

# *The Invincibles. New Norcia's Aboriginal cricketers 1879–1906*

by Bob Reece

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Seventy years before Don Bradman's 'Invincibles', a group of Aboriginal cricketers also known by that name, from New Norcia, Western Australia, was enjoying similar success against all comers. Bob Reece has written an affectionate book about their remarkable success. He surmises playfully that, if the timely intervention of Our Lady of Good Counsel to save the wheat crop from fire in 1847 can be described as New Norcia's first miracle, then the success of the cricket team from 1879 was the second.

The catalyst that drew the team together was the happy relationship between Bishop Rosendo Salvado, founder of the New Norcia mission, and Henry Lefroy, a serious-minded but sporty Irishman, the young 'squire of Victoria Plains'. We do not know Lefroy's motives: Reece suggests that he was a 'practical and benevolent man who liked to get things done'. Salvado's motives in encouraging the game were more complex: he wanted to replace 'the corroboree' with 'pleasure and past-time in a good physical game', since good cricketers he thought needed 'activity, good sight, strong arms, light legs, cold blood, discernment and foresight', he wanted to show the colonists that these were qualities that the Aborigines possessed in abundance. When he discovered that two teams, spontaneously and untrained, had played each other as married men versus unmarried, he encouraged them to continue, especially on Sundays – but not during Lent.

Lefroy's first contribution was to organise the best players into a game against the local settlers in 1879. The game was to be played in Perth where the team's arrival was greeted with intense interest. We are not sure of the rules, but Reece

believes that overarm bowling was becoming popular at this time. Overs were four balls only, and a hit over the boundary was worth five, not six. Due not least to the poor quality of the grounds, any batsman was lucky to get to 20. Splendid lunches and celebration dinners added to the social occasions. The Norcians lost their first match but next day, at Fremantle, they won by nine runs. Salvado wrote that words alone could not describe the applause. The team lost the third match, but in the 1880 season they swept all before them. Many colonists were bemused at their success, surmising that their secret was their innate bush skills. There may have been something in it: John Walley, a spectacular fieldsman, threw a cricket ball 100 prodigious metres! That year, 1880, it seemed that half of Perth was turning out to see the latest match between the Norcians and the MCC (Metropolitan Cricket Club).

Reece prefers to see the team's success deriving from social, not racial origins. Naturally gifted, they played as a tight-knit group with social skills of close communication and cooperation. Their victories reflected 'ties of kin and upbringing in a cohesive and supportive New Norcia community'. Despite their success, though, the New Norcia cricket team found no permanent place in the cricket establishment. Lefroy and Salvado, for different reasons, became less enthusiastic about the endless travel. The Western Australian Cricket Association began in 1885, a mixed blessing, while the following year saw the establishment of the Aborigines Protection Board. The members of both Boards included settler colonists whose rural experiences had in no way enamoured them to Aborigines from New Norcia or anywhere else. From the mid-1880s, cricket was becoming codified and bureaucratised, in parallel to changes in the administration of the state itself. From this time Nyoongahs could expect no place as equals, whatever their sporting achievements. Reece notes that while there exists no actual record of 'administrative exclusion' it is clear that by 1887 the Norcians were no longer wanted as a united cricketing entity.

Even on their home turf the bonding of the Invincibles was short lived, to which Reece devotes a chapter to assess the three-way interaction between the cricketers, the missionaries and the New Norcia community. The cricketers enjoyed a special status, they mixed with the powerful, they learned to drink in moderation, but they may have used their familiarity with non-mission life to argue that the observance of traditional marriage rules was no longer important. They lost their novelty, and some of the settler community establishment found it hard to accept their success. Under Salvado's successor Torres, the community split, the agrarian village lifestyle declined, children finished up in the dormitories. Many of the Invincibles became dependent on rations and were buried in paupers' graves, their fate not so different from those who had not excelled at cricket. What defeated them in the end was racism, the advance of Australian Rules and the absence of their sponsors Lefroy and Bishop

Salvado. While some families like the Walleys and Yappos still talk of their great-grandfathers' cricketing prowess, the Invincibles are largely forgotten. Their only memorials are a pewter cup and the New Norcia cricket ground.

From his long familiarity with Aboriginal history, Reece has written a gentle book which contains much to enjoy. Descendants of the cricketers will love it, filled as it is with deeds of prowess, dozens of photos of the players and lists of teams and fixtures.

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