

5TH ANNUAL LECTURE

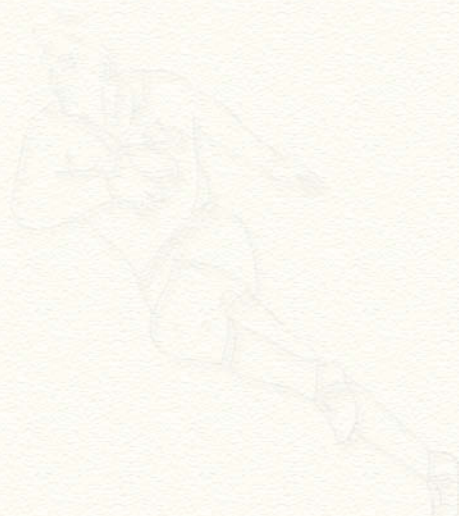
# TOM BROCK LECTURE

NORTH SYDNEY • 4 July 2003

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*'Ahr Waggy' –  
Harold Wagstaff and the  
Making of Anglo-Australian  
Rugby League Culture*

Dr Tony Collins  
De Montfort University  
Leicester, UK



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*Harold Wagstaff in his England  
cap and shirt in 1911.  
The photograph is signed  
simply 'Harold'.*





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Tom Brock Bequest Committee  
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## **TOM BROCK BEQUEST**

The Tom Brock Bequest, given to the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) in 1997, consists of the Tom Brock Collection supported by an ongoing bequest. The Collection, housed at The University of New South Wales, includes manuscript material, newspaper clippings, books, photographs and videos on rugby league in particular and Australian sport in general. It represents the finest collection of rugby league material in Australia. ASSH has appointed a Committee to oversee the Bequest and to organise appropriate activities to support the Collection from its ongoing funds.

### ***Objectives:***

1. To maintain the Tom Brock Collection.
2. To organise an annual scholarly lecture on the history of Australian rugby league.
3. To award an annual Tom Brock Scholarship to the value of \$5,000.
4. To undertake any other activities which may advance the serious study of rugby league.
5. To publicise the above activities.

### ***Activities:***

1. The Tom Brock Lecture.
2. The Tom Brock Scholarship.
3. Updating the Collection with new material published on rugby league.
4. Reporting to ASSH on an annual basis.

### ***Illustrations:***

Courtesy of Rugby Football League archives, Leeds, England.

Details of the Tom Brock Bequest are located on the website of the Australian Society for Sports History: [www.sporthistory.org](http://www.sporthistory.org)

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I'd like to start by saying what an honour it is to be invited to give this year's Tom Brock Annual lecture. Among the small band of rugby league historians in Britain Tom was a well-known and highly respected figure — so I hope that in some small way this lecture provides my tribute to the help and encouragement he provided to British historians over the years.

Certainly I hope I'm more successful than other recent British rugby league visitors to Sydney— I note with trepidation that it's almost a year to the day since the pride of Great Britain flew into Sydney to take on Australia, only to fly straight back out again on the back of a 64-10 defeat.

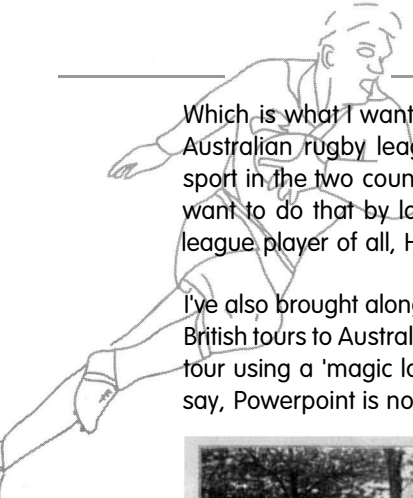
In such circumstances it seems downright perverse to ask a Pom to come and talk to an Australian audience about rugby league. In fact the only thing I can think of which would be even more perverse would be to ask a Pom to come over to talk about cricket.

It's usual at events like this for the speaker to start with a few comments about his or her journey. Well, in the mental geography of the British rugby league supporter, the journey to Sydney is not very far at all; it's just a little bit further east than Hull.

Most kids growing up in a rugby league environment in Britain will know the suburbs of Sydney better than those of London. Growing up in Hull in the late 1960s, I could point out Penrith and North Sydney on a map of Sydney but I'd be hard-pressed to show you where Surbiton or Twickenham were on a map of London.

I remember when I was maybe nine or ten, every Friday afternoon at school the teacher would give a pop quiz; she'd pick a letter and ask for the name of an animal, vegetable, country, town etc that began with that letter. One day she picked 'P'; when she asked for a town I said Parramatta. 'I've never heard of that, where is it?' she asked. 'In Australia' I replied. 'Are you sure you're not making it up?' she said. At that point Steven Lickiss, a fellow Hull KR supporter stuck his hand up and said 'Please Miss, I've heard of Parramatta'. I'd like to be able to report that, just like in the movie 'Spartacus', all the kids rose one by one to declare that they too had heard of Parramatta. Sadly, they didn't, but the fact that at least three of us in the class had heard of it demonstrated what journalist Adrian MacGregor has described as the 'intangible bond' between rugby league in the two countries.

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Which is what I want to talk about tonight. I want to look at how Anglo-Australian rugby league culture was formed, the parallels between the sport in the two countries and why the link has proved so durable. And I want to do that by looking at the career of possibly the greatest English league player of all, Harold Wagstaff.

I've also brought along some photographs — in the 1930s the managers of British tours to Australia would often go around clubs giving talks about the tour using a 'magic lantern' slide show — so despite what Bill Gates may say, Powerpoint is nothing new, it's just the magic lantern with bells on.



1914-15  
Huddersfield,  
The Team of all  
the Talents: the  
all-conquering  
1914-15  
Huddersfield  
team, one of  
rugby league's  
greatest ever  
club sides.

Why Wagstaff? Wagstaff is crucial to cementing the link between Britain and Australia. He captained the 1914 and 1920 British touring teams to Australia and New Zealand, tours which established the template for future tours and he led Huddersfield's 'Empire Team of All The Talents', a side which heavily featured Australian stars as it swept all before it in the years immediately before World War I, in the process helping to establish the tradition of Australian players in the English league. Just as importantly, he played a central role in the three key developments in rugby league that helped to forge a shared culture and identity for the sport in the two countries in the second decade of the twentieth century; namely, the development of a trade unionist, oppositional outlook among players, an innate sense of superiority over rugby union, and the contradictory combination of a working-class democratic spirit and loyalty to the Empire. On top of the shared social circumstances of the rugby splits of 1895 and 1907-8, these developments helped to solidify Anglo-Australian rugby league culture.

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Wagstaff's greatness was recognised by English and Australians alike. North Sydney's Sid Deane argued that Wagstaff was the difference between the two sides in the 1914 Ashes series: 'Harold Wagstaff was not only brilliant in attack and wonderful in defence but his leadership was a most important factor in the team's success'. Dinny Campbell of Easts and later Norths described him as 'the greatest tactician I ever played against. His personality was dynamic.' *The Referee's* football correspondent J. C. Davis wrote about the 1914 third test, the so-called 'Rorke's Drift' test, that 'Wagstaff, always a great player, that day became *the ubiquitous*, and the King of the game... Here, there and everywhere, all the time he was doing the work of half-a-dozen men. Wagstaff the Great.' In 1946, seven years after his early death, the *Sydney Rugby League News* gave pride of place to Wagstaff's memoir of the 1914 series as part of it build-up to that year's test series.

As can be seen from these quotes, there is something totemic about Wagstaff, in his achievements, his reputation, almost in his very being. Even his name is quintessentially northern English. He was always Harold, not Harry with its connotations of princes of the English realm. The name almost seems to have been designed to emphasise the flat vowel sounds of Yorkshire and Lancashire. And of course the aitch was rarely sounded — he was 'Arold, not Harold — a signifier of working-class speech in both the north and south of England. His nickname too, 'Ahr Waggy', underlines the close and familial relationship he had with the game's supporters; in the north to prefix someone's name with 'Our' denotes a close family member, conveying, in the words of Richard Hoggart, a 'sense of connection, of being part of a larger possessive whole, of not being only discrete individuals'. In this, he parallels Gracie Fields, the singing star of the 1930s who hailed from Rochdale, and was known universally as 'Our Gracie'. (Incidentally, I'm informed by John O'Hara that in Australia this honour was extended only to 'Our Don' Bradman and the singer 'Our Gladlys' Moncrieff.)

'I am a Northern Union man all the way through', Wagstaff declared in the first sentence of a series of autobiographical articles published in 1934, 'and I was suckled in the Northern Union game'. He never played any other form of football seriously and did not even see a game of rugby union until he was in Australia on the 1914 British tour. He was born in 1891 in Holmfirth, a village now familiar to anyone who has ever seen the long-running BBC TV series 'Last of the Summer Wine'. He made his debut for the local amateur side, Underbank Rangers, aged fourteen and the following season scored their first try under the new thirteen-a-side rules in September 1906. Two months later he signed as a professional for Huddersfield, aged fifteen years and 175 days, the youngest ever. Two years later he made his debut

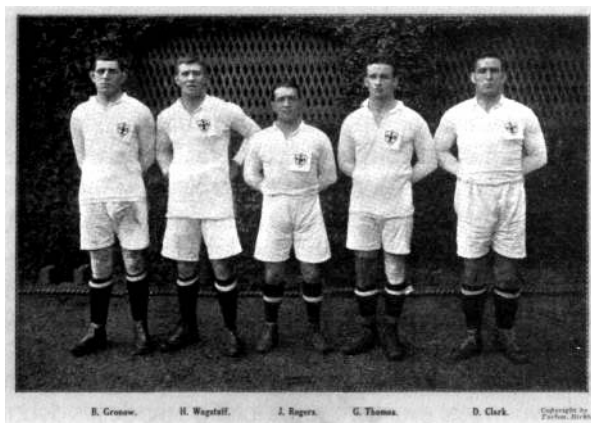


*Wagstaff's 1914 British Lions at their end of tour farewell dinner in Sydney.*



in representative football for Yorkshire, selected to some extent because of his policy of not kicking the ball, a practice he continued to preach throughout his career, which eventually led to Huddersfield becoming known as the team which wouldn't kick, paralleling the great South Sydney sides down the years. A few weeks later he made his England debut against the 1908 Kangaroos. Eighteen months later, aged just nineteen he was appointed captain of Huddersfield, a post he was to hold for the next fifteen years. Aged 22, he was made captain of the national side.

The blossoming of his career matched that of the Huddersfield side. Crucial to that success were its Australian stars such as Glebe's Tommy Gleeson, Newcastle's Paddy Walsh and, most of all, Easts great Albert Rosenfeld, who scored over 200 tries in just three seasons, Wagstaff's team finished top of the Championship table every season between 1911 and 1915, won



*Wagstaff (second from left) captains the 1920 British Lions tourists, pictured alongside fellow Huddersfield players – Ben Gronow, Johnny Rogers, Gwyn Thomas and Douglas Clark.*

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the Challenge Cup twice and the Yorkshire Cup three times. In the 1914-15 season they won every trophy available to them, losing only two games in the entire season. They played the game in fast open style that made the fullest use of the opportunities provided by the NU's rules, developing new tactics — such as 'scientific obstruction', the 'standing pass' and a hostility to kicking the ball — which moved the game far beyond the static set-pieces of its origins. It was no accident that the metaphors and adjectives most commonly used to describe the team were those of science and industry, as exemplified by a 1924 description of the side:

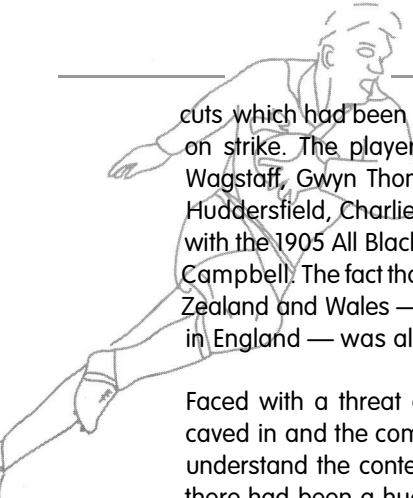
There was an absolute understanding between all parts of a perfectly working machine which resulted in the most audacious and unexpected movements being carried out with a precision that left the opposing defence aghast. Fast and clever three-quarters were served by halves whose brains were ever working at high pressure behind forwards who, as occasion demanded, could play the traditional scrummaging game or convert themselves into temporary three-quarters and handle the ball.

For a town which had been built on the efficiency of its textiles mills and spectators whose day-to-day lives were based on synchronised, collective working in those mills, Wagstaff's team was the embodiment of working-class industrial collectivity at play.

However, despite this iconic status and the high regard in which he was universally held, it is important to note that Wagstaff did not have an unproblematic relationship with the rugby league authorities, even after his retirement as a player. Indeed, the same can be said of many of Wagstaff's peers in the rugby league pantheon — of the nine players inducted into British rugby league's Hall of Fame in 1988, only the two Australians did not at some point clash with either their clubs or the RFL itself. This antagonism between players and officials came to a head shortly after the outbreak of World War I.

There has been a good deal of work produced in Australia on the war and the two rugby codes, such as that of Chris Cuneo and Murray Phillips. What is less widely known is that a similar, but not exact, division took place in England; union ceased operations in September 1914 while league carried on, although only unofficial competitions took place after 1915. More importantly, in November 1914, three months after the declaration of war, English rugby league was hit by a series of players' strikes opposing wage





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cuts which had been proposed by the clubs. Referees too threatened to go on strike. The players were led by a four man committee, comprising Wagstaff, Gwyn Thomas, a Welsh full-back from Wigan who later joined Huddersfield, Charlie Seeling, the veteran Wigan forward who had toured with the 1905 All Blacks, and Leeds's Australian centre three-quarter, Dinny Campbell. The fact that the four leaders came from England, Australia, New Zealand and Wales — emphasising the international character of the sport in England — was also, consciously or not, highly symbolic.

Faced with a threat of all-out strike action, the rugby league authorities caved in and the compulsory wage cuts were rescinded. It is important to understand the context of these strikes — in the early months of the war there had been a huge hue and cry against professional football by large sections of the national press, much of it led by rugby union supporters, who believed that those who played or watched professional football were failing in their patriotic duty to volunteer for the army. To go on strike for their rights as professional footballers was significantly out of step with the militarist hysteria which seemingly prevailed in Briggtain. Although there is no evidence of players explicitly opposing the war, their failure to completely fall in line illustrates the fact that pro-war hysteria was by no means the norm among sections of the British working-class. It is interesting to note that the majority of league players only joined the armed forces after conscription was introduced through the back door in early 1916. And indeed a recent study of the town of Huddersfield during the war has discovered deep levels of indifference and hostility to the war effort.

The so-called 'national unity' of World War I did not extinguish oppositional attitudes among players. In November 1920 Wagstaff and Gwyn Thomas were the two central figures in the formation of the Players' Union, the initiative for which had been generated on the 1920 British tour to Australia. For much of the next eighteen months the RFL spent considerable time attempting to head-off the union's demands for higher wages, better benefits for players and a more equitable transfer system. The union's formation reflected the tremendous surge in class conflict which took place in Britain in the years following the end of the war. During this time Salford, Oldham, Barrow, Hull and Halifax all had to deal with threatened or actual strikes by players, and the union itself threatened two national players' strikes, although on both occasions it found itself outmanoeuvred by the RFL. But by the end of 1922 the inexperience of the union's leadership, coupled with Wagstaff's health problems with a stomach ulcer and Thomas's somewhat abrupt flight to America, not to mention the divide and rule tactics of the

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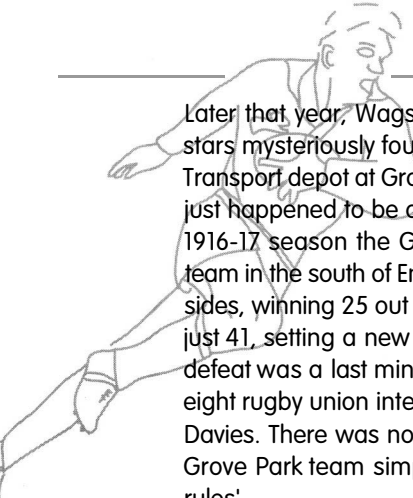
clubs, led to the end of the Players' Union. However, it wasn't the last time that Wagstaff was to clash with the RFL — in 1929 he was initially refused permission to sit on the Huddersfield club committee because he was a former professional player.

Although British rugby league never had the same close links with the organised labour movement that the Australian game had, the attitude towards the war and the deep divisions after it demonstrate a similarity of oppositional outlook that was shared among wide sections of both the Australian and British working classes. What's more, the cultural antagonism towards the southern English middle-class archetype was also shared, in spades, by the northern English working classes.

This was most obviously demonstrated by the attitude shown towards the rugby union game by rugby league in both countries. Following the recruitment of most of the leading rugby league players into the armed forces in 1916, services union sides began grabbing them like kids in a candy store. The first significant match took place in April 1916 at Leeds when Wagstaff and three other league tourists were picked for a 'North of England Military XV' against an ANZACs XV, featuring Australians Tommy Gleeson, Newtown's Viv Farnsworth and Norths' Jimmy Devereux and Sid Deane. Despite never having played the game and seeing only one union match in his life, Wagstaff was the star of the match.

*Wagstaff's first game of rugby union: the 1916 North of England Military versus an Australasian representative military team at Headingley. Both sides fielded four league internationals.*





Later that year, Wagstaff, Albert Rosenfeld and half a dozen other league stars mysteriously found themselves all assigned to the same Army Motor Transport depot at Grove Park in South London, whose commanding officer just happened to be a member of the RFU executive committee. During the 1916-17 season the Grove Park union team tore apart almost every other team in the south of England, including Australian and New Zealand services sides, winning 25 out of 26 games and scoring 1,110 points while conceding just 41, setting a new British union record for points in a season. Their only defeat was a last minute 6-3 loss to a United Services side which included eight rugby union internationals plus Wigan's Billy Seddon and Leeds' Willie Davies. There was no secret to their success; as Wagstaff described it, the Grove Park team simply played 'rugby league football under rugby union rules'.

The record of the Grove Park team in the war, and to a lesser extent that of the similar Royal Navy Devonport side, firmly ended any lingering sense of inferiority rugby league supporters may have had in relation to union. In the eyes of rugby league and the communities in which it was based, rugby union, as in Australia, was quite clearly the junior code, less skilful, less athletic and much less satisfying for players and spectators alike. This sense of superiority was underlined in the north of England by use of the everyday phrase 'best in the Northern Union', the implication being that if it was the best in the Northern Union, it was also better than anything else.



*The Grove Park Army Service Corps rugby union side, the outstanding military rugby union side of World War I. Wagstaff is second from the right on the front row.*

So, overlaid on top of the objective similarities in class and social circumstances of rugby league players in Britain and Australia, British players had also gone through experiences as club employees, as players in war-time and in rugby union which had given rise to attitudes and an outlook very similar to that Australian players. Wagstaff himself noted that players of the two countries were noticeably more friendly — off the pitch, of course — following World War I. It is also interesting to contrast the relations between Australian and British league players with those in the union game. The 1908 Wallabies were shocked at the level of snobbery they encountered and until the 1980s the British rugby union press had little positive to say about Australian players and tactics. Even as late as 1998, one of the reasons given for the sacking of Bob Dwyer as Leicester rugby union coach was the fact that he was 'too Australian'.

This could not be more different to league. Many Australian players who played for English rugby league clubs remained there after they had stopped playing. Albert Rosenfeld who came over with the first Australian tourists in 1908, lived in Huddersfield until he died in 1970, working for most of his life as a dustman. The peerless winger Brian Bevan has a statue erected to his memory in Warrington. Arthur Clues, who made his reputation through ferocious assaults on the 1946 British tourists, settled in Leeds, becoming probably the most prominent of its sporting celebrities. When he died in 1998, the church had to close its doors because so many people wanted to go his funeral. A similar point can be made about many of the British players who came to play in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s and stayed on, such as Dick Huddart, Dave Bolton and Tommy Bishop.

This shared common identity could be seen as surprising given the ferocity and violence which were an integral part of Ashes test matches. The tone was set by the



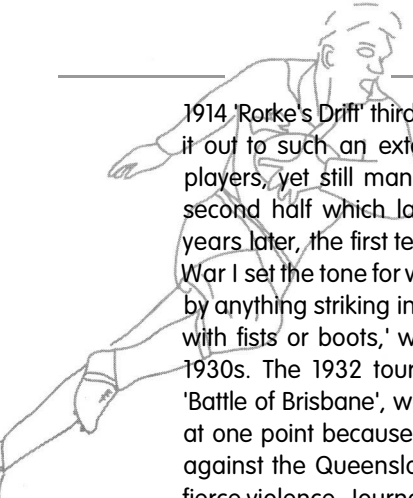
**OPPORTUNITY!**

Every player takes the field today aware of the knowledge that if he is good enough he will be our champion. Rugby League, with justifiable pride, always emphasizes the fact that it is the most democratic of sports. The point is interesting in view of today's fixtures — the first representative games of the season. Like today's players, they travelled hundreds of miles and played many tests before making the 'Rugby League News' team.

**'MY GREATEST TEST MATCH'**  
**HAROLD WAGSTAFF ON 1914 CLASSIC**

No greater example of the tenacity of the footballers of the building, could be found than that of the 'Rorke's Drift' Test, in Sydney, on July 4, 1914. ...

*Sydney's Rugby League News greets the 1946 British tourists, heralding the league as 'the most democratic of sports' and later reprinting Wagstaff's memoir of the 1914 Rorke's Drift Test.*



1914 'Rorke's Drift' third test match — in which the two sets of players slugged it out to such an extent that at one point the British were down to nine players, yet still managed to pull off an amazing 14-6 victory, despite a second half which lasted 54 minutes due to stoppages for injuries. Six years later, the first test match between the two countries following World War I set the tone for what was to come: 'the contest was not characterised by anything striking in sportsmanship: that is, the striking things done were with fists or boots,' wrote one reporter. This intensified even more in the 1930s. The 1932 tour became notorious for the second test match, the 'Battle of Brisbane', which Australia won despite being reduced to ten men at one point because of the injuries, and both the first test and the match against the Queensland representative side were also characterised by fierce violence. Journalist Claude Corbett described the Brisbane match as 'hard all the time, rough most of the time and foul frequently'.

Nor did the experience of World War II do much to halt the violence; less than half an hour into the first test match following the war, Bradford school teacher Jack Kitching was sent off for punching Australian captain Joe Jorgensen. Clive Churchill's abiding memory of the 1948 Kangaroo tour to Britain was the violence of the English club sides. Bradford's Ken Trail described the third test of 1952, known as the 'Battle of Bradford' as the roughest game he had ever experienced. Most notoriously the 1954 Britain versus New South Wales tour match was abandoned by the referee just sixteen minutes into the second half due to fighting. And the 1960s saw more players sent off in test matches than in any other decade, culminating in the 1970 World Cup final at Leeds, when vicious fighting between the players did not end when the referee blew the final whistle.

Yet such behaviour was never once used as a reason to question, let alone break, the relationship between the Australian and British rugby league authorities. This stands in marked contrast to the Bodyline cricket tour of 1932-33 when Jardine's bowling tactics appeared to threaten the future of Anglo-Australian cricket. Far worse misdemeanours were committed by British league players a few months before Jardine's men arrived in Australia without a hint of an international incident. Partly this can be explained by the importance of cricket to the Empire and the upper classes of society. Yet, the 1932 test series created massive interest in Australia, being watched by almost 150,000 people, and press coverage, especially for the 'Battle of Brisbane' test, often moved from the back to the front pages of the newspapers. The opportunity certainly existed for at least the more sensationalist sections of the press to question the relationship between the two countries' rugby league authorities.

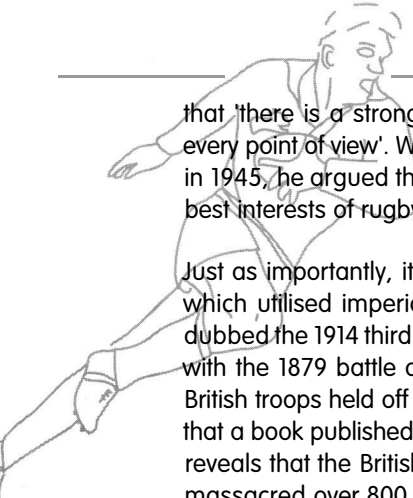


*Britain's Alf Ellaby and Les Adams contest Hector Gee for the football in the heroic Australian victory at the notorious 1932 'Battle of Brisbane'.*

But this did not happen, due to two interconnected and contradictory reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, because of the deep cultural affinities between the predominantly working-class constituency of the sport in the two countries. Secondly, and perhaps more controversially, the fact that Australian rugby league officials were as fundamentally loyal to the Empire as were their British counterparts.

In passing, I would argue that these were the reasons which also scuppered the 1914 and 1933 talks between the NSWRL and the VFL which discussed the possibility of forming a united nationwide Australian football code. The discussions came to nothing, partly because of differences over the rules but also, I would suggest, because a united game couldn't offer this combination of working-class self-assertion and the imperial link.

The leaders of Australian league were extremely vigorous in their belief in Britishness. At a dinner in honour of the 1928 British tourists in Sydney, Harry Sunderland told the tourists to 'remember Captain Cook; if he hadn't planted the Union Jack here, Australia might have become a Dutch dependency'. 'We are just as British as you are,' protested Harry 'Jersey' Flegg, the president of the New South Wales Rugby League, in 1950 during a dispute with British tour manager George Oldroyd. 'Australians look to England as the mother country in war, in industry and also in rugby league football,' said Kangaroo tour manager E. S. Brown in an address to the RFL Council in 1954, explaining



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that 'there is a strong desire in Australia to get along with England from every point of view'. When H. V. Evatt met the leaders of British rugby league in 1945, he argued that a tour to Australasia by the British was vital for 'the best interests of rugby league football and of the Empire'.

Just as importantly, it was the Australian press, far more than the British, which utilised imperial imagery for league test matches. It was they who dubbed the 1914 third test in Sydney as 'the Rorke's Drift Test', in comparison with the 1879 battle of Rorke's Drift during the Anglo-Zulu war, when 100 British troops held off 3,000 Zulu warriors. In parentheses, it must be noted that a book published this year, *Zulu Victory* by Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill reveals that the British forces who relieved the troops at Rorke's Drift also massacred over 800 wounded Zulu prisoners in the aftermath. The battle of Rorke's Drift appears to have had special significance for Sydney; in 1882 the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased Alphonse de Neuville's painting 'The Defence of Rorke's Drift', which you can still see prominently displayed in the gallery today. The use of such rhetoric continued even as late as 1958 when *Truth* began its report of the second test, again a landmark British victory against overwhelming odds, by quoting Shakespeare: 'This happy breed of men, this little world ... this England'. Examples such as this, I would argue, also raise questions about the strength of Australian nationalism as expressed through sport before the 1960s.

But this loyalty to the Empire was also tempered with a hostility to many of the social mores of British society, especially its deference and class snobbery. Whereas Jardine, and English cricket captains in general until the late 1960s, were the embodiment of the English Imperial elite, rugby league players manifestly were not. British rugby league tourists were not seen as representatives of a distant, and perhaps alien, government. In fact, they had far more in common with Australia's self-image as a country of the (white) working man than with the privilege and class discrimination that English cricket represented. Much of the hostility towards Australia from the British upper- and middle-classes was based on a social snobbery which was also directed with equal venom at the working-class in Britain — Australia was seen as 'an entire continent peopled by the Lower Orders' in the words of English upper-class novelist Angela Thirkell. Jardine's tactics were unacceptable to Australians to a great extent because of what he represented. Yet physical intimidation and worse by a British rugby league side that shared the same social background and suffered similar frustrations as the great mass of Australians was a 'fair dinkum' part of the game.

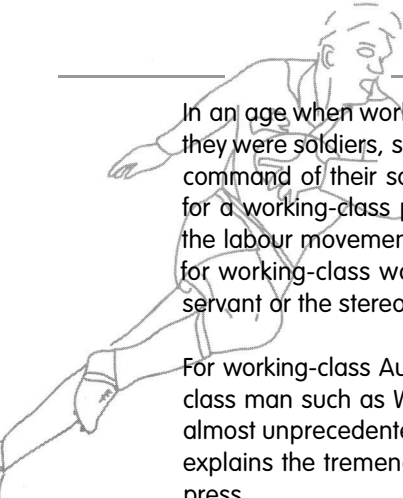
*The Sun-Herald names names as it reports the abandonment of the 1954 NSW versus Great Britain match. The alleged hit-man, Britain's Duggie Greenall, pictured here pursuing Harry Wells, bred rabbits in his spare time.*



Rugby league perfectly encapsulated the two seemingly contradictory attitudes of imperial loyalty but hostility to privilege. And Anglo-Australian test matches provided the arena in which both aspects of this relationship could be demonstrated. For many Australians and working-class Britons, the British rugby league tourists presented an image of the Empire in their own self-proclaimed likeness: working-class, democratic and meritocratic. Made up workers from the industrial heartlands of Britain the British players were men just as they were. This sense of shared identity was sometimes reflected by the combatants on the field: when Nat Silcock and Ray Stehr were sent off for fighting in the first test match of 1936, they shook hands once they had left the field. During the 1958 Brisbane test Australian captain Brian Davies forbade his players from attacking British captain Alan Prescott's broken right arm (although this decision was heavily criticised by Clive Churchill among others). Most tellingly, following the 1954 abandoned match Britain versus New South Wales match, the players met that night at a dance and, according to Clive Churchill, 'had a good laugh' about the match — although Aub Oxford, who sadly died a few weeks ago, the referee who had abandoned the match, never refereed at that level again.

This leads to my final and perhaps the most important point about the significance of Harold Wagstaff to Anglo-Australian rugby league culture. Touring British rugby league sides were exclusively working-class — almost uniquely in comparison to any other sports' touring sides such as cricket or rugby union — and were captained and led by men who by and large worked with their hands when not playing football.





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In an age when working people did not travel around the world — unless they were soldiers, sailors or emigrants, and then it was always under the command of their so-called social superiors — it was almost unheard of for a working-class person to hold such a leadership position (outside of the labour movement). At best, a working-class man — and the situation for working-class women was far worse — could hope to be a trusted servant or the stereotypically loyal Tommy Atkins' character.

For working-class Australians, just as much as British, to see an working-class man such as Wagstaff as a leader of a British national side was an almost unprecedented event, which, along with his football skills, perhaps explains the tremendous coverage Wagstaff was given in the Australian press.

Wagstaff stood out as a symbol of what working people could achieve given the opportunity to get a 'fair go'. And it was rugby league which gave him, and many others from similar backgrounds, that opportunity. In the British army he would have been a NCO at best, but in rugby league he was a five star general. In short, he became 'Ahr Waggy' not just for English rugby league followers but for Australians too.

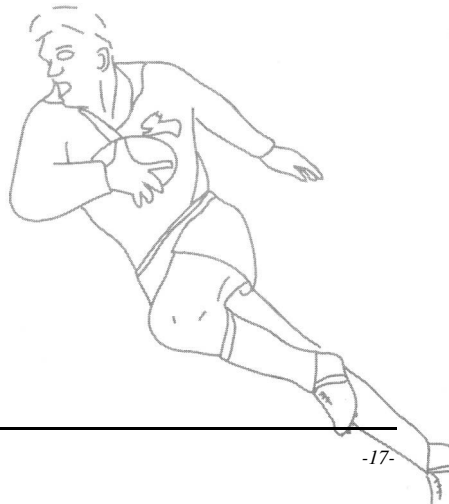
Wagstaff's memoirs of the 1914 Rorke's Drift test match were reprinted as much in Australia as they were in Britain — in 1946 the Sydney *Rugby League News* gave them centre stage in its preview of the first Ashes test following World War II, and as late as 1992 they were prominently featured in Geoff Armstrong's *The Greatest Game* compendium. One of the interesting points about the 1946 coverage is that discourse on the tour was wrapped up with the idea that rugby league was the most democratic of sports, as can be seen in the example from *Rugby League News* on page 11. This was also repeated in Britain — the strength of the democratic ideal in league was (and is) very strong, beginning with the rationale for the split in 1895. British journalist Eddie Waring was a regular proponent of this view, and it was this sense that rugby league represented something more than merely sport which accounts for the fury of rugby league supporters around the world against Rupert Murdoch attempt to takeover the game in the 1990s.

I would like to end on a partisan note; after all, this is a lecture to honour a

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great supporter of rugby league and I am proud to call myself a rugby league supporter since I was seven years old. The great Jewish novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer once noted that Yiddish had never been the language of a ruling class. A similar point can be made about rugby league: it has never been the sport of a ruling class in any of the countries in which it is played. Some see that as its weakness — on the contrary, that is precisely from where its strength is drawn. For without its deep roots in the working-classes of the north of England and eastern Australia, the game would have survived neither the persecution of the rugby union authorities nor the corporate attacks of the Murdoch empire (nor, incidentally, its banning by the Nazi collaborators of France's war-time Vichy government).

It is this working-class, democratic, 'battler' spirit — which is central to the sport in both Britain and Australia, and which is embodied in the career of Harold Wagstaff—that, to use a phrase that I believe that would be endorsed by Wagstaff, Tom Brock and countless others across Australia and Britain, has helped to make rugby league the greatest game of all.





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## **TONY COLLINS**

Tony Collins's earliest sporting memories involve watching Roger Millward, Phil Lowe and Balmain's Bob Smithies play for Hull Kingston Rovers in the early 1970s.

Today, he is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University, Leicester, England. He is the author of *Rugby's Great Split*, a social history of the 1895 rugby split, *Mud, Sweat and Beers* (with Wray Vamplew), about sport's relationship with alcohol, and the forthcoming *Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain*. He is also archivist of the British Rugby Football League.



*Wagstaff followed by Douglas Clark enter the field of play for Huddersfield in the pre-World War I years.*

