Sporting prowess obscured by the history warriors

Richard Allsop reviews

Tom Wills: His Spectacular Rise and Tragic Fall
by Greg de Moore
(Allen & Unwin, 2008, 336 pages)

The 150th anniversary of the first game of Australian Football in 1858 has not passed without ac-
rimony.

Some historical pedants have argued that because the first set of rules was not formalised until 1859, we should be cele-
brating the anniversary next year. More substantially, there has been debate about which indi-
viduals should share the credit for the start of the game and, in partic-
ular, whether the form of the game was influenced by Aboriginal sources.

These debates posed a conundrum for Greg de Moore, the biographer of the individual most associated with the

game’s commencement, Tom Wills. It is the sort of dilemma that often con-
fronts biographers who have to weigh the amount of space they give to the aspects of the life that are of greatest in-
terest to the modern reader versus what was important to the individual and his contemporaries. Wills is almost a classic
case of the conundrum. While he is now remembered as the founder of Australian football, and has become something of a
cause célèbre for those interested in Aboriginal issues, to contemporaries he was the best cricketer of his generation.

De Moore gets the balance right. One is given a strong hint when one reads that the PhD thesis from which the book arose was called ‘Tom Wills: A Nineteenth Century Sporting Hero.’ However, he helpfully provides an after-
word for those wanting answers to the two major modern-day questions about Wills—was he the major contributor to
the foundation of the game and were the rules he devised for the game influenced by his childhood contact with Abor-
iginals and their game of Marngrrook? De Moore’s answers are yes to the role in
foundation, and no to the Aboriginal influence.

De Moore does not have a back-
ground as a historian or biographer, nor
has he come to the topic with an obvious agenda from previous work. He is a con-
sulting psychiatrist at Sydney’s Westmead Hospital and it was the nature of Wills’
suicide that originally piqued his interest in the topic. He could not understand how someone clearly in a psychotic state
had been allowed to leave hospital the day before he ended up taking his life in
May 1880.

De Moore’s research began by un-
earthing the medical records that ex-
plained what had happened in the days
leading up to Wills’ particularly violent
death. The research was painstaking,
but also blessed with a strong element of good luck as he found not only the
relevant medical records, but also buried
away in outback Queensland, a treasure-
trove of letters, and even school books
from Wills’ time at Rugby School.

While born in New South Wales, and forever associated with Victoria, Queensland played a crucial part in
Wills’ life. It was only by chance that Wills himself did not become a victim of the
largest massacre of white settlers by
Aborigines in the history of frontier vio-

lence in Australia. In 1861, Tom accom-
ppanied his father, Horatio, in establish-
ing a property at Cullin-la-Ringo, two
hundred miles inland from Rockham-
ton. Shortly after arrival on the property, Tom led a small party on a journey to acquire provisions; when they returned a
week later his father and 18 other settlers were dead. Retribution soon followed
with an estimated sixty or seventy local Aboriginals being massacred.

Being a psychiatrist, de Moore can explain ‘how the human mind and body responded to a traumatic experience was poorly appreciated in 1861’ and how it was during the American Civil War, later in that decade, that the first studies of
how to handle survivors of trauma were completed.

Unsurprisingly, given the focus on ‘history wars’ type issues, newspaper
reviewers have tended to focus on Ab-
original issues, with one commenting
that Wills’ ‘complex relationship with Aborigines’ is ‘the central fascination of
the book.’ There is certainly a complexity that often eludes simplistic debates on these topics, because just a handful
of years after the massacre, Wills cap-
thoned an Aboriginal team against the
Melbourne Cricket Club. It is pleasing


Richard Allsop is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs.
in the homes of their hosts because the hosts could not distinguish between amateur and professional and thus did not know who to exclude. As de Moore comments, if it were not possible to distinguish between them, either by looks or behaviour, why not admit them all? Wills also insisted that Victorian teams be chosen on merit and he encouraged players from lesser Melbourne and country clubs.

There is no doubt that Wills was a sporting champion and what de Moore makes very clear is that he was performing on a big stage. Inter-colonial cricket matches between New South Wales and Victoria were huge events. For instance, the match against NSW at the MCG in early 1860 was attended by 25,000 people (out of a population of approximately 125,000), while the 1863 encounter in Sydney produced a serious riot. In the 1860 game, Wills not only top-scored for Victoria, but also bowled unchanged through both NSW innings.

A central theme of the book is that sporting genius and flawed character often go together. Indeed, the link between cricket and suicide throughout history is so strong that a book has been published on the subject. Wills’s private life included a broken engagement and a long-term relationship with a woman to whom he was not married. Even within the sporting environment, his erratic behaviour earned him many critics with whom he regularly conducted spirited debates in the letters’ pages of contemporary publications. De Moore observes that ‘those most critical of Wills still admired his sporting abilities, even if it was the colder admiration reserved for those with excessive talent and confidence ... his forthright tactics, which might have worked on the field had limited value in life.’

It is perhaps his role as a nineteenth century flawed sporting genius that provides Wills’s ongoing significance after all. In a wonderful piece of sports writing in 2006, The Times’ Simon Barnes observed of Shane Warne’s single-handed mental destruction of England in the Adelaide Ashes Test that what was remarkable was Warne’s unique ability to impose his will on the contest. Having listed a long list of sporting greats, Barnes argued that:

alone among this collection of greats, Warne is possessed of that touch of devil. In his real life—an area in which Warne has proved himself consistently inept—the devil led him into trouble again and again. But in sport it was the making of him.

De Moore’s biography makes it clear that Wills also had ‘that touch of devil.’ He provides an authoritative account of Wills’ role as an outstanding footballer in the code he helped to found, and of his involvement in important aspects of Australian race relations. However, he also makes it clear that to Wills and his contemporaries he was a cricketing great:

Tom may not have understood how a cricket ball obeyed the laws of physics but he was able to instinctively shift to that other world of the divine, where the few with true genius play sport. When he played cricket, it was not merely a game amongst mortals—Tom Wills bowled with the Gods.