

MYTH AND REALITY: REFLECTIONS ON RUGBY AND NEW ZEALAND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Gradually, so-called mainstream historians have begun to acknowledge the role of sport in the social history of modern society. Historians of sport are now recognised as significant contributors to academic debates in the areas of popular cultural expression, capitalist political economy, and working-class history. In the case of New Zealand, social history as a conscious pursuit has emerged only in the past ten years or so. Prior to the 1970s, historians of New Zealand were too caught up in the debates emerging from the work of Keith Sinclair and William Oliver over the nature of the historical process in nineteenth century New Zealand. This historiography was concerned predominantly with the political and economic factors which shaped New Zealand's national identity.¹ In the late 1970s scholars such as Erik Olssen, Miles Fairburn, Claire Toynbee and Len Richardson, among others, diversified historical enquiry in New Zealand. Much of this revisionist work has been collected in the *Oxford History of New Zealand*, published in 1981. While recent scholarship has been of high quality, the subjects addressed have retained an insular and narrow focus. Sport, to a large degree, has remained outside the work of established scholars.²

Nevertheless historians of New Zealand have started to analyse the role of sport in the New Zealand social structure. Several articles and significant sections of books have been published which give sport, particularly rugby, a more central role in the social history of New Zealand. Two themes have emerged in analyses of the position of rugby in New Zealand society. The first is how rugby, particularly, success internationally, has helped to shape a New Zealand national identity. The second is the way in which rugby has served to form a male identity in New Zealand. This essay examines

recent writing on the history of rugby in the context of New Zealand's social history, and suggests areas for further research and theoretical formulations.³

Rugby, often called New Zealand's greatest religion, was first played at Nelson in 1870. The game soon gained rapid popularity with teams springing up in every village and mining camp in the country. Regional rugby unions were formed in the 1880s and in 1892 a national union was created. By 1890 there were nearly 700 clubs and 18 provincial unions in New Zealand and the first official tour of Britain by a New Zealand national team was organised for 1905. The newly coined 'All Blacks' were immensely successful losing only one match (to Wales 3-0). Most scholars agree that the 1905 tour was crucial to cementing rugby's position in New Zealand popular consciousness.⁴

Prior to the late 1970s, the history of rugby was confined to local and national rugby histories written from an institutional perspective, interested only in the dynamics of games and scores, with little mention of the wider social implications of the immense popularity of the game. These histories are of great value to the social and cultural historian as they document much information about players, clubs, associations and crowds.⁵ Over the last decade the appearance of works critiquing the role of rugby in social history largely have emerged out of the changing values in New Zealand society at large.

Separation of sport and politics in New Zealand is no longer viewed as possible. International isolation of New Zealand came with the boycott by African nations of the 1976 Olympics because of New Zealand's sporting relations with South Africa. In New Zealand, massive protests surrounding the 1981 tour sparked a reassessment of rugby's dominance in popular consciousness. Keith Sinclair states that the result of the 1981 tour was 'the worst scenes of disorder and violence since the Anglo-Maori wars of the eighteen-sixties, as huge

processions of demonstrators tried to disrupt or at least protest against the games'.⁶

In this political climate the most stunning critique of rugby in New Zealand was published. The play *Foreskin's Lament* was written by former All Black trialist Greg McGee.⁷ McGee's play illustrates the pervasive nature of rugby in society. As the Coach of the team in the play, Tupper, states: 'This is a team game, son, and the town is the team. It's the town's honour at stake when the team plays, god knows there's not much else around here'.⁸ The play concludes with 'Foreskin's lament' delivered after it is revealed that the team captain died from blows received from a teammate. Foreskin rejects the game and all that it embodies. It is in this context of questioning the society's values that recent studies by New Zealand historians have emerged.

Keith Sinclair's *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity* (1986) and Jock Phillips's *A Man's County?: The Image of the Pakeha Male* (1987) both point out the significant place rugby holds in national and male identity in New Zealand. Phillips's 'Rugby, War and the Mythology of the New Zealand Male' (1984) and a series of related articles by Scott Crawford, have also examined the development of rugby within national consciousness.

Sinclair's work is the culmination of over thirty years' investigation into the historical background to the emergence of a New Zealand identity. His early publications rarely mention rugby, focusing rather on politics. *A Destiny Apart* moves toward placing sport in a more central position in the 'identity of New Zealanders. In the tenth chapter, entitled "'Peace Hath its Victories": Sport', Sinclair states that in 'studies of Australia or New Zealand sport can scarcely be ignored'.⁹ Why this should be peculiar to Australia and New Zealand is not discussed. He then clearly links rugby in New

Zealand with war, stating that rugby was seen as either a substitute or preparation for war.¹⁰

After a synopsis of early rugby history in the chapter, Sinclair makes a crucial initial link between rugby and politics. He states that at a reception for the successful 1893 New Zealand tourists of New South Wales and Queensland, both Prime Minister Richard Seddon and the Leader of the Opposition, William Rolleston, spoke to the team. Seddon, the Governor-General and other government ministers were present at the Wellington match of New Zealand against Britain in 1904.¹¹ However, Sinclair fails to carry the connection further. Why was Seddon so involved in rugby, particularly the national team? My research on the 1905 tour has shown that Seddon followed the tour closely, having results cabled to him as government messages. He was the first to greet the team on its return from Britain. He also obtained approval for the government to finance the team's return via the United States as a reward for a successful tour.¹² Again Sinclair alludes to this without providing any theoretical analysis or context. None of Seddon's biographies mention rugby or his connection with sport. Clearly, the relationship between sport and politics in New Zealand is an area which demands further research.

Returning to the war metaphor, Sinclair calls the 1905 test match with Wales 'The Gallipoli of New Zealand sport', and refers to the match as a 'major episode in the mythology of New Zealandism'.¹³ New Zealand thought they had scored a try in the second half, but the referee disagreed. On welcoming the 'All Blacks' home at Auckland, Seddon proclaimed that 'in their hearts, and in the opinion of most people, it was recognised that this was not a defeat, but a try to a try'.¹⁴ *The New Zealand Times* of 9 March 1906 declared that 'Peace hath its victories ... There is no need to apologise for the predominance that sport has achieved in our national life'.

In situating the 1905 tour in the mythology of 'New Zealandism', Sinclair fails to analyse just how this 'myth' was generated, and for what purpose. The 1905 tour came soon after Britain stumbled to victory in the South African War. As a result of the war, a series of commissions were formed to investigate the state of the British military and male physical degeneracy. New Zealand's successes on the rugby field were seen as further proof of the decline of British manhood. The Colonials were praised in the British press for their physical strength and ingenuity which were attributed to the rural nature of New Zealand society. This praise translated into an affirmation of colonial maturity in the New Zealand press. The myth of physical superiority due to the pastoral nature of the country was incorporated easily into an emerging national mythology of rural arcadia.¹⁵

Jock Phillips's *A Man's Country?* is concerned with the mythology of New Zealand white or pakeha manhood. The central question for Phillips is how the image of the pakeha male came into being, and how it has been perpetuated over the years. Two themes predominate in Phillips's analysis; war and rugby. These themes have been central to white male experience in New Zealand for over a century. Interspersed throughout his text are detailed analyses of rugby and how it forms part of the image of the white New Zealand male.

Phillips argues that the game developed so rapidly in New Zealand because it meshed well with the pioneer male culture. However, by 1900, as urbanisation increased there was anxiety over the emerging social order. Therefore, Phillips argues, rugby was seen by the middle class as an effective antidote to hooliganism and an insurance of social conformity. He also points out that rugby, and other outdoor games, were seen as valuable weapons in sublimating sexuality. As rugby became more organised and ritualised by the late

1890s it assumed a moral significance as a 'training for life'. In addition, the sport also encouraged a spirit of co-operation and submerged individual expression. Phillips rejects the argument that rugby was seen by the bourgeoisie as a way to create efficient workers. He suggests that economic utility was a factor in an emerging ideology, but contends that rugby was more important as a way to ensure military preparedness, especially in the period from 1900 onwards.

The 1905 tour of Britain is also seen by Phillips as the point at which rugby became solidified in a new Zealand 'national consciousness'. However, in analysing the tour, he critiques what he calls the official legend, and suggests an unofficial legend. Rejecting the available sources, Phillips reads the present male culture of rugby tours back onto the reality of 1905. It is through the rejection or manipulation of evidence that the argument is, at times, self-defeating. Nonetheless, Phillips' analysis of rugby goes a long way towards the goal of placing rugby within the context of social history. Phillips' interpretation of the interaction between politics and rugby goes beyond Sinclair's. Phillips demonstrates that Prime Minister Seddon made a conscious effort, in the guise of national identity, to make political gain out of the 1905 tour. Seddon was dubbed by newspapers as 'Minister of Football', but, as Phillips argues, 'Seddon was too crafty a politician not to ride on the coat-tails of rugby'.¹⁶

Phillips demonstrates that until the early 1980s, apart from war, rugby was the dominant component of a pervasive pakeha manhood. However, he is not concerned with the Maori male culture. He is searching for the roots of his own experience, and does not claim that his experience and that of Maoris, in terms of rugby, is the same. Yet, Maoris began playing rugby enthusiastically from early in New Zealand's rugby history, which Phillips mentions but does not analyse.

The first team from New Zealand to tour Britain was the 'Maori' team of 1888. The majority of players on the team were Maori, and the tour was very successful, with the Maoris winning most of their matches. The history of rugby in Maori social history is a neglected area which demands further research. The social history of rugby in New Zealand will not be complete without including the Maori experience.

Similar to the focus in Phillips' research is that of Scott Crawford. Crawford, trained in physical education, has published a series of articles on the history of sport and recreation in colonial Otago which emerged out of his University of Queensland Ph.D. thesis. He has also published a series of articles which focus specifically on rugby. Disguised as studies on rugby in New Zealand as a whole, Crawford's primary evidence concerns rugby in Otago, particularly prior to 1907. His work lacks sophisticated theoretical analysis, yet it succeeds in providing much empirical detail on the history of rugby in Otago. He has attempted several thematic approaches to essentially the same body of evidence.

The crucial question addressed by Crawford is why rugby came to hold such a dominant place in New Zealand's popular consciousness. He entitled one of his articles 'A Secular Religion: The Historical Iconography of New Zealand Rugby' (1986). Echoing Phillips, Crawford states that the game was one answer to the increasing industrial anomie of the 1880s. Furthermore, the enthusiastic support for rugby made possible a new feeling of ritualistic belonging within a larger group.¹⁷ He applies the Dunning and Sheard paradigm for the modernisation of rugby, in which they seek to demonstrate how football in England evolved in a series of stages from folk-football to modern soccer and rugby.¹⁸ Crawford asserts that, by the 1880s, rugby in New Zealand became less violent, and players were expected to exert control on the playing field.¹⁹

However, he also posits that the pattern for New Zealand rugby was set in this period -- hard driving notions of forward play.²⁰

Crawford argues that the 'games cult' and the influence of 'muscular Christianity' was transferred to the prestigious boys schools of New Zealand creating a mystique that made the good 'games player' a privileged person in society.²¹ This success of rugby in public schools is not theorised by Crawford in terms of class. The game was clearly transported from English public schools by old boys to New Zealand, but why did the exclusive nature of rugby in southern England not reproduce itself in New Zealand? This is a crucial question to answer in analysing interactions between rugby, and class structure and ideology.

Conceptually, Crawford tries to place rugby at the centre of an egalitarian society in New Zealand. He contends that rituals surrounding the game had a 'drawing together' effect.

The action, excitement and movement as a team must have served as a strong antidote to the alienation experienced in the work situation by the player who was an unskilled labourer.²²

Finally, Crawford argues that rugby provided an outlet for stifled upward social mobility resulting from diminishing access to land and the depression of the 1880s. This argument is problematic for several reasons. First, rugby players were drawn from all classes of urban and rural areas. Second, there was a clear predominance of middle-class control over the games' administration. Third, without a significant data-base of players and administrators on a variety of rural and urban clubs, we cannot infer that rugby was egalitarian in reality. A crucial question Crawford fails to ask is whether rugby retarded the emergence of a class consciousness among workers, and if so, was rugby used in a conscious effort by middle-class administrators and employers as a means of social control. Crawford

leaves us with the myth of New Zealand egalitarianism manifested in rugby. To quote from the conclusion of another article of Crawford's: 'Rugby was appropriate for, and complimentary to, a New Zealand community forged by a democratic press of "mateship" and familiarity'.²³ This notion of 'mateship' and social equality forms the myth of male culture which Phillips has taken such pains to deconstruct in *A Man's Country*? More empirical work needs to be undertaken before a full breakdown of this 'myth' can occur.

Myth or Reality: Suggestions for Future Projects

These studies by Sinclair, Phillips and Crawford raise the crucial question of just what are we looking for in analysing rugby within the context of New Zealand social history? All of these works suggest that rugby forms a central part of a myth of male national identity in New Zealand. But, what is the reality? The significance of rugby in the social history of the country is incontrovertible, however, these historians consign it to some form of abstract consciousness and identity-builder.

More systematic historical analyses of rugby are vital if we are to get beyond the mythology paradigm. Several questions remain unasked or unanswered. What role has race played in rugby? The New Zealand myth is that race relations have been better than in other settler societies with white and black or brown residents. Was this, and is this still, the case in the historical reality. What role have women played in rugby? What does their exclusion tell us about New Zealand society? Can we simply reject class divisions in rugby, and if so, how does this relate to the class structure in wider society? None of these studies have attempted to look at class from a marxian perspective in terms of the relation of people to the production process. While I am not advocating an exclusively Marxist analysis of

rugby in New Zealand, class division may prove useful in attempts to demystify the place of rugby in New Zealand society. How does rugby work towards the creation of community, regional and national consciousness in reality? Finally, what is the relationship between sport and politics in the history of New Zealand? These are just a few of the most significant questions which a social history of New Zealand rugby must address. The source material is vast and could be supplemented by an oral history project which could still provide useful evidence for rugby from the 1920s or 1930s. The recent literature has been important in opening up the history of rugby in New Zealand to serious historical enquiry, however, we are a long way from a social history of rugby in New Zealand.

NOTES

1. The Sinclair-Oliver debate is summarised in K.A. Pickens, 'The Writing of New Zealand History: A Kuhnian Perspective', *Historical Studies*, 27 (April 1977), pp. 384-398.
2. Early work on sport by historians largely was confined to B.A. Honours theses. See for example, Neal Swindells, 'Social Aspects of Rugby Football in Manawatu From 1878 to 1910,' B.A. Honours Thesis, Massey University, 1978; Anthony Lunch, 'Otago 17 - Southland 11: A Social History of Otago Rugby in the 1940s,' B.A. Honours Thesis, University of Otago, 1984. A notable exception was Scott Crawford, 'A History of Recreation and Sport in Nineteenth Century Colonial Otago,' Ph.D. Thesis, University of Queensland, 1984. Crawford has published several articles from this thesis, see below; See also, John Hinchcliff, (ed.) *The Nature and Meaning of Sport in New Zealand* (Auckland, 1978).
3. The main works reviewed here are: Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity* (Wellington: Allen and Unwin in association with Port Nicholson Press, 1986); Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?: The Image of the Pakeha Male* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987); See also his, 'Rugby, War and the Mythology of the New Zealand Male', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 18.2 (October 1984), pp. 83-103; Scott Crawford, 'The Game of Glory and Hard Knocks: The Interpenetration of Rugby and New Zealand Society,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 19.2 (Fall 1985), pp. 76-91; Scott Crawford, 'A Secular Religion: The Historical Iconography of New Zealand Rugby,' *Physical Education Review*, 8.2 (1986), pp. 146-158.
4. For specific analyses of the 1905 tour, see J. Nauright 'Sport, Empire and Nationalism: The 1905 New Zealand Rugby Tour of the Britain and Ireland,' forthcoming; and Len Richardson, 'Rugby, Race, and Empire: The 1905 All Black Tour'. *Historical News* (published by the History Department, University of

- Canterbury) no. 47 (December 1983), pp. 1-6. Richardson focuses his research on the tour on New Zealand primary sources, while I have used primarily British sources, from which most reports and commentary in New Zealand were gleaned.
5. The best of these is still Arthur C. Swan, *History of New Zealand Rugby Football 1870-1945* (Wellington, 1948); see also Gordon Slatter, *On the Ball: The Centennial History of New Zealand Rugby* (Christchurch, 1970); as well as many local club and association histories and histories of the All Blacks.
 6. Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Revised edition, (Auckland, 1988), p. 318.
 7. Greg McGee, *Foreskin's Lament* (Wellington, 1981).
 8. *ibid.*, p. 10.
 9. Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*; p. 143.
 10. *ibid.*
 11. *ibid.*, pp. 145-47.
 12. Nauright, *op.cit.*, p. 16.
 13. Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p. 147.
 14. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 150.
 15. For a summary of the rural myth in New Zealand, see Miles Fairburn, 'The Rural Myth and the new urban Frontier: An Approach to New Zealand Social History, 1870-1940', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 9.1 (April 1975), 3-21.
 16. Phillips, *op.cit.*, p. 110.
 17. Crawford, 'A Secular Religion', p. 147.
 18. Erik Dunning and Keith Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (Oxford, 1979)
 19. In 'The Evolution of Rugby From Folk Football in Colonial New Zealand: The Shaping of a National Ethos 1850-1907,' *Carnegie Research Papers in Physical Education*, 1.7 (1985), 40-46, Crawford uses the Dunning model for the modernisation of football to analyse the early development of rugby in colonial Otago.
 20. Crawford, *op.cit.*, p. 148.
 21. *ibid.*, p. 149.
 22. *ibid.*, p. 151.
 23. Scott Crawford, "'Muscles and Character are there the First Object of Necessity?': An Overview of Sport and Recreation in a Colonial Setting -- Otago Province, New Zealand,' *British Journal of Sports History*, 2.2 (September 1985), p. 123.

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