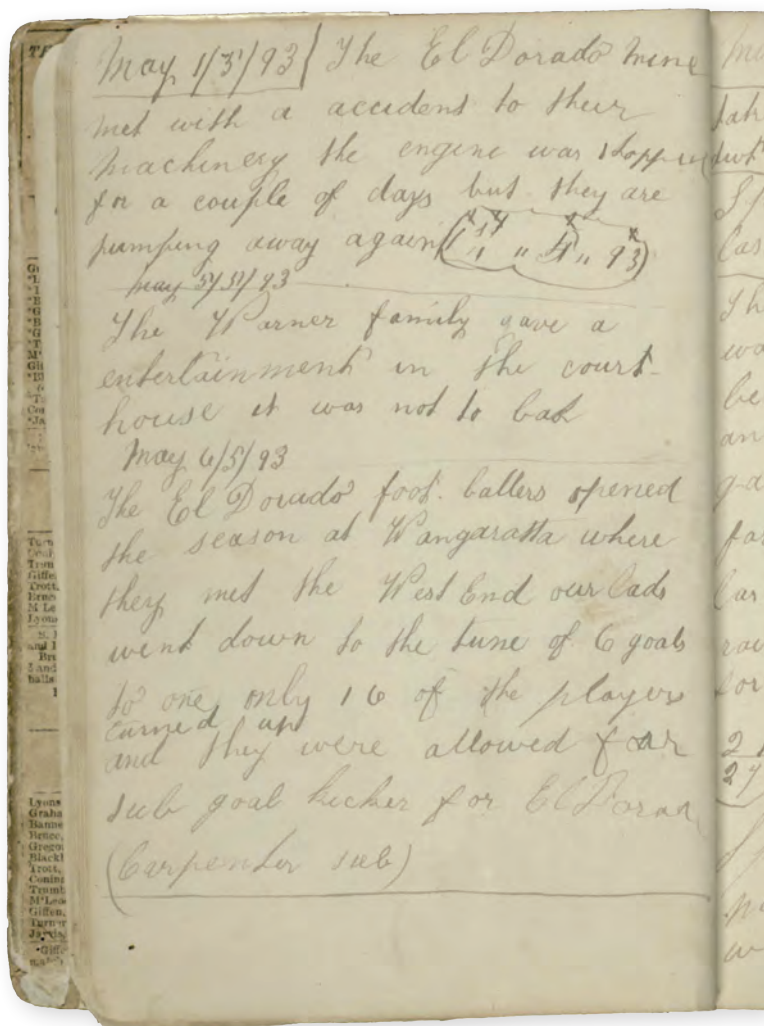
extent facilitated by the formation of the Victorian Football Association, in May 1877.

To trace how football developed in the rural areas of Victoria, newspapers of the period may be used. This material provides the essential building blocks for historians. But there are other sources of information, such as the earliest football books, personal diaries, illustrations and photographs. In some cases such sources provide important alternative narratives. State Library Victoria holds some unique and rare examples of these types of primary sources, a close examination of which provides insights into the early development of football in rural Victoria and glimpses of the passions about the game expressed by ordinary people.

The first Australian Rules football book

A fascinating glimpse into how widespread football was across Victoria in the 1870s is provided by *The Footballer: An Annual Record of Football in Victoria* (see page 41). This is the earliest known published book relating to Australian Rules football. It was first published in 1875 and appeared annually until 1881. State Library Victoria holds one of only a few known complete sets of the publication.¹⁸ The majority of this work concerns itself with football competitions in Melbourne and Geelong, where most of the best-performing clubs played. *The Footballer*, though, was comprehensive in its account of all football competitions in Victoria at that time, and there was substantial space devoted to 'provincial' clubs and to clubs from yet smaller communities, which were often referred to as 'junior' or 'minor' clubs. Some of the big provincial clubs, like Ballarat, played regularly against Melbourne clubs and Geelong at this time, and most of the provincial clubs played matches against teams within their regions. *The Footballer* listed the particulars of as many provincial clubs about which its editor, Thomas Power, could obtain information. In all there were 39 country clubs listed in the 1875 edition, although 20 of these were in the process of formation. The country clubs represented nearly all regions in Victoria; those listed ranged from Portland in the far south-west to Dunolly in the central north-west, Maffra in the east, Bendigo and Ballarat in the central districts and Myrtleford in the north-east.

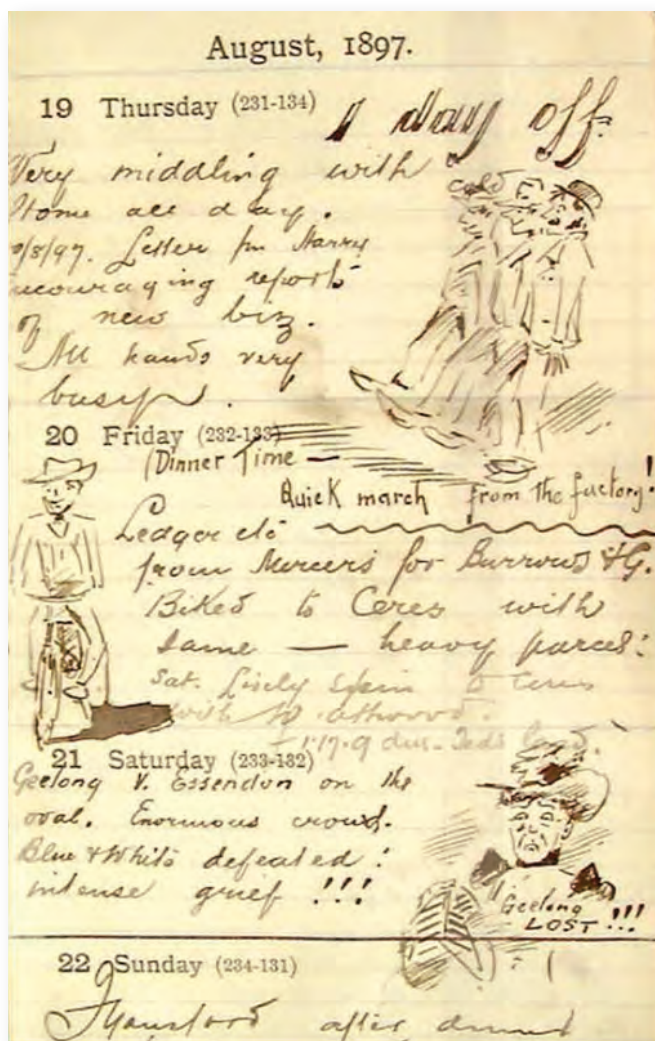
For many of the clubs listed in *The Footballer* there are details about club colours, home ground, number of members and prominent players. In 1875 the notes for Bacchus Marsh players included EG Jones, who played in the infamous 1882 game against Ballan. He was described as 'a good all-round man, best on the wings'. A description of another Bacchus Marsh player reads, 'Simpson, G. – Punts well, but charges better', suggesting that in modern terms



'El Dorado miner's diary', 6 May 1893, Manuscripts Collection, MS 14076

he would have been a good player at winning the ball when it was contested by opposing players.¹⁹ It is not known if G Simpson played in the 1882 match, but one who charged well would have been in the thick of the action in that rather acrimonious game.

Another interesting feature of *The Footballer* is its references to the early participation in football competitions by Indigenous Australians from the south-western region of Victoria. The 1878 edition contains an account of the Framlingham Aboriginal Football Team. The team is described as 'a fine strong athletic lot of fellows all of them. Who with practice would be second to none'. Several players are then mentioned, including Albert 'Pompey' Austin,²⁰ who is recognised as the first Aboriginal man to play major league football, in 1872, when he represented Geelong.²¹

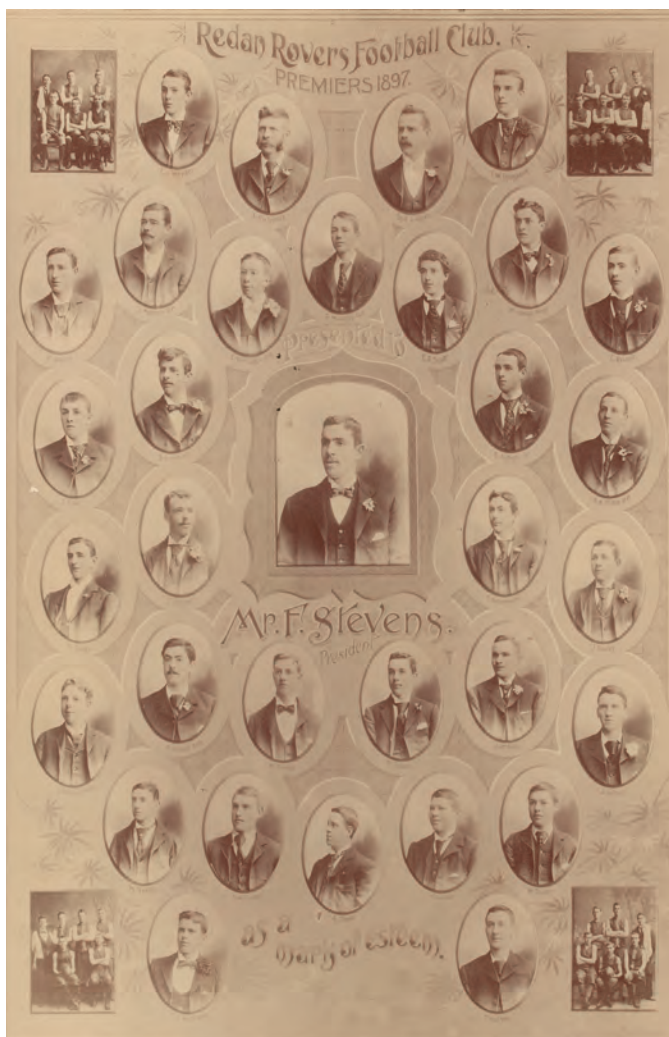


Alexander Goodall, diary, 19–22 August 1897, Alexander Goodall, Papers, 1892–97, Manuscripts Collection, MS 12075

Personal diaries

State Library Victoria holds hundreds of original 19th-century personal diaries and journals. There are two known to contain occasional references to football, the 'El Dorado miner's diary' and the diaries of Alexander Goodall.²²

Eldorado is a small community near Wangaratta, in north-east Victoria. The 'El Dorado miner's diary' was written between 1893 and 1895. The author has not been identified, but the diary's many references to mining suggest he was engaged in the mining industry. Brief references to cricket and football occur regularly in the diary. The entry for 6 May 1893 records the opening of the football season: 'The El Dorado footballers opened the season at Wangaratta where they met the West End. Our lads went down to the tune



Richards & Co., *Redan Rovers football club, premiers 1897, 1897*, Pictures Collection, H33055

of 6 goals to 1. Only 16 of the players turned up and they were allowed for sub goal kicker for El Dorado (Carpenter sub)' (see page 45).

Entries were mainly factual, but sometimes, like all football fans, the writer was emotional in his expression. The entry for 12 May 1894 notes, 'El Dorado get disgracefully beaten by Wang 16 goals to 1'. The entry for 7 September 1894 is interesting, as it notes a match between Essendon, from the Victorian Football Association, the premier competition in Victoria, and a local team, Beechworth Wanderers. The local team were heavily defeated, 'to the tune of 14 goals to 2 goals', and there was a 'large crowd present to witness the match'.

The diaries of Alexander Goodall, a young clerical worker in Geelong, were written in the 1890s. Goodall was a keen supporter of the



Unidentified junior football team possibly from Geelong, c. 1900, Pictures Collection, H96.17/19

Geelong football club. His diary entries are brief, but they are frequently illustrated with line drawings and have a wonderful whimsical quality. For example, on 28 August 1895 he wrote, ‘Heavy rain and hail, very cold. Lively football match at Kardinia Park. Mud and slush no object!’²³ An entry from 21 August 1897 indicates his passionate support for his team: ‘Geelong v. Essendon on the oval. Enormous crowd. Blue & White defeated! Intense grief!!!’ (see page 46).

Although references to football in these two diaries are brief and fairly infrequent, they provide a glimpse of what two ordinary working people following the early years of Australian Rules football thought of the game. When compared with the thousands of words about football written by newspaper reporters that can be found from this period, rare private accounts such as these by individual football fans are all the more special because of their intimacy.

Photographs and illustrations

Winter in Australia: football in the Richmond paddock, published in the 27 July 1866 issue of the *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, is the earliest known illustration of an Australian Rules football match.²⁴ Similar illustrations appeared over the next few decades, the earliest being of the teams and personalities from the major leagues and clubs in Melbourne. Images of the game in regional Victoria in the 19th century and early 20th century are extremely rare. Some of the



Woods Point football ground, c. 1890–1920, Pictures Collection, H2012.220/2

earliest of these are team portraits from the Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong areas, where regional football was long established and well patronised by relatively large populations. Redan football club, in Ballarat, established in 1872, is one of the oldest Victorian regional clubs. When it won a premiership in 1897 a photographic portrait was commissioned to commemorate the event, and it is one of the earliest images of a country football team held by State Library Victoria (see page 47). Other early team portraits from the Library's collection include those of Eaglehawk club in 1900 and Imperial Albion club, from Bendigo, in 1905.²⁵ There is also a striking image of an unidentified junior team thought to be from Geelong (see page 48).

Photographs of the game actually being played in this early period of football, in any level of competition, are exceptionally rare. The technical constraints and cost of photography at the time meant that it was usually reserved for recording important events such as premierships. One notable action photograph of a game in a rural setting is of a match at Woods Point, deep in Victoria's mountain region north-east of Melbourne. The date of the image is not known, but judging by the players' attire it looks to be sometime in the 1890s or early 1900s. The basic condition of the ground and the relatively sizeable number of spectators vividly suggest the extent to which football had become popular even in small and remote places in Victoria.

Apart from these early photographs, country football also attracted the attention of artists and illustrators. A delightful compilation of images was produced for the 28 July 1884 issue of the *Australasian Sketcher with Pen and*



Our match with the Wallaby Flat football club, print, 1884, Pictures Collection, A/S28/07/84/supp, in *Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil* (Melbourne), supplement, 28 July 1884, pp. 2–3

Pencil (see above). The work is in a very humorous vein and is titled *Our match with the Wallaby Flat football club*. No such team as Wallaby Flat existed, so this is an entirely imagined football frolic in the country but one which captures the essence of country football in the public imagination.

As football continued to spread throughout regional Victoria in the late 19th century, local newspapers devoted increasing space to its reportage, and by the middle decades of the 20th century this began to include some photographic coverage in many of the country newspapers. State Library Victoria's extensive collection of newspapers, many of which are digitised and searchable online, enables historians, football fans and the curious to easily discover this documentary record. The few known surviving personal accounts of football in diaries and photographs from the early decades give some fascinating insights into the place of football in communities far from Melbourne. They are reminders that the history of football has a community and individual dimension, a parallel narrative to the more widely known story of major league football in Melbourne.