

# *From Bondi to Batley: Australian Players in British Rugby League 1907- 1995*

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Globalisation has become a much discussed word among historians and sociologists of sport over the past decade. But the transfer of players across nations and continents is not a new phenomenon. British rugby league, and rugby union in the north of England before the 1895 split, has always sought to recruit players from beyond its geographical confines.<sup>1</sup> Because rugby league is a marginalised sport in British society and commercially driven by the need to attract spectators, it has historically seen those countries in which it is played, and to a lesser extent those in which rugby union is played too, as a global labour market.

The most obvious example is the hundreds of Welsh rugby union players who have 'gone north' since the 1880s to benefit financially from their rugby skills. In this migration from the Celtic nations to England's industrial heartland, rugby league was not unique; thousands of Scottish soccer players took their talents south over the years to earn greater rewards than they could gain at home.<sup>2</sup> But what has made British rugby league different from other sports is the fact that from 1908, when the first Australian rugby league touring side arrived in Britain, over 1,500 Australians have trekked halfway around the world to find football fame and fortune in the north of England. In doing so, they have provided British rugby league, often thought of as geographically insular and parochial, with a cosmopolitanism which was, until recent times, unique in British sport.

Many of their exploits have been recorded in British journalist Dave Hadfield's 1992 book *Playing Away*.<sup>3</sup> This article seeks to go beyond a biographical approach and examine the ways in which Australian players have helped to shape and define the culture of British rugby league - and also how those returning home influenced Australian rugby league. It attempts to place the importation of Australian players in the context of

the changing balance of power between the British and Australian games, and looks at the questions of national identity and the shared, working-class culture of rugby league.

### **1907-1937: Pioneers**

Of the pioneering 1907 professional All-Black New Zealand tourists to Britain, six went on to play for British clubs, including Lance Todd, whose name lives on in the trophy for the Wembley Challenge Cup Final player of the match. When the first Kangaroos arrived from Australia the following year, ten, or almost a third of the tour party, went on to play in English club football.

The great Huddersfield 'team of empire talents' which won 12 out of a possible 16 trophies between 1911 and 1915 period had two Australians, one of them being Albert Rosenfeld, who scored what was thought to be a never-to-be-beaten record of 78 tries in a season in 1912, only to beat it two seasons later with a phenomenal 80 tries. Oldham signed three of the first Kangaroos who helped them to two rugby league championships in 1910 and 1911. By 1912 they were one of three English clubs with Australian captains, two others having New Zealanders in charge. The Hull side which won the 1914 Challenge Cup had Jimmy Devereux and Steve Darmody directing the side. In the six years between the initial Australian tour and the outbreak of World War One, only two sides without an Australian in a key position won the RL championship. One of those was Wigan, runners-up on four consecutive occasions, who had built their success on a combination of New Zealanders and Welshmen. Such was the strength of the Australian and New Zealand presence in the British game that a combined Australia/New Zealand 'Colonial' team thrashed the returning British tourists 31-15 in September 1910.

The impact of the 'Colonials' was not just on the playing field. As well as increased credibility from tours to and from Down Under, the Northern Union (NU), as the Rugby Football League (RFL) was known until 1922, gained a uniquely cosmopolitan flavour - the importation of overseas players into the game gave the NU its own alternative to the glamour of soccer's nation-wide competitions and the social cachet of rugby union. This, together with the move to 13-a-side and the introduction of the orderly play-the-ball in 1906, was crucial in creating the template for modern rugby league.

By the beginning of the 1909-10 season the Yorkshire Post estimated that there were at least 20 'Colonial' players playing in Britain.

Unsurprisingly, the administrators of the fledgling Australian and New Zealand rugby leagues were not pleased with what many saw as the looting of some of their best players. In November 1909 the British authorities acceded to their requests and introduced the first regulations governing player transfers between the hemispheres - any player wishing to sign for an English club now had to have the permission of his home league and club.<sup>4</sup> Those without it had to serve a two-year residency period before playing-which, in effect, meant that international transfers were banned. A revolt of British clubs at the start of 1912 led the NU to cancel the ban but furious threats from Australia forced its reimposition in February 1912. Following World War One, British clubs again tried to remove the ban. The RFL succumbed to this pressure in the summer of 1923, only to re-instate the restrictions a few weeks later after protests from Australia.<sup>5</sup> This time the ban was extended to include rugby union players from Australia and New Zealand. However, by 1927 the British clubs' desire to boost their attendances through antipodean glamour proved too strong and in June of that year they forced the removal of the restrictions on international transfers.

This marked the beginning of a new golden age, providing a temporary respite from the gloom of the depression years for the mining villages and mill towns across Yorkshire and Lancashire. Ernest Mills and Ray Markham at Huddersfield, Vic Hey, Eric Harris and Jeff Moores at Leeds, Hector Gee at Wigan - a departure from their then traditional policy of signing New Zealanders - and Bill Shankland at Warrington, were merely the most prominent of the Australians who lit up the football fields of northern England in the 1930s. Significant earnings were available to these players: Bill Shankland was paid a £1,000 signing-on fee plus £6 per match and given a job paying £8 a week.<sup>6</sup> But not all were successful. Dave Brown, one of Australia's greatest ever players, never made his mark at Warrington, and Kangaroo half-back Joe 'Chimpy' Busch, 'scorer' of the most famous non-try in rugby league history when his touchdown in the 1930 third Ashes test match was disallowed, also failed to fulfil his potential at Leeds.

Although the acquisition of such stars delighted English spectators it brought no pleasure to Australian rugby league, nor, for that matter, to those in the English game who feared the detrimental effect of player importation on international competition. To assuage these fears, the RFL agreed in 1931 to compensation of £200 per player to be paid by

British clubs to the Australian or New Zealand authorities. But by the mid-1930s such was the player drain that it was becoming commonplace for journalists to wonder if Australia would ever beat Britain in a Test series. Once signed to an English club, a player's contractual obligations and the difficulty of international travel meant that they were no longer eligible for international selection. The precedent had been set following the attempt of Dan Frawley, the 1908 Kangaroo, to play for the 1911 tourists despite being contracted to Warrington. The club refused to let him to play for Australia, but his contract was sufficiently ambiguous to allow him to eventually play later in the tour. Henceforth British clubs made sure that there was no ambiguity: a player's responsibility was first and foremost to his club. This meant that Eric Harris, the 'Toowoomba Ghost', a truly great winger who played for Leeds from 1930 to 1940, never had the chance to play for his country. Indeed, it would have been quite possible to select an Australian test side from those playing for English clubs in the 1930s.

#### **1945-1983: Reversal of Fortunes**

To safeguard the competitiveness of international football, the ban was reimposed in 1937 and the flow of players dried up. However, the agreement lapsed in the midst of World War Two and no attention was paid to it until a letter arrived at RFL headquarters in early 1946 from the New Zealand Rugby League, complaining that Wigan had breached the agreement by signing the Ponsonby winger Brian Nordgren. Although the British authorities somewhat cynically dismissed the complaint because neither New Zealand nor Australia had requested a new agreement, they were sufficiently concerned to instruct the two managers of the 1946 British touring side to Australasia to discuss the matter when they arrived down under.<sup>7</sup>

Part of this desire to reach an understanding may have been motivated by rumours that the British tourists would themselves be targets for Australian clubs. In fact, a number were approached when they arrived but none were tempted. For example, Wakefield Trinity forward Harry Murphy was offered £300 to sign for Balmain plus a three year contract paying £9 per match. He turned it down because, as the Wakefield secretary explained;

He was brought up on the Trinity ground. He has been with us since he was sixteen and in his job as a marine engineer he has prospects which will develop as he grows older.<sup>8</sup>

Balmain's terms were barely more than what Murphy received at Wakefield and offered little incentive to move. Although more prominent players were probably offered more money, it is unlikely that Australian clubs had the finances to match the wages offered by English clubs. The growth in British crowds from 1945 offered the prospect of higher wages and post-war economic reconstruction appeared to promise long-term employment opportunities. Also, as implied by the above quote, British insularity probably played a role in players' reluctance to move. In his study of migrant soccer players in Colombia in 1950, Tony Mason suggested that "British players put up the strongest cultural resistance to life in a foreign land," bolstered by the prevailing belief that "British is Best."<sup>9</sup>

The opportunities offered by a resurgent British game did not go unnoticed by Australian players nor unpublicised by scouts acting for British clubs. The international transfer ban was not renewed until the beginning of the 1947-48 season, which gave a vital window of opportunity to British clubs to take their pick of Antipodean talent. If the 1930s were a golden age for overseas players, the players signed in 1946 and 1947 helped raise the British game to even greater heights, among them being Brian Bevan, Harry Bath, Arthur Clues, Lionel Cooper, Pat Devery, and Johnny Hunter. Possibly even more than the preceding two generations of Australian exiles, this group indelibly marked the sport with a resonance that remains today. Bevan became the most prolific try-scorer ever, with 796. Hunter, Devery and especially Lionel Cooper became the crucial triumvirate in Huddersfield's success of the early 1950s. Arthur Clues and a complete three-quarter line of fellow Australians raised Leeds back to the heights they had conquered under their previous generation of imports. The Australians of this era became identified with the huge boom in post-war rugby league attendances.

The influx also had an impact, unappreciated at the time, which was to have a major influence on the future development of the sport. As many of the stars returned to Australia in the late 1950s they took back new approaches to the game. Future Australian national coach Harry Bath left Warrington to play for St George in 1957 and was shocked at the poor skills of his new team mates: "I couldn't believe the bash and barge way Saints played the game. Blokes knocking themselves stupid. I thought 'Christ! This isn't for me'." Dick Huddart, the British international second-row forward who moved to St George in the 1960s, credits Bath with

revolutionising Australian forward play:

Before Harry showed them how to play, Australian forwards were called pigs, and that's how they played. ... all they'd do was put their heads down, get tackled and die with the ball. Harry taught them that there was much more to forward play than that.

Rex Mossop, later to play with Manly, also acknowledged how much his skills improved during his time with Leigh.<sup>10</sup> Much of the success of St George's record breaking eleven-premierships between 1956 and 1966 was due to the influence of British playing methods learned by Bath and captain-coach Ken Kearney, who played for Leeds between 1948 and 1952. According to Larry Writer, the highly organised and brutally effective defence of St George was based on the straight defensive line which many British sides employed at that time. By the mid-1960s these methods had helped to raise the Australian game to the level of the traditionally dominant British.

In 1947, faced with a new exodus of star players, the Australian Rugby League Board of Control successfully insisted on the ban on unauthorised transfers being re-introduced.<sup>11</sup> But this did not stop English clubs pursuing Australians. Disaster almost struck Australia in 1949 when Workington Town announced they had secured the signature of the South Sydney and Australian full-back Clive Churchill for £12,500 - unsurprisingly, the Australian authorities refused to sanction the move. Writing in the September 1947 issue of *Rugby League Review* Alfred Drewery said he had little sympathy with the Australian authorities but "those who look upon rugby league football from an international point of view cannot help but be perturbed at this wholesale drain on Australian talent."

Undeterred by the ban, British clubs soon realised that it did not apply to rugby union players. Rochdale Hornets hit upon the idea of persuading league players to switch temporarily to rugby union, thus becoming free to transfer to England. In 1950 Rochdale managed to sign five junior players from Newtown, Eastern Suburbs and Albury using this subterfuge until the Australian Board of Control found out and appealed to the RFL to stop Rochdale's undercover operation, complaining that:

agents scour our junior ranks for players of promise and approach them to sign contracts for English clubs which they

represent. If the prospect is interested, these agents advise the lads to forsake rugby league and transfer to rugby union (sometimes under fictitious names). After playing a few matches in rugby union these players are then signed up for English clubs under the guise of being rugby union players.<sup>12</sup>

British scouts also turned their attentions to bona-fide Australian union players such as Wallaby captain Trevor Allen and future league TV commentator Rex Mossop, both of whom signed for Leigh at this time. As Trevor Delaney notes, this proved highly unpopular with league players in Australia who saw their own opportunities to sign lucrative English contracts disappear while those with no league background were free to cash in.<sup>13</sup> In 1951 it was agreed that all overseas signings, whether from league or union, had to be sanctioned by the player's domestic rugby league authorities. Finding all doors locked, British clubs' focus for overseas signings turned to South Africa - as had happened in the 1920s - and, to a lesser extent, Fiji.

By the mid-1960s rugby league's international balance of power was perceptibly shifting towards Australia. This was reflected both on the playing field - the 1963 Kangaroo tourists had demolished the British, scoring an unprecedented fifty points in the second test match at Swinton - and financially too. The legalisation of poker machines in New South Wales in 1956 opened up extensive sources of revenue for clubs. Coupled with the abandonment of the residential qualification for players in 1959 and the development of a formal contract system, Sydney rugby league clubs were now able to match the financial benefits of playing in England.<sup>14</sup>

On a broader level, the imperial relationship between Britain and Australia was also unravelling. Up until the formation of the Rugby League International Board in 1948, the RFL's international authority had been based in large part on the fact it was the representative of the Imperial mother country - the Imperial Rugby League Board, formed in 1927, gave an m-built majority to the British. This was not simply due to British arrogance; the Australian authorities themselves were keen to emphasise their loyalty to the Crown. When the Australian Minister for External Affairs Dr HV Evatt met with the RFL Council in 1945 to discuss a possible British tour down under, he argued that it would be "in the best interests of rugby league football and of the Empire".<sup>15</sup> The Australian press also accorded the British game an imperial importance it was denied at home. For example, the famous third test match in Sydney in

1914, when a ten-man British side overcame the Australians to win the Ashes, was covered with little fanfare by the British press but in Australia was dubbed 'the Rorke's Drift Test' after a notable rearguard action by British troops against Zulu warriors in 1879.<sup>16</sup> But by the 1960s, Australian society had begun to question such deferential attitudes and this new self-confidence was reflected in Australian rugby league - the British game was no longer regarded as being inherently superior and, for example, coaches began to look to American football for inspiration.

At the same time, British rugby league was sinking into a malaise: crowds had slumped and the traditional industries from which the game had historically drawn its support, such as mining and textiles, were in acute decline. This was also the era of the 'Ten Pound Poms'. Thanks to the encouragement of the Australian government's Assisted Passage Scheme, emigration to Australia from Britain had become, if not exactly commonplace, a well-used option for those seeking better life and employment prospects in the 1950s and 1960s. For cash-strapped British rugby league clubs, the possibility of large transfer fees from Australian clubs for British players was highly attractive and the RFL consequently gave permission to transfer to a steady stream of British players who had declared their intentions to emigrate.

In 1960 Phil Jackson, the Barrow centre who had starred on the 1958 British tour of Australia, accepted an offer to become captain and coach of the Goulburn Workers club. He thus became the first British player of the modern era to move down under to play; the only previous example was Huddersfield's Welsh forward Ben Gronow who moved to Grenfell in New South Wales in 1925 as their coach but returned two years later.<sup>17</sup> In 1963 Derek Hallas moved from Leeds to Parramatta and, over the next decade and a half a series of leading British players made their way down under.

The football boot was now firmly on the other foot. If the Australian game had suffered in the past because of its talents being siphoned by British clubs, the reverse was now true. Britain lost almost an entire test team to Sydney clubs in the 1960s and 1970s. Dick Huddart to St George, Dave Bolton to Balmain, Malcolm Reilly and Phil Lowe to Manly, Roger Millward, Cliff Watson and Tommy Bishop to Cronulla and John Gray to North Sydney were some of the players who became league stars in both hemispheres. British league was becoming seriously weakened at international level and the 1977 World Cup, in which Great Britain was

forced to field a drastically understrength side due to the loss of numerous leading players to Sydney clubs, was the final straw for the RFL, who successfully lobbied for a new international transfer ban.

### **1983-1995: The Deluge**

Although the British touring team had suffered unprecedented losses in Australia in 1979, it was the historic Kangaroo tour of 1982 which highlighted just how far the domestic game had fallen behind Australia. The shock at the scale of the defeat was traumatic and, desperate to learn as much as possible from their conquerors, the RFL called for an end to the transfer ban. Consequently, in September 1983, all restrictions on international transfers were lifted... and the floodgates opened.

In the following ten years, 757 Australian players came to play for British clubs.<sup>18</sup> In the first two seasons clubs were free to sign as many players as they wanted: Halifax owner David Brook took this at face value and signed 13 Australians. This led to a situation in early 1985 when Halifax played Leeds and fielded ten Australian players while Leeds fielded five, with another as a substitute. Many of those that played, often on short-term contracts, became local icons, including Mal Meninga at St Helens, Peter Sterling at Hull, Brett Kenny and John Ferguson at Wigan. Wally Lewis played ten games for Wakefield Trinity and earned additional immortality, if such a thing is possible, by being enshrined in the name of the club's fanzine.

It goes without saying that many of those signed were not in the class of such exalted company and the rush to sign an Australian player, any Australian player!, seemed to be best exemplified by Runcorn's signing of the world's only one-armed rugby league player, Kerry Gibson. Although this was widely seen as something of a joke signing, Gibson was in fact an accomplished player, having played in reserve grade for Sydney's Western Suburbs in 1983 and 1984. For the players, the primary motivation for coming to Britain was the lucrative contracts available – at the top end Wally Lewis was paid £1,000 per game – and, occasionally, to serve out bans handed down by the NSW Rugby League judiciary, a facility enjoyed by Mario Fenech, Steve Roach and Mark Geyer before the loophole was closed. In an attempt to nip in the bud the growing reliance of some British clubs on their imports, not to mention their increasing financial burden, the RFL introduced a quota of five Australians per club in 1985, reducing it to four in 1986 and three in 1987.

Reaction to the influx of Australian players was marked by two

divergent views: the new players were undoubtedly popular with spectators while others within the British game were more sanguine. Unsurprisingly, wholesale importation became the source of dissatisfaction among British players. Halifax's purchase of almost an entire team and the sacking of popular coach Colin Dixon to make way for Canterbury's Chris Anderson caused considerable dissension, resulting in the enforced transfer of players' spokesman John Carroll. Hull half-back Kevin Harkin retired from the game in disgust after the club signed Peter Sterling and Wally Lewis recounts how only half of his new team mates shook his hand when he arrived at Wakefield Trinity. There were also complaints from Australian players that their British colleagues were often quite happy to let them do more than their fair share of tackling, something which, if Rex Mossop is to be believed, was also common in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup>

But there was more at stake than new players. The traditional British view of the game was being challenged. Unlike the three previous periods of Australian immigration, when the game down under was undeniably the junior partner, players were coming to Britain as representatives of the dominant power in world rugby league. This was perceived by many, especially British coaches, to be a threat to their authority, best expressed by former national coaches Alex Murphy and Peter Fox, who continued to argue for the superiority of the British game, despite its obvious inferiority on the pitch. "The conventional wisdom in this country is that the Australians play the game at great speed but are stereotyped and lack skill in the finer points of the game," was how *Open Rugby* summed up this attitude in 1983.<sup>20</sup>

As this passage suggests, national stereotypes came rapidly to the fore: the Australians were all brawn but no brain, whereas the British were perhaps not as athletic but possessed the more cerebral arts of the game. Journalist Mike Rylance somewhat sniffily argued that:

Just as the Australians have built on the traditional components of their game, we must also build on our own values - those of craft and skill, those which make the 'footballer' rather than the mere rugby player. While enjoying the qualities which the Australians will no doubt bring to the British winter, we should not forget, without being jingoistic, that the future of the British game does not lie in Australian, but in British hands.<sup>21</sup>

This was a reversion to British beliefs about the game in the 1940s and 1950s, which in the 1980s amounted to little more than wilful blindness. Some even insisted that it was an absence of patriotism which undermined British rugby league: "Players in Great Britain have lost pride for their British shirt," was how former Great Britain and Penrith hooker turned media pundit Mike Stephenson explained the dominance of the Australians.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, others wholeheartedly supported the Aussie invasion. Ironically, it was Halifax coach Colin Dixon, who was shortly to find himself dumped to make way for Chris Anderson, who summed up the attitude when he stated: "English rugby league must look to the future and now the future is Australia."<sup>23</sup> Phil Larder, the RFL's newly appointed coaching director, not only met Australian coaches but also conferred with Australian players in Britain about what the British game could learn from them. Among many supporters, a cult of all things Australian developed - like Sidney and Beatrice Webb's view of Stalin's Russia in the 1930s, Australian rugby league represented 'a new civilisation'. A minor industry sprang up importing Australian rugby league videos, books, magazines and playing kit. Kangaroo jerseys were worn by British supporters in the same way that Brazil shirts are worn today by soccer fans. By the late 1980s it was a sign of an enlightened high rugby league fashion sense to wear an Australian replica club shirt to matches.

Did the large number of Australian players bring success to the clubs using them? If we measure success by the winning of the Championship or the Challenge Cup, the sport's two major prizes, the evidence would suggest not. In the ten years following the lifting of transfer restrictions in 1983 only 18 Australians appeared for sides winning the Championship, and seven of those played for Halifax in the 1985-86 season. Of the ten sides that won the Challenge Cup in the same period, five of them fielded a total of ten Australians, six of whom played for, yet again, Halifax in 1987. It is also worth noting that Halifax's success was quickly followed by near bankruptcy, relegation to Division Two of the RFL Championship and the departure of the architect of the club's Australian policy, David Brook. In fact, it was New Zealanders who were far more prominent in Championship winning sides and it was they who provided the backbone for Wigan's long dominance of the game from the late 1980s - just as they did for the club's rise to prominence in the era immediately preceding World War One.

Wigan's one long-term Australian acquisition was their Australian coach John Monie. At the start of the 1984-85 season, Monie's predecessor at Parramatta, Jack Gibson, had suggested that British clubs should recruit Australian coaches rather than players.<sup>24</sup> This began to happen in the late 1980s, with Monie being the most prominent, along with Chris Anderson at Halifax and Brian Smith at Hull. It was Monie who built the side which won both the Championship and the Challenge Cup for seven consecutive seasons, in the process becoming the first man ever to coach championship winning sides in Britain and Australia. He was the most successful of the 24 Australian coaches who moved to the British game in the late eighties and early nineties. In hindsight, it may well be the case that it is the importation of Australian coaches rather than players which has contributed more to the changing face of British rugby league over the past 15 years.

### Conclusions

In the conclusion to their collection, *The Global Sports Arena*, Bale and Maguire set out a four point 'agenda for further research' into athletic talent migration, focusing on the impact of migrant players on both 'recipient' and 'donor' cultures, labour rights and the inter-relationship between cultures, self- and national identities.<sup>25</sup> What does the history of Australians in British rugby league tell us about these four issues?

For the British 'recipients', the impact of Australian players was such that it is almost impossible to exaggerate their influence: two of the original nine members of the Rugby Football League's Hall of Fame are Australian; until the dislocation of the 1995-97 'Super League War' the rhythm of its life revolved around the cycle of tours to and from Australia; the history of the British game and its most successful clubs cannot be written without mentioning the role which Australian players have played in it. Australian players brought a glamour and style to the game which helped it transcend its geographical limitations. A successful Australian player in a local side represented an affirmation of the sport's strength and relevance beyond its immediate locality, in defiance of the scorn of the establishment game of rugby union and the threat of the commercial juggernaut of soccer. In the 1980s, the importation of players and coaches provided a reservoir of knowledge and expertise which helped to improve the domestic game.

For the Australian 'donor' culture, it is clear that the loss of some of its finest players to British clubs in the 1930s and 1940s seriously undermined

the ability of Australian rugby league to compete successfully with Britain at an international level up to the 1960s. Yet, paradoxically, the experiences which Australian players in Britain in the 1950s brought back home helped lay the foundations for the eventual eclipse of the British game. In doing so, they contributed to the weakening of the imperial link with Britain in the sporting arena. From being the dominant power in world rugby league, the British have not won an Ashes test series since 1970 - indeed, the decline in competitiveness of the British national side has led to the New South Wales versus Queensland 'State of Origin' series becoming the pinnacle of the sport internationally and, arguably, to a growth of insularity in the Australian game. Nowhere was the decline in the strength of British rugby league so clear than in its utilisation merely as a bargaining chip by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation against the Australian Rugby League in 1995.

The labour rights of the Australian player in Britain until the 1980s differed little from his British team mate. Both were subject to the same contract and transfer system, although, given his higher profile, the Australian would generally receive higher wages and a higher signing-on bonus. Until the advent of short-term contracts during the Australian off-season in the 1980s, the major difference in their terms of employment was their inability to play for their national team. This led to situations where British players could be chosen to play for Britain in an Ashes test match yet an Australian playing for the same club could not play for Australia. It appears that only Dan Frawley in 1911 challenged this ruling. The iniquity of such a situation was only brought home to the British in the 1970s, when they regularly played test matches in Australia without their best players, unable to play because of their contractual obligations to their Australian club employers.

In contrast to rugby union or cricket, there were never any attempts to 'naturalise' Australian players in order to allow them to play for Britain - when in the early 1990s former Illawara hooker Phil Mackenzie, then playing for Widnes, married a British woman, took out British citizenship and declared his desire to play for Britain, it became an open secret that the then British coach Malcolm Reilly would never pick him because he was 'really' an Australian.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, for many Australian players playing in the north of England, the strands of national, local and self-identity became inextricably interwoven. Many settled in the towns that had welcomed and made

them a focus for civic pride. While it is unlikely that they went as ‘native’ as Rex Mossop claimed of Harry Bath (when Mossop made his debut for Leigh against Warrington, Bath allegedly told his Warrington forwards to “Get this convict Australian bastard Mossop!”), those who chose to stay slipped easily into the culture of the north of England.<sup>27</sup> Albert Rosenfeld, scorer of an unsurpassable 80 tries in the 1913-14 season, stayed in Huddersfield until he died in 1970, working for most of his life as a dustman. Arthur Clues too stayed on in Leeds, becoming probably the most prominent of its sporting celebrities. When he died in 1998, the church had to close its doors, such were the numbers wishing to attend his funeral. Brian Bevan has a statue erected to his memory in Warrington. As Jeff Hill has also argued in relation to overseas cricket professionals in the 1930s, the Australian rugby league star “was respected as a man who somehow carried the reputation of the local community on his shoulders.”<sup>28</sup>

The esteem in which Australian players were held by the communities which adopted them was almost without exception reciprocated. No biography of an Australian player who spent time with a British club is complete without a comment about those who watched them play. In a reversal of national stereotypes, Steve Roach found them less reserved than Australians. Ken Thornett, who played for Leeds in the early 1960s, encouraged fellow players to get out and meet them. Even players who, like Brett Kenny, had little liking for the British way of life, praised the British supporters. Rex Mossop’s comments about Leigh in the 1950s are also representative of the view of the players of the 1980s: “I loved these loyal supporters, the way they’d cheer and sing at matches and shout you a pint in their cosy, friendly pubs. They made you feel part of a community.”<sup>29</sup> A similar observation was made in 1990 by Australian journalist Adrian MacGregor:

To east coast Australians, Yorkshire and Lancashire towns are more relevant to their education than the Tower of London. England and Australia have cricket in common but nobody pretends that singular game, by its very nature, possesses the camaraderie of rugby league. It may sound naive to refer to an international brotherhood of rugby league, yet hundreds of Australians have come to England to play, many to stay. I found that, in the North, to be Australian was to be welcomed, to be an Australian on the rugby league trail ensured a hospitality bred of an intangible bond.<sup>30</sup>

This 'intangible bond' had its roots in the cultural meanings attached to rugby league. Although the wheels of commercialism and the lure of hard cash transported Australian players to Britain, it was the culture of the game which made them feel part of a community. As with all sports, that culture reflected the society which nurtured the game. The working classes of both the north of England and Australia faced the contempt of imperial rulers in southern England and responded by developing a culture which was ostensibly more democratic, at least for white-skinned people, than that of the London-centred establishment. Rugby league, forged in opposition to the social exclusiveness of rugby union and bolstered by its own self-image as "the working man's game", embodies some of these common elements of British and Australian working-class culture. It was this that enabled British rugby league to welcome Australian players and, in doing so, to act as a bridge linking the sun-kissed beach of Bondi with the dark satanic mills of Batley.

## Notes

- 1 This article is an expanded version of a paper presented to the 'Australia 2000, Britain Nil? Australian and British Sport into the 21st Century' conference, held at the Sir Robert Menzies Centre For Australian Studies, London, 19-21 November 1998.
- 2 See Robert Gate, *Gone North* (two volumes), The Author, Ripponden, 1985 and 1986 and Gareth Williams 'The Road to Wigan Pier Revisited: The Migration of Welsh Rugby Talent Since 1918' in John Bale and Joseph Maguire (eds), *The Global Sports Arena*, Frank Cass, London, 1994.
- 3 See Dave Hadfield, *Playing Away. Australians in British Rugby League*, Kingswood. London, 1992. This article deliberately concludes at 1995, before the outbreak of war between Rupert Murdoch's Super League, supported by the RFL, and the Australian Rugby League, which irrevocably altered the relationships within national and international rugby league.
- 4 Northern Rugby Football Union, General Committee minutes, 9 November 1909.
- 5 Rugby Football League, Special General Meeting, minutes, 12 July 1923.
- 6 Bill Shankland, interviewed by Dave Hadfield in *Playing Away*, p. 26.
- 7 Northern Rugby Football League Council, minutes, 23 January and 18 March 1946.
- 8 *Yorkshire Post*, 30 July 1946.
- 9 Tony Mason, 'The Bogota Affair' in Bale and Maguire, p. 47.
- 10 Larry Writer, *Never Before, Never Again*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1995, pp. 36-37; Rex Mossop with Larry Writer, *The Moose That Roared*, Ironbark, Randwick NSW, 1991, p. 80.
- 11 RFL Council, minutes 7 August 1947.
- 12 Letter from J. K. Sharp, secretary of Australian Board of Control, to RFL, 7 July 1950.
- 13 Trevor Delaney, 'A History of Rugby League International Transfer Restrictions', *Code 13*, number 7, June 1988, p. 26.
- 14 For the impact of poker machines on Australian rugby league, see Andrew Moore, *The Mighty Beats*, Macmillan, Sydney 1996, pp. 290-298. For the end of the residential qualification, see Ian Heads, *True Blue*, Ironbark, Randwick NSW, 1992,

- pp. 298-299.
- 15 RFL Council, minutes, 10 October 1945.
  - 16 See Geoffrey Moorhouse, *A People's Game*, London, 1995, pp. 124.
  - 17 See Stanley Chadwick, *Claret & Gold*, The Author, Huddersfield, 1947, pp. 45. Tom McCabe, the 1966 Kangaroo tourist, played for Widnes before moving to Australia but his decision to emigrate was not rugby-related.
  - 18 Source: *Rothman's Rugby League Yearbook*, Queen Anne Press, London, 1982-83 to 1994-95.
  - 19 *Shopacheck's Rugby League Review*, Kingswood, London, 1985, p. 84; Peter Sterling with Ian Heads, *Steriol Portrait of a Champion*, Lester-Townsend, Paddington NSW, 1989, p. 99; Adrian MacGregor, *King Wally*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1987, pp. 149-151; Mossop, p. 77.
  - 20 *Open Rugby*, October 1983, p. 31.
  - 21 *Open Rugby*, October 1984, p. 22.
  - 22 *The Sun*, 3 November 1982.
  - 23 *Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 1982.
  - 24 *Open Rugby*, August 1984, p. 21.
  - 25 Bale and Maguire, pp. 281-284
  - 26 Tulson Tollett, who was brought up in Australia, was selected for the 1997 British touring side to New Zealand, although he was born in Hastings before his parents emigrated.
  - 27 Mossop, p. 74.
  - 28 Jeff Hill, 'Cricket and the Imperial Connection: Overseas Players in Lancashire in the Inter-War Years' in Bale and Maguire, p. 56.
  - 29 Steve Roach with Ray Chesterton, *Doing My Block*, Ironbark, Randwick NSW, 1992, p. 77; Ken Thornett with Tom Easton, *Tackling Rugby*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne 1966, p. 21; Brett Kenny in *Open Rugby*, October 1985, p. 16; Mossop, p. 83.
  - 30 Adrian MacGregor, *Simply The Best: The 1990 Kangaroos*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1991, p. 2.