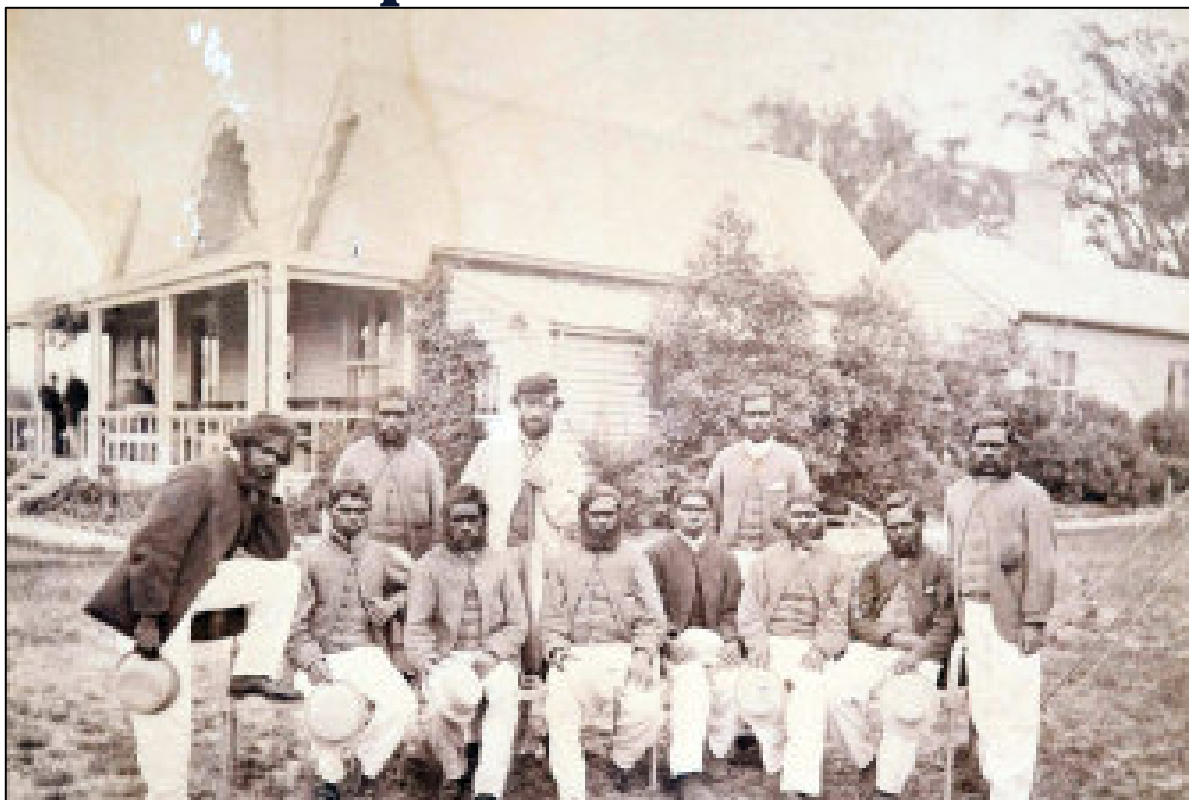# Fresh evidence of Aboriginal XI's financial exploitation

The Aboriginal cricket team who played the Melbourne Cricket Club on Boxing Day, 1866.

By Daniel Brettig
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Further evidence of the financial exploitation of Australia's Aboriginal first XI cricket team more than 150 years ago has emerged following the performance of a play about the team's 1868 tour to England.

The Aboriginal team from western Victoria, featuring the Australian cricket hall of fame member Johnny Mullagh, was initially coached by Tom Wills and managed by William Hayman for a game at the MCG on Boxing Day 1866, before travelling to New South Wales.

It was there that they met William Gurnett, a businessman who proposed the tour's expansion to travel to the UK, but then breached his contract to leave the team penniless and stranded in Sydney.

Following the performance of the play *Black Cockatoo*, written by Geoffrey Atherden and directed by Wesley Enoch, in the Wimmera town of Harrow last Saturday night, a fresh rummage through the archives was conducted to settle a longstanding

question – who had promised the players they would be paid £50 each for touring and playing?

In the play, which first premiered in 2020, the promise was initially ascribed to the team's 1868 captain/coach Charles Lawrence, before recently being adjusted to attribute it to George Graham and George Smith, the financial backers of the 1868 tour.

The 1868 Aboriginal team to England, pictured with their coach Charles Lawrence.

But a search by the Harrow Discovery Centre's manager, Josie Sangster, and researcher Ian Friend – a descendant of Lawrence – uncovered the following article from the *West Gippsland Gazette*, dated September 5, 1899, which captured the recollections of the Hayman family:

"While the match in Melbourne was in course of progress, Wills received a wire from the Sydney cricketers offering to give a lump sum and pay all expenses if the Aboriginal team would go there and play. Before they started for Sydney Mr W. E. B. Gurnett, a member of the Melbourne Cricket Club, who was represented to be wealthy, offered Wills and Mr Hayman £1000 each if they would take the blacks to England," the article reads.

"Mr Gurnett offered to find all the expenses and pay £50 to each member of the team. The offer was accepted, and the agreement embodying it was signed, and is now preserved in the Melbourne Museum. By that undertaking Mr Gurnett was to take all the Victorian matches at Geelong, Sandhurst and Castlemaine. They went through their programme in this colony and sailed for Sydney, where they started their first match on the Albert ground. The proceeds were to go to Mr Gurnett.

"Disaster, however, was at hand. No sooner were the wickets pitched and all in readiness than certain legal documents were served upon Wills and Mr Gurnett, and the match could not be proceeded with. Finally the match came off, but owing to the hitch which had occurred it was not a success financially, and Mr Hayman found himself stranded at Charles Lawrence's hotel at Manly Beach."

The 1866-67 tour was not only a financial bust but a human disaster for the team. Four of their number died during and immediately after the tour.

This also brought their association with Wills to an end. His involvement in colonial cricket, football and interactions with Aboriginal communities is currently subject to a joint research project between the MCC, the AFL and Cricket Australia.

It was Lawrence, then, who accompanied the team back to Victoria, and then helped oversee the 1868 trip. Details of financial agreements with the Aboriginal team for the 1868 tour are more sketchy, save for the fact that several members of the side won prize money during its course and afterwards.

Mullagh, the central character in the play, was inducted into the Australian Cricket Hall of Fame in 2021. The player of the match during the Boxing Day Test is awarded the Mullagh medal - an honour received by the Indigenous cricketer Scott Boland after last year's Ashes Test.