IN SEARCH OF MARNGROOK

My maternal great-great-grandparents, John and Mary Anne Chivers, settled at Templestowe in the Yarra Valley in 1840, and immediately established close and enduring relationships with the local Aboriginal people. Their two sons, Willie, and my great-grandfather Tom, grew up immersed in tribal life. Many stories of this time have been passed down our family, including snippets about a tribal football game they played.

In my final year of secondary school at Scotch College in 1958, the centenary was celebrated of what is claimed to be the first game played of Australian football in 1858, between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar.

The person who organised, umpired and played in this first Aussie Rules game was twenty-three years old Tom Wills, who had grown up in the Western District of Victoria. At the time I was struck by the similarity of Tom Wills' upbringing with that of my great-grandfather, Tom Chivers. Both boys had been immersed in tribal life in the 1840's, both spoke Aboriginal language fluently, and both were adept at Aboriginal song and dance.

However, it was not until twenty-three years later, in 1981, that the light really dawned on me. This was when the centenary edition of a book 'Australian Aborigines' was published. It had been written by Jimmy Dawson, whom I had known about, because Dawson had also settled on the Yarra River at Warrandyte in 1840.

Jimmy Dawson and John Chivers had therefore been contemporaries and neighbours, and had also shared a quite strong, but uncommon interest in indigenous culture. To my knowledge, Jimmy Dawson and John Chivers were the only two settlers in the district, who became fluent in the local Woiwurrung language.

Dawson then shifted to the Western District of Victoria in 1844 and continued a close association with the Aboriginal people there. This was aided by the fact that he found the languages there to be very similar to Woiwurrung. Finally, in 1881 Dawson published his book, detailing his lifetime of experience with Aboriginal culture.

My moment of revelation came when I read his account of the universally played Aboriginal game of football. This was usually played with a possum-fur ball, about the size of a grapefruit, or alternatively with an inflated kangaroo bladder. I immediately saw that the unrestricted movement and high marking of the Aboriginal game was strikingly similar to that of Australian Rules football.

Interestingly, an appendix in Dawson's book also showed that tribal football was played in the Ararat area where Tom Wills had grown up. The Djabwurrung word for the tribal game was recorded as 'Mingorm'. Dawson's book indicated that the game was not only a daily part of life within tribes, it also had strong ritual and diplomatic significance between tribes. So, Tom Wills must certainly have been regularly exposed to both the adult and children's versions of the tribal football game.

To me, it seemed that one of the most compelling arguments in favour of a link between tribal football and Australian Rules, was that Aussie Rules is the only football code in the world that does not have an offside rule. So, where could Tom Wills have got such a radical idea from, if not from tribal football? Both the tribal game and Aussie Rules are free-flowing, 360-degree games, and there is also incontrovertible evidence that Tom Wills invented the strategy of forward positional play in the new national football game.

However, to promote a connection between the two games, I needed to choose between the many tribal names on offer, as the best vehicle with which to capture the public imagination. To me, the other language names provided in Jimmy Dawson's book and in other sources lacked resonance. But the Woiwurrung word where my great-grandfather had grown up, was Marngrook, which rolled nicely off the tongue. So, I consciously decided that this was the name I would use to promote wider public awareness of the historical connection, between Australian Rules football and the traditional Aboriginal game.

I then began asking around my older Aboriginal friends if they knew anything about this traditional tribal game. Most responses were pretty vague, but the response by Uncle Kevin Atkinson from Shepparton, was by far the most illuminating. He looked flabbergasted when I explained the traditional game to him and said: 'Now it all makes sense'.

Kevin then described in detail how when he was about eight at Cummeragunja Mission in the 1930's, he and some other children were playing kick-to-kick football between a row of houses. An old man whom they all thought was over ninety, emerged from one of the houses and told them to pair up according to size, gender and kinship. He then urged them to kick the ball high and compete for the mark, and went back inside.

Being good kids, they just did as they were told, without seeking any explanation. The point is that if the old man had been around ninety as they thought, then tribal life would still have been intact when he was a child.

Armed with this key information from Kevin, I then consulted a tribal friend from the Northern Territory, Donald Murrawilli, who was staying with me at the time. After describing Dawson's account of the 'class' relationships underlying the game, Donald then trusted me with a detailed insight into the structure and process of traditional tribal 'Skin Group' relationships, that Jimmy Dawson's account had revealed.

Now fully armed, my next decision was how to promote a wider public awareness of our national game's likely Aboriginal roots. I concluded that writing for an academic audience would not achieve what I wanted and decided instead to write articles for the popular press. So, in 1982 I sent articles to the Herald newspaper, the Australian Post magazine and the Southern Cross community newspaper, plus blurbs to various radio stations.

The tactic proved to be a raging success and stories about the possible Aboriginal origins of Australian football were splashed across the popular media over a number of weeks. Public acceptance of the idea was immediate, but academia remained much more sceptical. This idea was completely outside accepted academic wisdom.

Following this blaze of publicity, I helped an Aboriginal workmate, Grant Hansen, to launch 'The Marngrook Radio Show' on community radio in the mid-1980s. This radio show ran for a decade and Grant then followed on in 2007, with the launch of 'The Marngrook Footy Show' on NITV. The show was to be enormously popular for many years, but after its launch in 2007 it was the very next year followed by the 150th anniversary of our national football game. I had thought that by 2008, the argument on the Aboriginal origins of the game had already been well and truly won, but I was wrong.

In the official history of the game commissioned by the AFL and launched in 2008, an article by a historian had branded the vaunted Aboriginal connection as just 'A Seductive Myth'. The author quite erroneously claimed that there was no evidence that the game had been played where Tom Wills grew up. She then tried to buttress this with the erroneous claim that the game could not have been imported from Port Fairy, where Jimmy Dawson had witnessed it, because: 'Aboriginal people never left their own land for fear of getting killed'.

I immediately issued a statement to the media, pointing out that where Tom Wills had grown up, the Djabwurrung word for football was 'Mingorm', and that extensive intertribal trade and cultural exchange was a matter of proven fact. A series of vigorous exchanges then took place across the whole media, which subsequently became known as 'The 2008 Football History War'.

However, it was only just four years later in 2012, that the debate swung heavily back in favour of Marngrook as a precursor to Australian football. This was when some long-forgotten lithograph etchings emerged that had been made by the Blandowski expedition of 1856. These etchings showed daily Aboriginal tribal life in the Mallee region of Victoria, and Included one showing Aboriginal children playing kick-to-kick with a possum fur ball. Underneath the etching was inscribed 'Never let the ball touch the ground', which is the key rule from which other rules flow. In other words, don't do anything to make the ball touch the ground, such as spoiling the kick or mark, or tackling your opponent. What is intensely interesting is that when you look closely, the children are paired up according to size, just as Kevin Atkinson had described.

But there was also another etching that Blandowski had commissioned when he was back Germany in 1862. This showed the adult football game that Blandowski had obviously also witnessed. The etching is a powerful image of a spectacular high marking contest in an open clearing. Elders in possum-fur cloaks are looking on in the foreground and other spectators are in the background, on the other side of the contest. Unlike the previous etching there is no caption underneath, and only a ball in flight has been added to the original etching.

Looking at these two long-lost etchings, they seem to irresistibly infer a close relationship between both our traditional and contemporary indigenous football games.

'Never let the ball touch the ground'