

= Tom Wills =

Thomas Wentworth " Tom " Wills (19 August 1835 ? 2 May 1880) was an Australian sportsman who is credited with being his country 's first cricketer of significance and a pioneer of Australian rules football .

Born in the British colony of New South Wales to a wealthy family descended from convicts , Wills grew up in the bush on properties owned by his father , the pastoralist and politician Horatio Wills , in what is now the Australian state of Victoria . He befriended local Aborigines , learning their language and customs . At the age of 14 , Wills was sent to England to attend Rugby School , where he became captain of its cricket team , and played an early version of rugby football . After Rugby , Wills represented the Cambridge University Cricket Club in the annual match against Oxford , and played in first @-@ class matches for Kent and the Marylebone Cricket Club . An athletic all @-@ rounder with devastating bowling analyses , he was regarded as one of the finest young cricketers in England .

Returning to Victoria in 1856 , Wills achieved Australia @-@ wide stardom as a cricketer , captaining the Victorian team to repeated victories in intercolonial matches . He played for many clubs , most notably the Melbourne Cricket Club , with which he had a fraught and complex relationship . In 1858 he called for the formation of a " foot @-@ ball club " with a " code of laws " to keep cricketers fit during the off @-@ season . After founding the Melbourne Football Club the following year , Wills and three other members codified the first laws of Australian rules football . He and his cousin H. C. A. Harrison spearheaded the sport as team captains and administrators .

In 1861 , at the height of his fame , Wills joined his father on an eight @-@ month trek into the Queensland outback to establish a family property . Two weeks after their arrival , Wills ' father and 18 others were murdered in the largest massacre of settlers by Aborigines in Australian history . Wills survived and returned to Victoria in 1864 . He continued to play football and cricket , and , in 1866 ? 67 , coached and captained an Aboriginal XI ? the first Australian cricket team to tour England . In a career marked by controversy , Wills challenged cricket 's amateur @-@ professional divide , and was frequently accused of bending rules to the point of cheating . Called for throwing in 1872 , he mounted a failed comeback four years later on the eve of the first Test cricket match , by which time his sporting glory belonged to a colonial past that seemed " like a distant land " . Psychological trauma from the massacre was worsened by his alcoholism . Now destitute , Wills was admitted to the Melbourne Hospital in 1880 , suffering from delirium tremens , but shortly afterwards escaped and returned to his home on the city 's margins , where he committed suicide by stabbing himself in the heart .

Wills fell into obscurity after his death , but has undergone a resurgence in Australian culture since the 1990s . He was an inaugural inductee into the Australian Football Hall of Fame , and is the subject of a statue outside the Melbourne Cricket Ground . Today he is characterised as an archetype of the tragic sports hero , and as a symbol of reconciliation between Indigenous and non @-@ Indigenous Australians . The theory that he incorporated features of an Aboriginal game into Australian football has been hotly debated . According to biographer Greg de Moore , Wills " stands alone in all his absurdity , his cracked egalitarian heroism and his fatal self @-@ destructiveness ? the finest cricketer and footballer of the age . "

= = Family and early years = =

Tom Wills was born on 19 August 1835 on the Molonglo Plain near modern @-@ day Canberra , in what was the British penal colony of New South Wales , as the elder child of Horatio and Elizabeth (née McGuire) Wills . Tom was a third @-@ generation Australian of convict descent : his mother was born to convicts from Ireland , and his paternal grandfather was Edward Wills , an English highwayman whose death sentence was commuted to transportation , arriving in Botany Bay aboard the " hell ship " Hillsborough in 1799 . After receiving a conditional pardon in 1803 , Edward amassed immense wealth through mercantile activity in Sydney with his free wife Sarah (née Harding) . He died in 1811 , five months before Horatio 's birth , and Sarah remarried to convict

George Howe , owner of Australia 's first newspaper , the Sydney Gazette . During his tenure as the newspaper 's editor , Horatio met Elizabeth , an orphan from Parramatta . They married in December 1833 . Seventeen months after his birth , Tom was baptised Thomas Wentworth Wills in the parish of St Andrew 's , Sydney , in honour of statesman William Charles Wentworth . Drawing on Wentworth 's pro @-@ Currency rhetoric and the emancipist cause , Horatio set forth a strident nationalist agenda in his journal The Currency Lad (1832 ? 33) , the first publication to call for an Australian republic .

Horatio took up pastoral pursuits in the mid @-@ 1830s and moved with his family to the sheep run " Burra Burra " on the Molonglo River . Although athletic from an early age , Tom was prone to illness , and at one stage in 1839 his parents " almost despaired of his recovery " . In November 1840 , in light of Thomas Mitchell 's discovery of " Australia Felix " , they overlanded south to the Grampians in the colony 's Port Phillip District (now the state of Victoria) ; and , after establishing a run on Mount William , moved a few miles north through the foothills of Mount Ararat , named so by Horatio because " like the Ark , we rested there " . Horatio went through a period of intense religiosity while in the Grampians ; at times his diary descends into incantation , " perhaps even madness " . He implored himself and Tom to base their lives upon the New Testament .

Living under canvas , the Wills family settled on a large property named " Lexington " (near present @-@ day Moyston) in an area inhabited by Djab wurrung Aboriginal clans . Tom , as an only child , " was thrown much into the companionship of aborigines " . In an account of corroborees from childhood , his cousin H. C. A. Harrison remembered Tom 's ability to learn Aboriginal songs , mimic their voice and gestures , and " speak their language as fluently as they did themselves , much to their delight . " It is speculated that Tom may have also played Aboriginal sports . Horatio wrote fondly of his son 's kinship with Aborigines , and allowed local clans to live and hunt on Lexington . However , like many frontiersmen in the area , Horatio was implicated in deadly conflict with Aborigines , the occurrence of which he blamed on " distant predatory tribes " .

Tom 's first sibling , Emily , was born on Christmas Day 1842 . In 1846 Wills began attendance at William Brickwood 's School in Melbourne . There he was looked after by Horatio 's brother Thomas (Tom 's namesake) , a Victorian separatist and son @-@ in @-@ law of the Wills family 's partner in the shipping trade , convict Mary Reibey . Tom played in his first cricket matches at school , and he came in contact with the Melbourne Cricket Club through Brickwood , the club 's vice @-@ president . Wills returned to Lexington in 1849 where the family had grown to include siblings Cedric , Horace and Egbert . Mainly self @-@ educated , Horatio had ambitious plans for the education of his children , especially Tom :

I now deeply vainly deplore my want of a mathematical and classical education . Vain regret ! ... But my son ! May he prove worthy of my experience ! May I be spared for him ? that he may be useful to his country ? I never knew a father 's care .

= = England = =

= = = Rugby School = = =

Wills ' father sent him to England in February 1850 , aged fourteen , to attend Rugby School , the most prestigious school in the country . Horatio wanted Tom to study law and return to Australia as a " professional man of eminence " . He arrived in London after a five @-@ month sea voyage . There , during school holidays , he stayed with his paternal aunt Sarah , who moved from Sydney after the death of her first husband , convict William Redfern .

The reforms enacted by famed headmaster Thomas Arnold made Rugby the crucible of muscular Christianity , a " cult of athleticism " into which Wills was inculcated . Wills took up cricket within a week of entering Evans House . At first he bowled underhand , but it was considered outdated , so he tried roundarm bowling . He clean bowled a batsman with his first ball using this style and declared : " I felt I was a bowler . " Wills soon topped all of his house 's cricket statistics . At bat he was a " punisher " with a sound defence ; however , in an era when graceful stroke @-@ play was

expected of a gentleman cricketer , he was deemed to have no style at all . In April 1852 , aged sixteen , Wills joined the Rugby School XI , and on his debut at Lord 's a few months later , against the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) , he took a match @-@ high 12 wickets . That year he formed one half of a bowling attack that established Rugby as the greatest public school in English cricket . In a prelude to his colonial career , he was accused of throwing by critics in the national media . Rugby coach John Lillywhite , himself a key campaigner against throwing , defended his protégé . Wills survived the scandal . He won fame for his performances and played with the leading cricketers of the age , as well as royalty . William Clarke , his hero , invited him to join the touring All @-@ England Eleven , but he remained at Rugby . Then in 1855 he took over as Rugby XI captain , the most revered position within the school .

Rugby , like other English public schools , had evolved its own variant of football . The game in Wills ' era ? a rough and highly defensive struggle involving hundreds of boys ? was confined to a competition amongst the houses . Spanning the years he played , Wills is pivotal to any of the brief match reports in Bell 's Life in London . His creative play and " eel @-@ like agility " baffled the opposition , and his penchant for theatrics endeared him to the crowds . One journalist noted his use of " slimy tricks " , a possible early reference to his gamesmanship . As a " dodger " in the forward line , he was a long and accurate shot at goal and served as his house 's kicker . Wills also shone in the school 's annual athletics carnival and his long @-@ distance running ability in Hare and Hounds was unparalleled .

Wills cut a dashing figure with " impossibly wavy " hair and blue , almond @-@ shaped eyes that " [burnt] with a pale light " . By age 16 at 5 ' 8 " he was already taller than his father . In Lillywhite 's Guide a few years later he measured in at 5 ' 10 " and it was written that " few athletes can boast of a more muscular and well @-@ developed frame " .

Consumed by sport , Wills , to his father 's chagrin , showed little interest in academics . It was said that he " could not bring himself to study for professional work " after " having led a sort of nomadic life when a youth in Australia " . Suffering from homesickness , he decorated his study with objects to remind him of Lexington , including Aboriginal weapons . Horatio wrote to remind him of his childhood friends , the Djab wurrung : " They told me to send you up to them as soon as you came back . "

= = = Libertine cricketer = = =

Wills had built a reputation as " one of the most promising cricketers in the kingdom " . Held aloft as Rugby 's exemplar sportsman , his status as a cricketer came to define him . In June 1855 , nearing his 20th birthday , Wills finished his schooling . In a farewell note from his fellow students he was simply called " the school bowler " .

After leaving Rugby , and with a steady supply of money from his father , Wills wandered throughout Britain in pursuit of cricketing pleasure . He made first @-@ class appearances for the MCC , Kent , and various Gentlemen sides , and also fell in with the I Zingari ? the " gypsy lords of English cricket " ? an amateur club known for its exotic costumes and hedonistic lifestyle . Against Horatio 's wishes , Tom did not continue his studies at Cambridge , but did play cricket for the university 's team (as well as Magdalene College) , most notably when rules were passed over to allow him to compete against Oxford in the 1856 University Match , Cambridge being " one man short " . In June , Wills played cricket at Rugby School for the last time , representing the MCC alongside Lord Guernsey , the Earl of Winterton , and Charles du Cane , governor @-@ to @-@ be of Tasmania . Following a cricketing sojourn in Ireland , Wills , at the behest of Horatio , returned to England to prepare for his journey home .

The last eighteen months had exposed Wills to " the richest sporting experience on earth " . His six years in England charted a way of life ? one of drinking , profligate spending and playing games ? that he would continue to lead until his death .

= = Colonial hero = =

Wills returned to Australia aboard the Oneida steamship , arriving in Melbourne on 23 December 1856 . The minor port city of his youth had risen to world renown as the booming financial centre of the Victorian gold rush . Horatio , now a member of the Legislative Assembly in the Victorian Parliament , was living on " Belle Vue " , a farm at Point Henry near Geelong , the Wills ' family home since 1853 . In his first summer back in Melbourne , Wills stayed with his extended family , the Harrisons , at their home on Victoria Parade , and entered a Collins Street law firm to appease his father , but he seems never to have practiced ; the few comments he made about law suggest it meant little to him . " Tom was no dunce " , writes Greg de Moore . He was " negotiating a path to greatness . "

The Australian colonies were described as " cricket mad " in the 1850s , and Victorians , in particular , were said to live " in an atmosphere of cricket " . Intercolonial contests , first held in 1851 , provided an outlet for the at times intense rivalry between Victoria and New South Wales . With his reputation preceding him , Wills became the bearer of Victoria 's hopes of winning its first match against the elder colony . Victorian captain William Hammersley recalled the moment Wills first graced the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) for a trial match , staged one week after his return :

... the observed of all observers , with his Zingari stripe and somewhat flashy get up , fresh from Rugby and college , with the polish of the old country upon him . He was then a model of muscular Christianity .

Wills ' batting style amused the crowd , but he still top scored with 57 not out . In January , he travelled as part of the Victoria cricket team to Sydney to play against New South Wales on the Domain . Wills was the leading wicket @-@ taker with 10 victims . Bowling fast round @-@ arm , the Victorians regarded themselves as superior to their opponents , who used an " antiquated " underhand action . The latter style proved effective , giving New South Wales a 65 @-@ run win . Wills spent the rest of the season playing for numerous clubs , most notably the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) .

Parliament and business came to a standstill in Melbourne for the January 1858 intercolonial match between Victoria and New South Wales , held at the MCG . Captaining Victoria , Wills took 8 wickets , the most of his side , and on the second day , batting in the middle order , a ball hit an imperfection in the pitch and knocked him unconscious . He recovered , played on for two hours , and won the match at day 's end with a top score of 49 * . The crowd rushed the field and chaired Wills off in triumph , and victory celebrations lasted for several days throughout the colony . Now a household name and the darling of Melbourne 's elite , Wills was proclaimed " the greatest cricketer in the land " .

Although Wills enjoyed his lofty amateur status , he liked to socialise with and support working class professional cricketers ? an egalitarian attitude that sometimes led to conflict with sporting officialdom but endeared him to the common man . Wills ' allegiance to professionals was highlighted by an incident in Tasmania in February 1858 when the Launceston Cricket Club shunned professional members of his touring Victorian side . Infuriated , he spoke out against being " forsaken " in a " strange land " . One week later , during a game in Hobart , Wills earned the locals ' ire as he " [jumped] about exultantly " after maiming a Tasmanian batsman with a spell of hostile fast bowling .

Wills was elected secretary of the MCC during the 1857 ? 58 season . It was a role in which he proved to be chaotic and disorganised . MCC delegates took issue with Wills ' " continued non @-@ attendance " at meetings , and when the club fell into debt , his poor administrative skills were blamed . He acted on year @-@ long threats in mid @-@ 1858 and deserted the MCC , leaving its records and amenities in a mess ; to this day , the only minutes that cannot be found are from his secretaryship . A lasting tension existed between Wills and the MCC 's inner circle . According to Martin Flanagan , " It was a relationship which couldn 't last as Wills only knew one way ? his own . "

= = Football pioneer = =

Wills was a compulsive writer to the press on cricketing matters and in the late 1850s his letters

sometimes appeared on a daily basis . An agitator like his father , he used language " in the manner of a speaker declaiming forcefully from a platform " . On 10 July 1858 , the Melbourne @-@ based Bell 's Life in Victoria and Sporting Chronicle published a letter by Wills that is regarded as a catalyst for a new style of football , known today as Australian rules football . Titled " Winter Practice " , it begins :

Now that cricket has been put aside for some few months to come , and cricketers have assumed somewhat of the chrysalis nature (for a time only ' tis true) , but at length will again burst forth in all their varied hues , rather than allow this state of torpor to creep over them , and stifle their new supple limbs , why can they not , I say , form a foot @-@ ball club , and form a committee of three or more to draw up a code of laws ?

In endeavouring to bring his English sporting experience to Melbourne , Wills made the first public declaration of its kind in Australia : that football should be a regular and organised activity . He went on to help foster football in Melbourne 's schools . The local headmasters , his collaborators , were inspired in large part by Thomas Hughes ' novel Tom Brown 's School Days (1857) , an account of life at Rugby School under the headship of Thomas Arnold . Due to similarities between their sporting careers at Rugby , Wills has been called the " real @-@ life embodiment " of fictitious hero Tom Brown .

Wills ' letter was alluded to two weeks later in an advertisement posted by his friend , professional cricketer and publican Jerry Bryant , for a " scratch match " held adjacent to the MCG at the Richmond Paddock . It was the first of several kickabouts held that year involving Wills , Bryant and other local cricketers . One participant called the affair " football Babel " ; a " short code of rules " were to be drawn up afterwards , however this does not seem to have occurred . Another landmark game , played without fixed rules over three consecutive Saturdays and co @-@ umpired by Wills and John Macadam , began on the same site on 7 August between forty Scotch College students and a like number from Melbourne Grammar . The two schools have since competed annually . Wills emerged as the standout figure in accounts of Melbourne football in 1858 . These early experimental games were more rugby @-@ like than anything else ? low @-@ scoring , low @-@ to @-@ the @-@ ground " gladiatorial " tussles . The last recorded match of the year is the subject of the first known Australian football poem , published in Punch . Wills , the only player named , is reified as " the Melbourne chief " , leading his men to victory against a side from South Yarra .

Following a scratch match at the start of the 1859 football season , the Melbourne Football Club officially came into being on 14 May . Three days later , Wills and three other members ? journalists Hammersley and J. B. Thompson and teacher Thomas H. Smith ? met at Bryant 's Parade Hotel near the MCG to pen the club 's rules . Wills heads the list of signatories . The men went over the rules of four English schools ; Hammersley recalled Wills ' preference for the Rugby game , but it was found to be confusing and too violent . Subsequently , they rejected common features such as " hacking " (shin @-@ kicking) and devised a simple code of ten rules suited to grown men and Australian conditions . Wills , too , saw the need for compromise . He wrote to his brother Horace : " Rugby was not a game for us , we wanted a winter pastime but men could be harmed if thrown on the ground so we thought differently . " Thompson and Hammersley 's promotion of the new code , together with Wills ' star power , encouraged the spread of football throughout Victoria .

= = Height of celebrity = =

After falling out with the MCC , Wills moved freely about the colony , playing for any club of his choosing . He joined Richmond , serving as vice @-@ president and raising the standard of its play to make it the premier Victorian club . His presence greatly distorted the outcome of and betting on games , and his lack of loyalty to any one club was regarded with contempt by the MCC .

Victoria reappointed Wills as captain for the January 1859 intercolonial match against New South Wales , held at the Domain . On the first day he broke his right middle finger while attempting a catch . Undeterred , he top scored in the first innings with 15 * and took 5 / 24 and 6 / 25 , carrying Victoria to an upset win . He resigned from the intercolonial match committee in protest after Thompson assailed him for not turning up to practice ahead of the next match against New South

Wales . During a follow @-@ up practice game , players struggled in the day 's heat , and ignoring calls to retire , Wills suffered from a near @-@ fatal sunstroke . Hammersley wrote that Wills felt obliged to perform for the large crowd that had gathered to watch him . Over 25 @,@ 000 people attended the MCG in February 1860 to watch Victoria , captained by Wills , play New South Wales . Wills bowled unchanged in both innings , taking 6 / 23 and 3 / 16 , and top scored with 20 * . Victoria won by 69 runs . The Melbourne media gave Wills the sobriquet " Great Gun of the Colony " . The Victorian Cricketers ' Guide called him the ideal all @-@ rounder . The Sydney press , championing Wills as a native New South Welshman , agreed :

Tall , muscular , and slender , Mr. Wills seems moulded by nature to excel in every branch of the noble game , ... on the field we find him the admiration of the ground , while in the combination of his successes , [his teammates] recognise with pride the still more arduous duties of an unwearied and most discreet captain .

Wills remained an influential figure in Australian football from 1859 to 1860 . While he fought for the adoption of many Rugby School customs ? such as a free kick for marking , the use of an oval @-@ shaped ball , and (unsuccessfully) a crossbar ? he improvised on the field and devised innovative tactics and strategies , pushing the game in new directions . His exploitation of the code 's lack of an offside law in 1860 has been cited as the point at which " the full potential of the sport started to be realised " .

At Wills ' invitation , his cousin Harrison joined the footballing scene in 1859 , quickly becoming a leading player and captain . He looked up to Wills , terming him " the beau @-@ ideal of an athlete " ? high praise given that Harrison was the champion runner of Victoria . Their presence in Geelong fuelled a local craze for football and ensured the Geelong Football Club 's supremacy in the early 1860s . In an era when players moved freely amongst clubs , Wills still represented Melbourne , and was the first captain and secretary of the Richmond Football Club (no connection with the AFL club) in 1860 . The code underwent revisions around this time , principally in response to the on @-@ field actions of dominant players . " And there were none more dominant than Wills and Harrison " , writes James Coventry .

= = Queensland = =

With plans underway for the first tour of Australia by an English cricket team , Wills announced his retirement from sport . At the beckoning of his father , Wills agreed to leave Victoria to found a new family property , Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , on the Nogoa River in outback Queensland . He prepared for six months in country Victoria where learnt the crafts of a squatter . In his will , Horatio ? showing a " deep understanding " of Tom 's personality ? wrote that his son would be removed from the station and receive a diminished inheritance in the event of " misconducting himself " as manager .

In January 1861 , Tom , Horatio and a party of employees and their families travelled by steamer to Brisbane , disembarked in Moreton Bay , and then , with livestock and supplies , set out on an eight @-@ month trek through Queensland 's rugged interior . Food was scarce and Tom hunted native game to fend off starvation . They suffered many other hardships and even death when , in Toowoomba , one of Horatio 's men drowned . On the Darling Downs over 10 @,@ 000 sheep were collected . The size of the Wills party attracted the attention of local Aborigines , and the two groups engaged in games of mimicry . Wary of entering the region 's frontier war , Horatio maintained a conciliatory attitude to the Aborigines . The party reached Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , situated on Kairi Aboriginal land , in early October , and proceeded to set up camp .

= = = Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo massacre = = =

On the afternoon of 17 October , two weeks after their arrival , Horatio and eighteen of his party were murdered in the deadliest massacre of settlers by Aborigines in Australian history . Tom was away from the property at the time , having been sent with two stockmen to collect supplies left en route to Cullin @-@ la @-@ Ringo . He returned several days later to a scene of devastation .

Despairing and in shock , Wills immediately wrote to H. C. A. Harrison in Melbourne : " ... all our party except I have been slaughtered by the black 's on the 17th . I am in a great fix no men . " Police , native police and vigilante groups from neighbouring stations swiftly tracked down and killed at least 70 local Aborigines ; the total may have been 300 . Wills took refuge near Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , and though he desired to avenge his father 's death , there is no evidence that he joined the reprisal raids .

Conflicting reports reached the outside world and for a time it was feared that Tom had died . In the press , Horatio was accused of ignoring warnings and allowing Aborigines to encroach on his property . The retribution was also called excessive . Tom vehemently defended his father against any perceived criticism . Privately , in his first letter to Harrison , he admitted , " if we had used common precaution all would have been well " . It was later revealed that , prior to leaving the camp , Tom advised Horatio to be watchful of the local Aborigines , but according to Hammersley , " the old man prided himself on being able to manage the blacks ... and said they would never harm him . " The Queensland press , still in the wake of the massacre , suggested that Wills , " now a Queenslander " , be approached to captain the colony 's cricket team .

Different reasons were put forward at the time to account for the Wills tragedy . For many colonists , it confirmed the popular belief that Aborigines were bloodthirsty savages . Tom never articulated his version of events in writing , but Cedric Wills wrote years later that it was an act of revenge for an attack made on local Aborigines by squatter Jesse Gregson . He quoted Tom as saying , " If the truth is ever known , you will find that it was through Gregson shooting those blacks ; that was the cause of the murder . "

In the years following the massacre , Wills experienced flashbacks , nightmares and an irritable heart ? features of what is now known as post @-@ traumatic stress disorder . Having immersed himself in the drinking culture of colonial sport , he increased his alcohol consumption in a likely attempt to blot out memories and alleviate sleep disturbance . Wills ' sister Emily wrote of him two months after the massacre : " He says he never felt so changed in the whole course of his life " .

= = = Riot and expulsion = = =

Wills vowed to stay on Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo and fulfill his father 's agrarian dream ? words that , according to de Moore , " enshrined and imprisoned " Tom as the new head of the family . Hypervigilant , he slept only three hours a night with a rifle beside his bed and watched for signs of another attack . He began to rebuild the station pending the arrival of his uncle , William Roope , who took control of Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo in December 1861 , but soon left as a result of Wills acting " exceedingly ill " to him . Wills struggled to cope with the harsh conditions and isolation of the outback . He went blind for weeks after contracting " sandy blight " .

He went to Sydney in January 1863 to captain Victoria against New South Wales on the Domain . The match turned into a riot when the crowd invaded the field during a dispute over the Victorian umpire 's impartiality . Wills , leading his men from the Domain , was struck in the face by a stone , and professionals George Marshall and William Greaves fled the city , reducing the Victorian side to nine players . Wills took eight wickets and top scored in both innings (25 * and 17 *) , but Victoria lost by 84 runs . The Melbourne media castigated Wills for allowing the game to continue and called him a traitor when evidence surfaced that he agreed to play for New South Wales in the weeks prior to the match . He denied all accusations and wrote in an angry letter to The Sydney Morning Herald : " I for one do not think that Victoria will ever send an Eleven up here again . " Back in Victoria , he became engaged to Julie Anderson , a farmer 's daughter from Skipton and friend of the Wills family . Her name does not appear in any of Wills ' surviving letters ; he rarely mentioned the women he courted , let alone his feelings towards them . Wills stayed in Geelong for the start of the 1863 football season , breaking his promise of an early return to Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , much to the dismay of his mother and the holding 's trustees .

Wills finally returned to Queensland in May and was sworn in as a Justice of the Peace upon arrival in Brisbane . Over the next few months , he reported at least three murders of local settlers by Aborigines , including that of a shepherd on Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo . He accosted government

officials over the lack of protection against Aboriginal attacks and scorned " Brisbane saints " for sympathising with the plight of Aborigines in the Nogoia region . With the cricket season approaching , Wills agreed to captain Queensland against New South Wales , and then left the station to lead a Victoria XXII at the MCG against George Parr 's All @-@ England Eleven . In awe of his cross @-@ continental dash to play cricket , the English thought it a madman 's journey . Wills arrived on the final day of the match to a thunderous reception , and joined the visitors on their Victorian tour .

During the 1863 ? 64 season , Wills ' engagement to Anderson broke off , possibly due to his womanising , and it was revealed that he had been squandering family finances on alcohol while claiming it as station expenditure . The trustees demanded that he stay in Victoria to answer for the property 's runaway debt . In response , Wills joined Parr 's XI on a month @-@ long tour New Zealand . He captained local teams against the English and filled the same role for Victoria at the tour 's end in Melbourne . He faced the trustees soon after . His mother struggled to condemn him but ultimately approved his dismissal from Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , thus fulfilling the premonition in Horatio 's will .

= = Return to Victoria = =

Wills stayed at the family home in Geelong . Always a black sheep of sorts , he now became increasingly estranged from his mother and sister Emily . Family letters from mid @-@ 1864 reveal that Wills had a " wife " ? a " bad woman " according to Emily . It is likely a reference to the already @-@ married Sarah Barbor (née Duff) . Born in Dublin , she is a mysterious figure , but is known to have remained Wills ' lifelong partner . The de facto nature of their relationship , and even Barbor 's existence , were probably kept secret from Wills ' mother for a number of years .

Throughout the 1865 football season , Wills played for and often captained Melbourne and Geelong , two of the game 's most powerful clubs . At the end of a winter beset with public brawls over which team " owned " him , Wills moved to Geelong for the remainder of his career , prompting Bell 's Life in Victoria to report that Melbourne had lost " the finest leader of men on the football field " . The following year , when the running bounce and other rules were formalised at a meeting of club delegates under Harrison 's chairmanship , Wills was not present ; his move to Geelong had rendered him peripheral to the process of rule @-@ making in Melbourne .

Intercolonials between Victoria and New South Wales resumed at the MCG on Boxing Day 1865 , nearly three years since the Sydney riot . Sam Cosstick , William Caffyn and other Victorian professionals defected to the rival colony due to pay disputes with the MCC . Wills , leading the weakened Victorian side to an against @-@ the @-@ odds win , took 6 wickets and contributed 58 ? the first half century in Australian first @-@ class cricket ? to 285 , a record intercolonial total . Cheating allegations against Wills failed to endanger his status as a folk hero and " a source of eternal hope " for Victoria .

= = Aboriginal cricket team = =

In May 1866 , the MCC 's minute book featured an unusual request : Roland Newbury , the club 's pavilion keeper , wanted " use of the ground for two days ... for purpose of a match with the native black eleven " . It was the first intimation of a cricket match between the MCC and an Aboriginal team from Victoria 's Western District . The motive behind the match , scheduled for late December , was a financial one , and in August , Wills agreed to coach the Aborigines . Wills ' reasons for accepting the role remain a mystery , but his need for money was likely a factor . This was to mark the beginning of his transition from amateur to professional sportsman .

Wills travelled inland in November to Edenhope and Harrow to convene the players from local pastoral properties , where they worked as station hands . One of their employers , William Hayman , acted as the team 's manager and " protector " . They were mostly Jardwadjali men who shared common vocabulary with the neighbouring Djab wurrung people , which enabled Wills to use the Aboriginal language he learnt as a child . From their training ground at Lake Wallace , Wills , in a " tactical strike " , boasted to the Melbourne press of the Aborigines ' powers , especially the

batsmanship of Mullagh , spurring an anxious MCC to strengthen its ranks with players from outside the club . Public sympathy was with the Aborigines when they arrived in Melbourne and over 10 000 spectators attended the MCG on Boxing Day to witness the match . Wills captained the team in a losing struggle and afterwards spoke defiantly against the MCC 's " treachery " .

It is unknown what Wills and the Aborigines made of the broader social and political dimensions of the enterprise . Some of Wills ' contemporaries were shocked that he would associate with Aborigines in the shadow of his father 's death . Others , such as this writer in *The Empire* , called him a hero :

Although you may not be fully aware of the fact , allow me to tell you that you have rendered a greater service to the aboriginal races of this country and to humanity , than any man who has hitherto attempted to uphold the title of the blacks to rank amongst men .

While Melburnians were enthralled by the Aborigines , the annual intercolonial contest between Victoria and New South Wales ? usually the highlight of the season ? failed to excite public interest , and Victoria 's loss in Sydney was put down to Wills ' absence . The Aboriginal team embarked on a tour of Victoria , improving as it went . After an easy win in Geelong , Wills , without warning his mother , took the players to meet her at " Belle Vue " . Back in Melbourne in mid January , two of the Aborigines , Bullocky and Cuzens , joined Wills in representing Victoria against a Tasmanian XI . The team 's successes provoked a public discourse over past mistreatment of Aboriginal people and future relations between the races . As the only white member , Wills ' role took on a symbolic significance . His status as a ' native ' (a native born Australian) blurred the distinction between him and his ' native ' teammates , and he was also noted for speaking in " their own lingo " . The " team jester " Jellico teased Wills : " He too much along of us . He speak nothing now but blackfellow talk . "

They went to Sydney in February to begin a planned tour of the colonies and overseas . Aware of the tour 's lucrative potential , Englishman Charles Lawrence , captain of New South Wales , invited the team to stay at his hotel on Manly Beach . The first match against his club at the Albert Ground in Redfern came to a dramatic halt when Wills was arrested and briefly gaoled for a breach of contract . He and W. E. B. Gurnett , the tour 's promoter , had been competing to take over as manager . Gurnett , a con artist , left the team stranded and broke , dashing any hope of a trip abroad . Lawrence set up a " benefit " match , and by the end of the tour 's New South Wales leg , had worked his way into the team to usurp Wills as captain . No longer feted by the media , they returned to Victoria in May , and Wills was playing football within two weeks of reaching Geelong . It has been said that he exercised a " bad influence " upon the Aborigines with his drinking habit . Four players died over the course of the tour ; at least one death , that of Watty , was officially linked to alcohol .

The surviving members formed part of the Aboriginal team which Lawrence took to England in 1868 , ten years before the first Australian XI classed as representative went overseas . Wills resented Lawrence for reviving the team without him ; his exclusion has been called the tragedy of his sporting career .

= = Ambiguous professional = =

Without career prospects outside of sport , Wills joined the MCC as a professional at the start of the 1867 ? 68 season ; however , he wasn 't openly referred to as such . Instead , the club devised the title of ' tutor ' in order that he maintain the prestige of his amateur background .

Played on the MCG , the December 1867 intercolonial between Victoria and New South Wales ended in a sound victory for the former , principally due to Wills ' nine wicket haul and Richard Wardill 's century . Wills had been Victoria 's preferred captain for over a decade . Writing in his sports column , Hammersley claimed that , as a paid cricketer , Wills lacked " moral ascendancy " over amateurs . When he lost the captaincy to Wardill , an amateur , on the eve of the March 1869 match against New South Wales , he refused to play under him , or , indeed , anyone else . The Victorians condemned Wills and resolved to go on without him , after which he retracted his decision not to play . This was the last intercolonial played on the Domain and Victoria recovered from Wardill

's diamond duck to win by 78 runs . Wills scalped 7 wickets in a single innings .

Wills announced in early 1869 that he would not play for Victoria again , even if the colony wanted him . He planned to leave for Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , but his mother , still " very dissatisfied " with him , requested that he stay away from the property . The MCC took him back and he continued to act as a tutor with the club . Members of the recently returned Aboriginal XI , Mullagh and Cuzens , joined him as paid bowlers . Barred from having Wills in matches against the MCC , Geelong was allowed to field an extra five men to make up for his loss .

Wills ' appearance had deteriorated ; gaining weight , balding and generally unkempt , with " an alcoholic blush of his cheeks " , he looked older than his years . Describing his body as " stiff " during a cricket match in 1870 , he hinted , for the first time , that his talent was fading .

= = No @-@ ball plot and downfall = =

For Mr. Wills to no @-@ ball Mr. Wardill for throwing is like Satan reproving sin .

Hardly a year had passed since Wills ' return to Australia in 1856 without public comment on his suspect bowling action . Australia 's most famous and outspoken bowler to be accused of throwing , Wills became a " convenient caricature " upon which to cast blame for cheating in cricket . His amateur status had protected him , as had the collusion between newspapers , spectators and clubs when he was a certain match @-@ winner , but as his skills faded with age , the campaign against his throwing gathered strength .

In February 1870 , Wills captained Victoria to a 265 @-@ run win over New South Wales at the MCG . The match featured Twopenny , an Aboriginal paceman who was said to have been recruited by opposing captain Lawrence as a foil to Wills ' " chucks " . Comparing the two , the Melbourne press surmised : " Undoubtedly Wills throws sometimes , but there is some decency about it , some disguise . " In March , Victoria trounced a Tasmanian XVI in Launceston under Wills ' leadership , though not without criticism of his bowling action . The accusations of Wills ' throwing were growing louder , and one @-@ time ally Hammersley emerged as his most severe critic . In the face of a looming crisis in his career , Wills openly admitted to throwing in his 1870 ? 71 Australian Cricketers ' Guide , and in so doing taunted his enemies to stop him .

A villainous Wills was held as inciting a plague of throwing and corrupting younger bowlers . Throwing allowed him to increase pace , and he was criticised for introducing a style of fast bowling designed to injure and intimidate batsmen . Nonetheless , the Victorian team reappointed him as captain for the March 1871 intercolonial match against New South Wales , held at the Albert Ground in Sydney . Wills ' first innings top score of 39 * was offset by his drunkenness on the field and a reluctance to bowl for fear of being called . Victoria won by 48 runs . Not long after , Wills was no @-@ balled for throwing for the first time in a club match . Rumour spread that it was the result of a conspiracy against him .

A series of superb club cricket performances removed any doubt that Wills would play for Victoria in the next intercolonial against New South Wales , scheduled for March 1872 on the MCG . Before the game , representatives from both colonies met and signed a bilateral agreement designed to call Wills . When he opened the bowling , Wills became the first cricketer to be called for throwing in a major Australian match . Two more balls were ruled as throws in two overs , and Wills did not bowl again . He was again no @-@ balled when a Victorian side under his captaincy played and lost to a combined XIII from New South Wales , Tasmania and South Australia late in 1872 .

Hammersley had seemingly succeeded in his campaign to see Wills banished from intercolonial cricket . In an exchange of personal attacks in the press , Wills implied that Hammersley was an architect of the no @-@ ball plot , and protested that he and other English colonists were out to oppress native @-@ born Australians . Hammersley closed :

You are played out now , the cricketing machine is rusty and useless , all respect for it is gone . You will never be captain of a Victorian Eleven again , ... Eschew colonial beer , and take the pledge , and in time your failings may be forgotten , and only your talents as a cricketer remembered . Farewell , Tommy Wills .

= = Grace and comeback attempt = =

W. G. Grace , the Victorian era 's most famous cricketer , brought an English team to Australia in 1873 ? 74 . Wills was desperate to play for Victoria against Grace and rival cricketing factions fought over his possible inclusion . Hammersley , a selector , ensured his omission . Wills toured with the team , playing for country sides . Irked by Wills ' constant presence , Grace remarked that he seemed to regard himself as a representative of the whole of Australia . It was assumed that , on his homeward journey , Grace would play a final match in the South Australian capital of Adelaide , but he bypassed the city when Kadina , a remote mining town in the Copper Triangle , offered him more money . Wills coached the locals . Played in an open , rock @-@ strewn plain of baked earth , the game was deemed a farce . Wills made a pair and Grace later wrote derisively of the " old Rugbeian " as a has @-@ been . Grace neglected to mention that Wills bowled him , ending with 6 / 28 .

In Geelong , Wills was still idolised , though he seemed discontented , seeking any chance to earn money through cricket in the major cities . He maintained an interest in the development of football , what he called " the king of games " . He continued to suggest rule changes , such as the push in the back rule to curb injuries , and , as captain of Geelong , had shaped the sport 's playing style . Utilising the young squad 's speed and skill , Wills devised a revolutionary game plan ? what he called " scientific football " ? based on passing and running into open space . He pioneered another tactical manoeuvre in Ballarat by ordering his players to flood the backline to prevent the home side from scoring . Having incited the crowd , he and his men wasted time and deliberately kicking the ball out of bounds , inflaming the situation . A few years later , in a rare act of diplomacy , Wills quelled tensions after a rival club used his " unchivalrous tactics " against Geelong . He played his last football game in 1874 .

In his 1874 ? 75 Australian Cricketers ' Guide , Wills argued that the ailing Victoria XI needed a new captain . " No one reading his words could mistake its intent ? what Victoria needed was Tom Wills " , writes de Moore . For the first time since his demise , selectors considered Wills for the next intercolonial against New South Wales . Noting his faded skills and tendency to throw , the Melbourne press lamented , " there is some sentimental notion afloat that as a captain he is peerless . " Pessimism gave way to hope as Wills promised a victory , and in February 1876 he led the Victorians onto the Albert Ground . He went for 0 and 4 and failed to pick up a wicket despite keeping himself on longer than any other Victorian bowler . He was blamed for Victoria 's 195 @-@ run loss . In turn , he laid the blame on his team @-@ mates .

By 1877 , Wills ' cricket career " had become a series of petty disputes in petty games " of " ever @-@ deteriorating standards . " In a brief postscript to one of several rejected applications for employment at the MCC , Wills gave voice to professionals " left in the cold " . It has been interpreted as " an unmistakable backhander for the club . To see Wills simply as a beggar would be to misunderstand him . "

= = Final years = =

Following his retirement as a footballer , Wills turned to umpiring and committee work , and despite his continued slide into debt , donated money and trophies for football competitions . He served as Geelong 's vice @-@ president from 1873 to 1876 , and was one of three delegates appointed by the club after the 1877 formation of the Victorian Football Association (VFA) , but was dropped soon after for unknown reasons . During the 1878 VFA season , he acted as central umpire , and defended his adjudication of a June match between Carlton and Albert Park in what would be his last public letter . That year , Wills , broke and hounded by creditors , began selling his land in Geelong to help clear his debt , and moved with Sarah Barbor to South Melbourne .

Wills held no positions of power at the South Melbourne Cricket Club and only occasionally appeared in local team lists . He convinced the club to open its ground to football in winter . Other clubs followed , and football adapted to an oval @-@ shaped field . By now , the sport had spread throughout Australasia , and Melbourne matches were attracting the world 's largest football crowds yet seen . In late 1878 , the MCC rejected his last overture to the club , and his dwindling income

from cricket was " finally asphyxiated " .

From February 1879 onwards , Wills lived with his de facto in Heidelberg , a small village on the outskirts of Melbourne . He rarely left it for the remainder of his life . His alcoholism worsened , as did Sarah 's , also a heavy drinker . He coached the local cricket team , and , on 13 March 1880 , played for the side in his last recorded game . His " chucks " were still noted . In his last surviving letters , sent two days later to his brothers on Cullin @-@ la @-@ ringo , he wrote of Heidelberg as a place of exile ? " I 'm out of the world here " ? and fantasised about escaping to Tasmania . Begging for money to help pay off debts , he promised , " I will not trouble any of you again " .

= = = Suicide = = =

Isolated and disowned by most of his family , Wills had become , in the words of cricket historian David Frith , " a complete and dangerous and apparently incurable alcoholic " . Contrary to legend , Wills was never incarcerated in a lunatic asylum . He started to show signs of delirium tremens in late April , including paranoid delusions , and Sarah , fearing that a calamity was at hand , admitted him to the Melbourne Hospital on 1 May to be kept under restraint . Wills absconded soon after , returned home and the next day committed suicide by stabbing a pair of scissors into his heart three times . The inquest , on 3 May , presided over by coroner Richard Youl , found that Wills " killed himself when of unsound mind from excessive drinking " . Wills was buried the next day in an unmarked grave in Heidelberg Cemetery at a private funeral attended by only six people : his brother Egbert , sister Emily and cousin Harrison ; Harrison 's sister Adela and her son Amos ; and cricketer Verney Cameron . His death certificate declared that his parents were unknown . When asked by a journalist about her late son , Elizabeth Wills is reported to have denied that Tom ever existed .

= = Personality = =

Wills struck his contemporaries as peculiar and at times narcissistic , with a prickly temperament , but also kind , charismatic and companionable . Often embroiled in controversy , he seemed to lack an understanding of how his words and actions could repeatedly get him into trouble . His obsession with sport was such that he showed little interest in anything else . Through his research , journalist Martin Flanagan concluded that Wills was " utterly bereft of insight into himself " , and football historian Gillian Hibbins described Wills as " an overbearing and undisciplined young man who tended to blame others for his troubles and was more interested in winning a game than in respecting sporting rules . " Wills ' family and peers , though angered by his misbehaviour , frequently forgave him . It is unlikely that he sought popular favour , but his strong egalitarian streak helped solidify his folk hero status . This affection for him , coupled with an understanding of his waywardness , found expression in the public motto : " With all thy faults I love thee still , Tommy Wills " .

As a young adult back in Australia , Wills developed a peculiar stream of consciousness style of writing that sometimes defied syntax and grammar . His letters are laced with puns , oblique classical and Shakespearean allusions , and droll asides , such as this one about Melbourne in a letter to his brother Cedric : " Everything is dull here , but people are kept alive by people getting shot at in the streets " . The overall effect is one of " a mind full of energy and histrionic ideas without a centre " .

He could be dismissive , triumphant and brazen all within a single sentence . Whatever his inner world was , he rarely let it be known . Lines of argument or considered opinion were not developed . His stream of thought was in rapid flux and a string of defiant jabs . To give emphasis he underlined his words with a flourish . His punctuation was idiosyncratic . Language was breathless and explosive and he revelled in presenting himself and his motives as mysterious .

Unlike his provocative written language , Wills spoke in a breezy and laconic manner . In one of his borderline " thought disordered " letters , it is evident that at times he entered a state of depersonalisation : " I do not know what I am standing on ... when anyone speaks to me I cannot for

the life of me make out what they are talking about ? everything seems so curious . " In 1884 , Hammersley compared Wills ' incipient madness and fiery glare to that of Adam Lindsay Gordon , the Australian bush poet . Wills ' mental instability is a source for speculation : epilepsy has been suggested as a possible cause of his perplexed mental state , and a variant of bipolar illness may account for his disjointed thinking and flowery , confused writings .

In 1923 , the MCC discovered Tom 's old cricket cap and put it on display in the Block Arcade , prompting Horace Wills to reflect : " My brother was the nicest man I ever met . Though his nature was care @-@ free , amounting almost to wildness , he had the sweetest temper I have seen in a man , and was essentially a sportsman . "

= = Playing style and captaincy = =

'Great ' athletes seem to be anointed every day ; far rarer are those entitled to be considered ' original ' . Tom Wills is such a figure in every respect .

Wills was the greatest Australian all @-@ round cricketer of his era and " almost , if not quite , equal " to the best all @-@ rounders of early Test cricket . " The picture of the athlete " in his prime , " full to overflowing with animal vigor " , Wills seemed indestructible . Intensely competitive , Wills ' win @-@ at @-@ all @-@ costs mentality , his intimidation of opponents , and his bending and breaking of rules undermined the amateur ideal of friendly competition . A natural born leader , he emboldened the less gifted on his team with his supreme confidence . Even in the face of imminent defeat , he never appeared to despair the fortunes of his side . On the off @-@ chance that he sought another player 's opinion , he invariably followed his own mind , and his resources at any critical juncture in a match were said to be always clever , and sometimes unique . " As a judge of the game he never had a superior " , wrote Britain 's The Sportsman . The rarity of Wills ' genius was compared to William Shakespeare 's .

As a bowler , Wills varied his pace and style considerably , and was quick to work out a batsman 's weak points . He had in his repertoire " sparklers , rippers , fizzers , trimmers and shooters . " Noted for his deceptive slow deliveries , dropping mid @-@ flight and big on break , Wills ' fast round arm balls sometimes reared head @-@ high from the pitch , terrorising his opponent . English batsman Sir David Serjeant said that Wills was the only bowler he ever feared . Wills was a " peculiarly ugly " batsman with a dogged defence and a capacity for explosive hitting . His characteristic shots ? cuts and to the leg side ? ensured the primacy of defence . He explained his stonewalling thus : " The ball can 't get through the bat . " An outstanding fieldsman anywhere , Wills excelled in the slips and ran out batsmen with deadly accurate throwing .

Wills was a " tear away " Australian rules footballer whose " pluck and skill " , it was said , only George O 'Mullane matched . As at Rugby , he won praise as an elusive dodger and unrivalled drop kick , and excelled in different positions , moving from a follower and goal @-@ scorer in the ruck to full back . Of the early footballers , Wills was appraised as the greatest , most astute captain , and is credited with opening up the game to new tactics and skills and a more free @-@ flowing style of play . In July 1860 ? in what the press called a " coup de main " , and what has since been recognised as a " tactical leap " that foreshadowed modern football ? Wills breached the era 's notional offside line by positioning his Richmond men down the field from defence to attack , who , by a series of short kick passes towards goal , succeeded in scoring . That same month , captaining Melbourne to victory , he pioneered a rudimentary form of flooding ; and in another win for the club , exploited the low player turnout by instructing his men to dart with the ball in open spaces . Historian Bernard Whimpress called Wills an innovator who " would fit easily into today 's game " . Historian Geoffrey Blainey writes : " How many of the tricks and stratagems of the early years came from this clever tactician we will never know . "

= = Legacy = =

Australia 's first celebrity sportsman , Wills began to fade from public consciousness within his own lifetime . His dark reputation and suicide , and his links to convictism and frontier violence ? sources

of cultural cringe ? have been posited as reasons for his descent into obscurity . Academic Barry Judd called him " a ghost inhabiting the margins of written history " . Coinciding with a revival of interest in Australia 's colonial past , Wills has risen " almost to a vogue " , and is seen as a forerunner of today 's self @-@ destructive star athletes , some of those qualities that alienated his peers " being less shocking to a generation that likes its heroes flawed " . The subject of works in the arts , his story has been likened to Ned Kelly 's as an epic and quintessentially Australian narrative . After several attempts by different authors since the 1930s , a definitive biography was published in 2008 , Greg de Moore 's Tom Wills : First Wild Man of Australian Sport .

Wills ' unmarked gravesite was restored in 1980 with a headstone erected by the MCC and by public subscription . He was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame in 1989 and was made an inaugural member of the Australian Football Hall of Fame in 1996 . The Tom Wills Room in the MCG 's Great Southern Stand serves as a venue for corporate functions . A statue outside the MCG , sculpted by Louis Laumen and erected in 2001 , depicts Wills umpiring the famous 1858 football match between Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College . The AFL commemorated the 150th anniversary of the match by staging the Tom Wills Round during the 2008 AFL Season . The two schools played in a curtain raiser at the MCG ahead of the round opener between Melbourne and Geelong . That same year , Victoria 's busiest freeway interchange , the Monash ? EastLink interchange in Dandenong North , was named the Tom Wills Interchange . Tom Wills Oval , inaugurated in 2013 at Sydney Olympic Park , serves as the training base for the Greater Western Sydney Giants of the AFL .

= = = Marngrook theory = = =

Since the 1980s , it has been suggested that Wills played or observed an Aboriginal football game , Marngrook , as a child growing up in the Grampians among the Djab wurrung , and incorporated features of this game into early Australian football . The theory has provoked intense debate , amounting to a controversy dubbed " football 's history wars " . In her essay " A Seductive Myth " , published in the AFL 's The Australian Game of Football Since 1858 (2008) , Hibbins calls the proposed link an " emotional belief " lacking " any intellectual credibility " . She points out that neither Wills nor any of his fellow football founders mention Aboriginal games in existing documents , and states that there is no evidence of Marngrook being played in the vicinity where Wills grew up . Since then , among the personal papers of ethnographer Alfred William Howitt , an interview has been found with a Mukjarrawaint man who recalls playing Marngrook in the Grampians . Also , in his first @-@ hand account of Aboriginal games , James Dawson , an Aboriginal rights activist , records the Djab wurrung word for football as " Min 'gorm " . De Moore therefore argues that Marngrook was likely played around where Wills lived as a boy , " or , at the very least , that the local Aboriginal people knew of such a game " . That Wills knew of Marngrook , he adds , is speculative at best .

Proponents of a link point to similarities between the two games , such as drop punting the ball into the air and leaping , catching feats . Jenny Hocking and Nell Reidy write that Wills , in adapting football to Melbourne 's parklands , wanted a game that kept the players off the ground and the ball in the air . " It is here " , they argue , " in the interstices between rugby and Australian football , that the influence of [Marngrook] can be seen most clearly " . Others have countered that until the 1870s , Australian football was aligned with rugby @-@ style roots , and bore little resemblance to Marngrook . According to de Moore , Wills was " almost solely influenced " by Rugby School football , with local conditions also having an effect .

Flanagan promoted the Marngrook theory in his novel The Call (1996) , a fictionalised account of Wills ' life , and argued in an essay addressed to Wills that he must have known Aboriginal games as it was in his nature to play : " There 's two things about you everybody seems to have agreed on ? you 'd drink with anyone and you 'd play with anyone . " He quotes Lawton Wills Cooke , a Wills family descendent , who said there was a story in the family 's oral history about Tom playing Marngrook as a boy . This claim was disputed by family historian T. S. Wills Cooke . Despite the contentious nature of the Wills @-@ Marngrook tradition , it has become part of football folklore , and in Moyston , the self @-@ proclaimed " Birthplace of Australian Football " , stands a monument

commemorating Wills ' upbringing in the area playing Marngrook .

= = = Father of football ? = = =

The role of Wills and others in pioneering Australian football went largely unrecognised in their lifetimes as the sport had yet to develop a historical perspective . By 1908 , the year of football 's jubilee celebrations , Wills ' cousin Harrison was proclaimed " the father of football " for his reputation as a player , rule @-@ maker and administrator . Wills was the next most often recalled pioneer during this period , and it was Harrison who said that his cousin initiated the sport when he " recommended that we Australians should work out a game of our own . "

It has been said that , due to his suicide , Wills was written out of the game 's history , or at the very least downplayed as a significant figure . One sportswriter opined in the 1980s that Wills had " received very little credit due to him in originating the game ... somehow he is forgotten today . " More recent historiography has elevated Wills to a position of pre @-@ eminence . Hibbins questions the significance of Wills ' off @-@ field contributions , such as his 1858 letter . Echoing Hibbins ' arguments , Roy Hay writes that Wills , while the sport 's " catalyst " , was " much more interested in playing and performing than in organising . " British historian Tony Collins even compared Wills to William Webb Ellis and Abner Doubleday , the apocryphal inventors of rugby and baseball respectively . In response to Collins ' suggestion that Wills " quickly faded from the footballing scene " , ABC journalist James Coventry drew attention to his seventeen @-@ year playing career (by far the longest of the pioneers) , the influence he wielded as captain of various clubs for much of that time , and his administrative work . He concludes that Collins and other scholars have " perversely " devalued Wills ' real contributions " in their rush to discredit [the Marngrook theory] " . Blainey said of Wills : " It is far too much to say that he founded the game , but it would be too little to say that he was simply one among many founders . "