

# *'Father of Australian Soccer': John Waiter Fletcher 1847-1918—a Biographical Sketch*

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The first recorded soccer match in Australia was played on Parramatta Common in Sydney on the afternoon of Saturday 14 August 1880. Students from The Ring's School First XV rugby squad made up one team. The other, probably dressed in blue stockings, knickers that billowed beneath the knee and white jerseys that sported a southern cross over the left breast, was to become The Wanderers, the first 'Association Football' club in the land.

It is possible that soccer may have been played before the Parramatta game but suggestions to introduce the code began with two letters to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1877. The first was penned by 'Novicrucian'; the second, three days later, by 'CC'. 'Novicrudan' was Arthur Henry Savage, a colonial educated at Rugby who had played for England against Scotland in 1876. Four years later he was playing at Parramatta with Ring's to help the students. 'CC' was John Walter Fletcher, who also played on that memorable day but on the opposing team to Savage and his charges. The two sides came together by virtue of Fletcher's acquaintance with the headmaster of Ring's, Rev. George F Macarthur. Both men were members of Sydney's Union Club.

Fletcher had been elected Honorary Secretary of the committee set up to form an 'Association Rules' football club on 3 August 1880. On behalf of the committee he had then arranged the first match and on 19 August he presented the committee's proposals to a meeting of faithful for the official establishment of 'The Wanderers' Football Club. Thereafter Fletcher continued as Secretary, enrolling the new club with the (English) Football Association, organising more games and opponents, and in 1881 forming a team at his own Coren College. In 1882 he then established the [NSW] English Football Association, which with the Natal FA was the

first Football Association to form outside the United Kingdom. Prepared to take the lead, Fletcher was the English FA's first Secretary. Although others had been involved in the foundation years of soccer in Australia, Fletcher stands central to the key developments. It can be claimed with justification that he, and only he, was the 'Father of Australian Soccer'.

Fletcher's contribution to soccer has never been publicised within the game itself or anyone external to it. Little has been known of him, even though his involvement in sport was far wider than just football. During his times there were many others more important than him but in its own modest way the career of Fletcher illustrates colonial life in fine detail. This article is a long overdue attempt to rescue a personality from historical oblivion. It also provides a window into the close-knit world of antipodean society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

### **John Walter Fletcher**

John Walter Fletcher was born in London on 11 May 1847, the son of John Fletcher, barrister at law, and Harriet Bathurst. His childhood seems to have been spent at Redhill, Surrey and it was at the Redhill School that he began his education. From there he was sent to Cheltenham College, one of the new crop of private establishments for the emerging middle classes. His headmaster at Cheltenham was Alfred Barry, founder of Shore, Sydney Church of England Grammar School for boys. In 1866 Fletcher entered Pembroke College, Oxford and three years later graduated as a Bachelor of Arts with second class honours. His major seems to have been history. In 1879 he paid his yearly dues and obtained his Master's degree. While at Oxford, he took a keen interest in sport and acquired a 'blue' in athletics, with a speciality in long distance running.

Fletcher's movements from 1870-1874 remain obscure but during 1875 he accepted a position as Assistant Master at H E Southey's country school, Oaklands. Initially located at Moss Vale, New South Wales (NSW), the school was moved to Mittagong before Fletcher arrived in the last months of 1875. Employment and a touch of adventure lured Fletcher to Oaklands but the man Southey himself was an attraction. Also an Oxford man, even if he was secretly sent down for persistent gambling, Southey was the nephew of the prominent poet Robert Southey.

If Fletcher believed Oaklands was going to be another Cheltenham, he received a rude shock upon arrival. Southey's school was a small, rough and tumble establishment where bullying among the boys was reminiscent of English schools in the 1820s. Set in the bush with 640 acres

of scrub attached, the school had a better than average standard of teaching but Southey's methods, much liked by the Murrumbidgee squatters who sent their sons to Oaklands, were alien to the likes of Fletcher. His stay was accordingly short.

While there, Fletcher did become a pioneer of lawn tennis in Australia. He seems also to have been the 'reformer' who introduced history and geography to the school. His charges included Gilbert Murray, then a ten year old but later an eminent classics scholar. Murray's memoirs help explain why Fletcher's stay at Oaklands was so brief:

When my mother and sister came up once to see me they were horrified at our dishevelled and ruffianly appearance, but took comfort from the thought that we were as healthy as we were untidy.<sup>1</sup>

A final reason for Fletcher's quick departure conceivably lay in his staunch Anglicanism and disagreement with Southey, who had a commitment to Catholic religious instruction.

By May 1876 Fletcher was residing in Sydney. He was admitted to the Union Club as an honorary member and full membership followed. Soon after, and it seems through Club contacts, Fletcher met Anne Marian Clarke, whom he married at St Thomas' Church of England, North Sydney. It was Anne who embroidered the velvet bag in which cricket's famed Ashes were taken to England when Ivo Bligh's team returned home in 1883. Fletcher's own connection with cricket at that time was as secretary of the Paddington Cricket Club in Sydney, the same club at which his eldest son, John William, later played alongside Victor Trumper.<sup>2</sup>

Fletcher settled in Woollahra, one of Sydney's eastern suburbs, and by early 1877 had established his own private boys' school, which he named Coreen College. The school prospered and when Fletcher became involved with soccer as the founding secretary of the first club and football association in Australia, a team comprising the school's pupils played against Sydney's other clubs in 1881 and 1882.<sup>3</sup> John Scott Kerr, one of soccer's best players during the 1880s who went on to become a well known bookmaker in New South Wales, was a member of the school's team.

Coreen College continued until 1884 but was then moved to Katoomba on account of Fletcher's preference for mountain air. The new school was named Katoomba College and provided Fletcher with the platform from which to become a local identity.

This began soon after his arrival. Along with two others and John Britty North, the 'Father of Katoomba', Fletcher was appointed a Trustee of the Katoomba, Leura, Banksia and Echo Parks. He helped form the Katoomba Shooting, Excursion and Fishing Club, serving also on its committee. From 1891 to 1894 he was the President of the Katoomba School of Arts. In 1885 and 1886 he had entered his College in the Southern British FA's Association Cup, and in 1889 he was involved in establishing a Katoomba team that twice played the Lithgow Rovers in that year.

Evidently Katoomba College was a quick success. William Blamire Young (Pembroke College, Cambridge) arrived from New Leeds College, Leeds in 1885 to become mathematics master and Varney Parkes, son of Sir Henry Parkes, was commissioned to build extensions. This probably included the school's large and elaborate gymnasium which reflected Fletcher's keen interest in sport. Young was later to distinguish himself in Britain and Australia as a watercolour artist and art critic.

However, when the depression of the 1890s arrived and fewer parents were able to pay boarding school fees, Katoomba College was forced to close in 1893. Young returned to England and the school was turned into a guest house called 'The Priory', which Anne Fletcher managed. John Walter returned to his studies at the same time and was admitted to the Bar in November 1893. Entering Denham Chambers he practised in 1894 and 1895, no doubt returning to Katoomba on the weekends. At the start of 1896 'The Priory' was sold and Anne Fletcher, four daughters and two sons moved to Sydney.

John Walter seems to have left the Bar in 1896 and during the last term of school for that year filled in as a temporary master at Shore. His teaching qualifications and his background as an Anglican and a Cheltenham old boy who personally knew Shore's founder must have helped in gaining this position.

Fletcher's movements during 1897 are unknown but in May 1898 he joined the NSW Department of Justice. In 1899, he was appointed police magistrate at Wilcannia on £350 per annum and served there till he was transferred to Moree in 1902. In 1904 he became a relieving police magistrate in the Justice Department's Emergency Branch. He continued in this position till his retirement in 1914.

Fletcher retired to Neutral Bay in Sydney, not far from where he and Anne were married. During the War the youngest son, Robert Eric,

and two daughters, probably Edith Grace and Nora, served in the armed forces. Of the other children, Anne Judith was a photographer with studios in Sydney. Dorothy married D S McLaurin, a Scottish electrical engineer, and besides her work for the Blue Mountains Historical Society she also wrote a biography of Sir Henry Parkes. The eldest son, John William, became a wealthy grazier who owned vast tracts of pastoral property in Queensland. He served on a number of royal commissions, was twice an unsuccessful candidate for the Federal seat of Brisbane and, at one time, sat on the Commonwealth Bank Board. He was also a chief fund raiser for the Anglican Church.

John Walter Fletcher lived in retirement to his death on 28 February 1918. He was buried at Gore Hill Cemetery, in the Church of England section. Anne Marian Fletcher lived another eighteen years and died 5 June 1936. She was buried next to her husband.

#### Notes:

- 1 Gilbert Murray, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, London, 1960. p. 64.
- 2 It is likely that John Walter procured the measurements of the Ashes urn for *Anne* to sew the velvet bag. He was 13th man, probably the team scorer, for the NSW cricket team that played Victoria in Melbourne immediately after Christmas 1882. Fletcher met the English at a banquet at the conclusion of the intercolonial match on 29 December 1882 but it is conceivable that he also attended Rupertswood, Sunbury over Christmas upon the invitation of the estate's hosts Sir William and Lady Janet Clarke. It was at Rupertswood on Christmas Eve that a social match involving the amateurs of Ivo Bligh's English tourists led to the presentation of a small urn in which the burnt remains of a bail used in the match began the Ashes tradition. Whether Ann Marian Clarke was related to Sir William and Lady Janet has yet to be proven but it would make it even more likely that John Walter Fletcher was at Rupertswood and hence privy to everything which went on there. Details of the birth of The Ashes are provided by Joy Munns, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt ... the Birthplace of The Ashes*, Sunbury, 1994. I am indebted to Ray Webster for verifying Fletcher's membership of the NSW touring team—*Australasian*. 16 Dec. 1882. Fletcher's presence in Melbourne in late 1882 has further significance. It would have permitted him to make contact with people intent on establishing soccer in Victoria. Along with two Sydney colleagues, Fletcher had called for the game to be formed in Melbourne in 1880, raising at the same time the idea of intercolonial matches. Victoria's first club formed three months after Fletcher's 1882 visit and NSW and Victoria played the first intercolonial soccer series six months later in Melbourne.
- 3 Philip Mosely, 'The Game: Early Soccer Scenery in New South Wales', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 8, no. 2, May 1992, pp. 135-51; Philip Mosely, 'A Social History of Soccer in New South Wales, 1880-1957'. unpub. PhD thesis, University of Sydney 1987.