

Opera of the Proletariat: Rugby League, the Labour Movement and Working-Class Culture in New South Wales and Queensland

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Australian labour historians have rarely examined the social history of sport. The world of work has proved more engaging than patterns of popular culture and studies of the working class at play. The following article examines the history of a variant of rugby, rugby league, which, in two states of Australia and in the north of England became the 'people's game'. It reveals another side to the political lives of major labour movement figures and an important cultural dimension of the working-class experience. Contemporary events in the history of rugby league – principally the Super League 'war' of 1995 and its sequel, are placed in the context of the changing allegiances of Labor politics and the dismantlement of links between community and class. These shed light on why, despite rugby league's historical links with a powerful labour movement, the code proved vulnerable to corporate piracy.

In 1951, the forces which brought a youthful Jack Munday, later a renowned union activist and environmentalist, from rural Queensland to Sydney were not the customary attractions of an expanding labour market in the light industrial factories of that city's western suburbs. After a successful season playing rugby league on the Atherton Tableland, in 1950 Munday was approached by talent scouts to join the newly established Parramatta club, one of whose leading lights was Jack Scullin, nephew of the former Labor prime minister. A chunky lock forward, rugby league was then Munday's 'consuming passion'. As with many country boys arriving in Sydney for the first time, the Parramatta club played a paternalist role. It sought out employment for Munday as an ironworker at a foundry in Rydalmere where Spencer O'Neill, a footballer who later became secretary of the Parramatta Rugby League Football Club (RLFC), was the union delegate. Through O'Neill, Munday's long association with union politics began. Though Munday encountered few footballers in the local branch of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) he joined in 1955, rugby league was part of the making of a labour life.¹

Munday's passion for rugby league was not unusual. Tom Uren, a Cabinet minister in the Whitlam government of 1972-75, played junior rugby league in the Manly-Warringah district in the late 1930s and was called up to play grade for North Sydney.² Nick Origlass, for much of his political life synonymous with Balmain Trotskyism, played front row for a team of bagmen in Mt Isa.³ Pat Clancy, long term secretary of the Building Workers' Industrial Union, organised union meetings so that he would not miss radio broadcasts of the South Sydney Rabbitohs' games.⁴ Bob Savage, a scion of the Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association, as well as Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Council (1931-34, 1943-59), was a pillar of both the Balmain RLFC and the New South Wales Rugby League, serving the latter as a vice-president and co-manager of the strife-torn 1937-38 Kangaroo Tour.⁵ Another 'genuine Rugby League man' was Dr H.V. Evatt, leader

of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) between 1951 and 1960. Apart from founding the Sydney University RLFC in 1920, after World War II, Dr Evatt was an esteemed patron of the New South Wales Rugby League. Even the rush of campaigning during the 1951 anti-Communist referendum did not prevent the 'Doc' from attending all rugby league fixtures at the Sydney Cricket Ground. At the height of the Petrov Affair and related election in 1954, Evatt was keen to ensure that he did not miss an international test match series. He was the only senior official of Australian rugby league who could converse with the captain of a French rugby league touring team in the visitor's native language.⁶

Evidence of such interconnections between sport and the labour movement has rarely detained Australian labour historians.⁷ Bob Gollan's suggestion, in the first issue of *Labour History* in 1962, that historians should pursue the study of popular culture in Australia, his endorsement of Asa Briggs' view that the labour history project should embrace 'a study of the working class "situation" taken in terms of health, leisure etc. social history in the fullest sense', has not been followed.⁸ Nearly 40 years later the links between sport and working-class culture remain largely unexplored (refer page 26). In part, perhaps, this silence reflects the remnants of that timeworn and crude Marxist belief that sport deflects the working class from the task of revolution. Borrowing from a tradition of understanding culture as a simple reflection of the economic base, a tool in the hands of the dominant classes, according to this view sport is part of the 'bread and circuses' apparatus which capitalist ideology provides to divert an oppressed proletariat from dwelling upon its exploitation and the class struggle itself.⁹ The lacunae of sport in Australian labour historiography might equally reflect the elitism of some traditions of academic Marxism for whose practitioners the material lives and passions of working people and perhaps especially rugby league, are remote, maybe even a little absurd.¹⁰

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to take rugby league seriously, to examine its place in the class relations and the dynamics of social forces shaping British Eastern Australia in the early twentieth century and on an ongoing basis, as a cultural practice which, in common with other factors such as religion, occupation and residency, both expressed and shaped the working-class experience. Born from legitimate industrial relations concerns in 1907-08, in two states of Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, rugby league became the workers' game. Unlike Wales or New Zealand, where rugby union retained a strong hold on national identity and the populace as a whole, rugby league became attached to working-class culture, a means of asserting both a separate working-class identity and the tribalism of local communities, reinforcing common interests. At one level, it was a statement, made in the sporting arena, of independence from the parent code, rugby union, the game of the Eastern States' comfortable classes. At another level the 13-a-side game became 'a means of defining and winning space within the social structure'.¹¹ According to the official history of the New South Wales Rugby League, there was 'an unbroken chain binding Labor and rugby league'.¹² What follows is an attempt to attach some empirical flesh to this observation, and to explore the making and recent unmaking of that link. How did a code of football become so central to the leisure pursuits of the working class in New South Wales and Queensland? What values did the rebel code espouse? What were the issues and circumstances that precipitated the football split of 1907-08?

Opposing the 'Tyrannies of the Establishment'.

In both England and Australia rugby league was born amidst ideological ferment and industrial confrontation. As George Parsons argues, 'Class consciousness produced Rugby League'.¹³ The backdrop to the famous 1895 meeting at the George Hotel in Huddersfield that gave birth to the 'professional' code of rugby, the 'Northern Union', was one of intense class struggle in the mines and factories of Yorkshire and Lancashire. This reached its peak in 1892-93. At Hull naval gunboats in the Humber confronted striking dockers. In the 1893 miners' strike at Featherstone, near Wakefield, two miners were shot dead by troops and 16 more wounded. In the 1890s the Northern rugby league towns now strung along the M62 motorway enjoyed vibrant double lives as socialist enclaves. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was formed at Bradford in 1893. Salford was one of the strongholds of H.M. Hyndham's Social Democratic Federation. By 1895, 48 of 120 ILP delegates were from Yorkshire. Socialist politics infused the daily lives of towns like Keighley. While the inspiration to form a breakaway code of rugby was influenced more by a Gladstonian liberal than socialist perspective, more a response to a lock-out by the hierarchy of the British Rugby Football Union than a brave act of defiance by disenfranchised proletarian sportsmen, the George Hotel meeting on 29 August 1895 was, nonetheless, a significant moment in working-class history.¹⁴

So, too, was the series of events that gave birth to the New South Wales Rugby League some 12 years later. Comparable industrial turmoil – the 1890s strikes among shearers and maritime workers – coupled with early twentieth century disputes among coal miners, were rugby league's antipodean backdrop. Local industrial factors contributed. The bitterness engendered by events leading up to the 1909 Peter Bowling strike among coalminers in Newcastle, New South Wales, as well as the fact that many coal mine owners were evidently connected with rugby union, inclined Novocastrians to the view that it was 'anti-union to even fraternise with the players of the Rugby Union code'.¹⁵

A broader discourse about 'professionalism' and 'amateurism', essentially the matter of payment for sport, underpinned the rugby split of 1907-08. As Eileen and Stephen Yeo suggest, 'there was a formidable working class, even socialist, case for the professionalisation and capitalisation of sport'.¹⁶ The crux of the matter lay with democratising sport. Establishing an injured players' fund recognised that the ramification of injury was more serious to a worker who needed his pay packet in order to pay the rent than a son of the professional classes working in the family company whose parents could pay the bills until bones mended. Payment for 'broken time' to compensate players for time lost from work while training or playing was also an obvious way of facilitating working-class participation.

Further, there was the issue of the intransigence of the rugby union hierarchy. Having inherited a game whose local origins began in the 1860s through acolytes of the English public school system, leading officials of the New South Wales Rugby Union had become an entrenched cabal unreceptive to the needs or problems of the rank-and-file.¹⁷ At the same time as investing in a major new sports facility at Forest Lodge, they declined to assist injured players like Alex Burdon. A Glebe barber and sometime waterside worker, Burdon had broken his shoulder playing in a representative game. Ian Heads reports that the unwillingness of the rugby union hierarchy to assist Burdon provided an 'emotional push towards establishing the

new game'.¹⁸ In 1907 the arrival of a professional team of New Zealand footballers on their way to play in northern England provided a specific impetus for the establishment of a breakaway 'professional' code. After a series of meetings at secret venues such as cricketer Victor Trumper's Sports Store, on 8 August 1907 the founding meeting of the New South Wales Rugby League took place at Bateman's Crystal Hotel in central Sydney.¹⁹

From the outset rugby league was strongly circumscribed within a labour universe, a reflection of the self-confidence and sense of separate identity of a working-class movement recovering from the defeats of the 1890s. Drawing upon a value system that prized masculinity, aggression and local identity, the game tapped into aspects of working-class life. Unlike the private school ethos which infused rugby union with notions that sport was a means of moral development, winning became of supreme importance, a matter of local pride. For the workers, accepting payment – or rather compensation for time lost from work – implied no sense of moral opprobrium. It was certainly more honest than the surreptitious payments employed in rugby union.

Rugby league subscribed to the meritocratic view of the world that was sweeping organised sport across the western world in the late nineteenth century. Talent and effort were to be rewarded in the same way as unions sought wage justice. While individual players like H.M. Moran lamented the rugby split for the limitations it imposed on their social universe,²⁰ by and large the cadres of rugby union were pleased to see the 'rougher element' depart. Rugby union was thus free to evolve as a recreational form attuned to a more genteel and unspoiled milieu where sporting performance continued to be judged ascriptively; above all it became a gentleman's game, a rite of passage between private school, varsity and a career in the professions.²¹ Richard Stremski cites J.F. Thompson's remark, 'Black eyes don't look so well on Collins Street' to explain the enthusiasm of Melbourne's middle class for Australian Rules, 'a more open, flowing game in contrast to Sydney's preference for rugged, unadulterated rugby'.²² Substitute one of Sydney's more elite commercial addresses and therein lies a further explanation why rugby union became a 'ruffian's game played by gentlemen', rugby league vice versa.

The urban geography of Sydney reinforced rugby league's points of demarcation with rugby union. While there was one rugby union club – Randwick – whose social character was proletarian, allegiance to rugby league and union divided Sydney. By and large the 'biff and barge' code did not thrive in areas where the comfortable classes predominated. To the present day the affluent suburbs along Sydney's North Shore railway line, with their numerous private schools, remains strong rugby union territory. With the exception of the ill-fated Cumberland and Western Suburbs, the foundation clubs were clustered around the strongly proletarian inner city suburbs that serviced the ports of Sydney. Sydney's rugby league competition and foundation clubs like, Newtown, Glebe, Balmain, South Sydney, Eastern Suburbs and North Sydney, reflected the demography of the inner city and its labour force. Among the pioneers of 1907 were four labourers, two painters and two carpenters, a dealer in fish, a boilermaker, a clerk, a storeman, a waterside worker, a journalist, a boat builder, a draper, an 'athlete', a tailor, a compositor and a cleaner.²³ Waterside workers formed a strong contingent of the early players. A hard man in the front row who could inflict and withstand pain was obligatory. Wharfies like Con Sullivan from North

Sydney, 'Botsy' Williams from Easts and 'Tedda' Courtney from Norths and Wests were part of this aristocracy of muscle; the heavy labour associated with their vocation assisted their prowess as footballers. All three were proud members of the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF) which later organised its own rugby league team to compete in a separate work-based competition.

As the rhythms of the factory system of industrial capitalism helped mould the abrasive physicality of rugby league, local industries shaped the composition of district rugby league teams. Newtown RLFC fostered links with workers from local industries: the woollen mills and the brickpits. Three of its 1914 side worked in the brickpits. Workers from Newtown's woollen mills received free passes to the games in 1909.²⁴ Across the harbour the tanneries of Willoughby, the brickpits and quarries of St Leonards, as well as the maritime, ferry and ship-building enterprises of Lavender Bay, Berrys Bay and Careening Cove were the most fertile source of rugby league talent for the North Sydney RLFC.²⁵ From 1911, as rugby league spread to the country, it flourished in towns where there was a distinct working-class presence, in railway centres like Bathurst, Cootamundra and Junee in New South Wales, or Ipswich in Queensland, as well as in mining towns throughout the Hunter Valley, the Illawarra and Lithgow.

Rugby league became part of the dialectical relationships of class, reinforcing class tensions, responding to the sense of social exclusiveness of the rugby union fraternity with a gruff egalitarianism. W.J. McKell, Evatt's successor as patron of the New South Wales Rugby League, a former Labor premier and governor general introduced the visiting Lord McDonald to Jersey Flegg, a rugby league stalwart. Not hearing correctly, Flegg greeted the English visitor, 'G'day Claude'. McKell corrected him: 'No Jerse, it's Lord, not Claude'. Without breaking stride Flegg retorted: 'We don't go with that bull—— here. This is Australia'.²⁶

Each of the foundation clubs was formed in the shadow of ALP branches and local trade unions. The first president of the Cabmen's Union and Labor Party MLA for St Leonards, 'Teddy' Clark, was a foundation patron of the North Sydney RLFC. A pioneer player was E. 'Pat' Boland. A revered figure, champion boxer and stalwart of the Tramway and Omnibus Union employed at the Neutral Bay tram depot, Boland illustrates Rodney Cavalier's point about the significance of local worthies within trade union and Labor circles.²⁷ W.M. Hughes, the unionist and Labor politician, was the first patron of the Glebe RLFC, while at South Sydney, a pioneer official W.T. (Billy) Bruce was secretary of the Leather Workers' Union.²⁸ Newtown's first treasurer W.J. Ellis was also a staunch railway unionist, a fitter in charge of a section at Eveleigh locomotive workshops.²⁹ Among the figures associated with the central body of rugby league in Phillip Street were Harry Hoyle and E.R. Larkin. The former was the League's first president, another pioneer railway unionist and parliamentarian for South Sydney, who represented the ALP at the 1910 elections. The latter was the League's first full-time secretary. Larkin, Labor member for Willoughby 1913-15, reputedly was 'seldom without a Socialist book or pamphlet in his pocket'.³⁰ In Queensland the Irish born Jack Fihelly, later a deputy leader of the State ALP, was a foundation Queensland and Australian rugby league player and assistant manager of the first Kangaroo team to tour England.³¹

Above all, these were respectable Labor men. If, as John Shields notes, top hats, waistcoats and gold watch chains were part of the late Victorian and Edwardian

trade workshops,³² wearing the guernsey of a first grade rugby league club was another emblem of skill and status. Football clubs monitored excessive swearing and offensive behavior among spectators on the terraces or disrespect displayed towards police officers outside ovals.³³ For the likes of Newtown's W.J. Ellis who served on the Committee of the Railway and Tramway Hospital Fund from 1895 to 1910 and was foundation treasurer of the Drivers' and Firemen's Mutual Benefit Fund from 1906-09,³⁴ rugby league was a means of facilitating working-class self-improvement and self-sufficiency.

Rugby league put down strong roots in New South Wales and Queensland. A more attractive spectacle than rugby union, more fluent and speedy, less impeded by scrummaging and lineouts, by 1913 it had supplanted rugby union in popularity with spectators. Variegated and contradictory, professionalism necessarily embraced the entrepreneurial acumen of the likes of J.J. Giltinan, a salesman cum manufacturer's agent, but in cultural terms the game was imbued with a bed rock of ideas about solidarity and collectivism that encapsulated aspects of the broader urban working-class culture of Australia during the 1900s. The game's social democratic temper showed in quite practical ways. Initially football clubs were run along unusually egalitarian lines. Gate money was initially shared equally between the players, both first grade and reserves. In its foundation years the players decided the composition of the team, rather than a separate group of selectors.³⁵ By 1914 separate administrative cliques had emerged, but at least at the outset the internal governance of a rugby league club was very much like the *socialisme sans doctrine* which Albert Metin, the French commentator, had observed in Australia. In a country that was developing an exaggerated reputation for being a working man's paradise – a curious place where arbitration court judges like Mr Justice Higgins legislated in favour of living wages – working men created rugby league. As League Secretary Horrie Miller philosophised in 1921, rugby league was 'the working man's game ... not a caste game'.³⁶

Similar remarks were made to contextualise another of rugby league's connections with the working class – its Catholicism, via the Catholic school system. Christian Brothers affiliated with the New South Wales Rugby League in 1918; Marist Brothers did so in 1926. As the 1928 New South Wales Rugby League annual souvenir asserted:

It is entirely natural that the Catholic Schools, founded on a policy that provides especially for the nurturing of the young, and in which the spirit of democracy has ever been fostered, should be an early and fertile field for the germination and development of the game ... Rugby League is the people's game.³⁷

In common with other working-class pursuits – the outdoor political meeting, for instance – rugby league became an informal expression of 'upholding a separate working-class identity', reinforcing a 'sense of common interests'.³⁸ Attendance at a local oval to watch a district rugby league team play rivals became an important ritual of working-class life. In common with that other central institution of working-class life, the pub, it expressed sociability. Unsurprisingly, the proprietors of various hotels supported local rugby league clubs. The headquarters of the Glebe Rugby League club, for instance, was the Burton Family Hotel, on St Johns Road. Cliff

Upton, one player with Glebe from 1908 and club secretary from 1912-20, lived at the pub. Proprietor Frank Flitcroft, known locally as 'Cranky Franky' or 'Knackers O'Brien', found that his business thrived because of its rugby league affiliations. In 1902, patrons of the Burton Family Hotel had consumed 235 beer barrels. In rugby league's foundation year (1908) they consumed 347 beer barrels. From 1911-13, years in which the Glebe 'Dirty Reds' experienced significant success, more than 600 barrels of draught beer were consumed annually. No doubt even 'Cranky Franky' had cause to smile.³⁹

Nor was a movement partly steeped in rebellion without its own acts of resistance. In 1917 members of the Glebe RLFC railed against a number of injustices visited upon their club by the code's Phillip Street headquarters. In one of Australia's least remembered industrial disputes, the club's selection committee resigned while its best players went on strike. Taking a lead from the draconian measures implemented by the Fuller Government against workers participating in the 1917 transport strike, the New South Wales Rugby League responded by banning one striker from playing the game for life. Fourteen others were suspended until the end of the 1918 season. Appeals were upheld at the start of the 1918 season, but not before the 1917 Glebe team rejoiced in a team photo which described them as 'The Rebels'.⁴⁰

The principal architect of 'The Rebels' was Glebe's most celebrated player and selector: Frank 'Chunky' Burge. A staunch trade unionist, Burge was never one to endure intimidation. The distinguished Glebe international of the 1910s and 1920s was a 'very loyal member of the Federated Municipal and Shire Council Employees Union of Australia'. An avid anti-conscriptionist in 1916-17, Burge worked tirelessly for the ALP until the 1950s, making his motor vehicle available during elections. At Burge's funeral in 1958 another rugby league luminary, W.J. McKell, remarked that 'Labor has lost a great supporter'.⁴¹ Burge's union connections were mirrored in Queensland where Harry Liebke, a member of the 1924 Toowoomba team – the famous 'Gallopers' which defeated England in Toowoomba – was also a highly respected rank and file member of the Queensland branch of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemmen.⁴² Harry 'Dealer' Wells, Reg Gasnier's international centre partner in the 1950s, came from a family synonymous with trade unionism in the Illawarra. A Port Kembla wharfie, Wells' father was a long-term president of the Port Kembla branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation.⁴³

On occasions the links between rugby league and the labour movement were less than spontaneous. In the 1930s, for instance, the CPA cadre Tom Brislan was a communist trade union organiser attempting to encourage shearers and other bush workers in Queensland to break away from the Australian Workers' Union and join the communist dual union, the Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union. In order to maintain links with the rural proletariat and show that communists were not 'bad blokes', Brislan suffered the intolerably hard grounds of rural Queensland, playing hooker for the Longreach rugby league team.⁴⁴ Fred Paterson, the communist Rhodes Scholar and later MP, captained the Gladstone rugby league team in the 1920s. Later, as a way of frustrating police surveillance during the Cold War, Paterson used local football matches as a venue to meet with fellow communists.⁴⁵ Norm Jeffery, another CPA organiser, ensured that he was always up to date with the latest rugby league news of his local club (Balmain) so that proselytizing for revolution in the local pub

could be tempered by discussion of injuries, suspensions and the finer points of wing play.⁴⁶

In part, too, the football clubs were engaged in cultural terms with working-class communities because they were also enmeshed on a material basis. At times of economic or industrial crisis the rugby league clubs became important components of the support networks which evolved within workers' suburbs. In Newtown during the timber-workers strike of 1929 the Newtown RLFC committee busied itself with the collective activities of the Enmore ALP branch, providing money to the Enmore Ladies Relief Depot which, in turn, gave assistance to families of timber workers.⁴⁷ During the Great Depression football clubs fulfilled a protective role, organising charity matches to assist the district's unemployed, as well as ensuring that players and ex-players who had fallen upon hard times were assisted.⁴⁸ In Newcastle one local butcher connected with the Western Suburbs club provided free savloys at half-time during games at New Lambton Oval. Another Newcastle Western Suburbs official provided free soup to impecunious players and supporters at his butcher's shop.⁴⁹

In 1971, when one correspondent to *Rugby League Week* reflected on the origins of rugby league, it was to emphasise the extent to which the code's pioneers had bravely opposed the 'tyrannies of the Establishment'.⁵⁰ Clearly, however, the pioneers of 'professional football' were not in the same category as the diggers at Eureka or the shearers at Barcaldine. By and large theirs was a modest rebellion. The League's pioneers stressed the 'humanitarian ... character' of the forces that impelled them to breakaway from rugby union, employing sentiments that closely resembled Labor rhetoric of the period. Like the ALP, that 'party of sound, humanitarian economics and honest political effort',⁵¹ rugby league's project was to civilise rather than abolish capitalism. Again in common with the ALP, J.J. Giltinan felt that 'revolutions were timely only when more peaceful efforts have failed'.⁵² Rugby league offered a self-contained world which, in part, thumbed its nose at the Establishment in the recognition that working-class football was more intense, physical, and, perhaps, in the final resort, superior to that spawned by middle class athleticism.

In general, rugby league tended to wear its politics lightly. Yet, belying their sometimes garish appearance, even the affiliated licensed premises that emerged in the 1950s, funding local rugby league teams, were practical evidence that *socialisme sans doctrine* still had a place in Australian culture. Emerging from an early 1950s New South Wales Royal Commission which freed up liquor licenses, these clubs became, as R.F.X. Connor argued in 1956, 'working man's castles'.⁵³ The profit motive did not dominate. Collectivist islands in a capitalist sea, the Leagues Clubs revolutionised leisure opportunities for the masses.⁵⁴ Unionists like 'Barney' Smith, secretary of the Sydney branch of the Seamen's Union of Australia and former leader of the North Sydney contingent of seamen in the 1935 strike, flocked to such venues. The veteran seaman and communist enjoyed few things more than 'a quiet beer with his mates (at North Sydney Leagues Club) and was a 'regular' at the special club boxing nights'.⁵⁵

Rugby league was an oppositional cultural form largely expressed in reformist terms. H.R. Miller was one of the few rugby league apparatchiks who took a strong political stand. In 1941, Miller planned to hold a special sevens tournament to assist the New South Wales Aid to Russia Committee, of which he was a vice president.⁵⁶

He also contributed to a wartime pamphlet eulogising Russian achievements in the area of sport and physical culture. Miller looked forward to sporting exchanges between the Soviet and Australian people and spelled out some of the philosophical basis of his attachment to rugby league. Miller suggested:

I believe in the equality of mankind and therefore in the encouragement of healthy recreation with recompense against financial loss ... In the midst of plenty many live starved, emaciated lives. I believe that the man who can afford to play for nothing should continue doing so while he who cannot afford should be assisted ... Sport was not given to mankind for the edification of the idle rich – a mere accident of birth.⁵⁷

In a similar spirit of war-time anti-fascist unity, the 1941 annual report of the North Sydney RLFC urged members to participate in the Curtin government's war loans scheme because:

In countries dominated by Hitler's New Order, people are not permitted to save and lend. Under the New Order they slave and give. Trade Union standards are reduced to slavery levels. Unionists are crushed and Unionists are forced to be slave labourers.⁵⁸

As late as 1968, and no doubt influenced by the spirit of those times, one of Miller's successors, W.G. Buckley, ('Chairman Bill'), a dour Dulwich Hill working man, claimed that 'The NSW Rugby League is ... a truly socialist body'.⁵⁹ Indubitably Buckley took liberties with definitions of the term socialism, but it was true that a non-profit ethos remained the centre piece of rugby league's operations, 92 per cent of operating profits being channelled back into improving the game's infrastructure, developing juniors and school boys competitions and the like. To that point in its history the ethical basis of rugby league remained true to the efforts of the pioneers of 1907-08.

In short, the story of rugby league is not simply one of the minutiae of sporting achievement and shortcomings, of dubious referees' decisions, of tries scored, goals kicked, punches thrown. It is an important piece of social history, all the more so because its popularity in New South Wales and Queensland was eccentric in world terms.⁶⁰

Tony Collins explains the success of rugby league in Australia in terms of the identity of interests between an egalitarian society and a game built on a tradition of injustice⁶¹. While this may underestimate the level of inequality in Australia, for whatever reason the rhythms of the rugby league season came to shape sporting and community life in the Eastern states of Australia. After a rocky patch in the early 1980s, by 1994 rugby league had achieved the impossible. In Sydney it could nearly claim the level of universal popularity enjoyed by Australian Rules in Melbourne, a game with similar working-class roots and Labor credentials, but traditionally claiming greater cross-class support. In a sense, rugby league had become too popular for its own good. Soaring television ratings made it attractive to the proprietors of the new pay television networks then being established, raising the possibility of globalising an essentially parochial game.

The 'Decline of Working-Class Culture'?

Inevitably, the onset of the so-called Super League 'war' in 1995 and its disastrous aftermath, the apparent demise of four foundation Sydney clubs in 2000,⁶² dominates the modern history of rugby league. On 1 April 1995 a corporate raid orchestrated by elements within the Brisbane Broncos club, financed by the American media billionaire Rupert Murdoch, sought to take over or establish a rebel competition styled 'Super League' whose purpose would be to provide sporting content to Foxtel, Murdoch's pay television station. Legitimated on appeal in October 1996, this endeavour led to an abortive 'compromise' with the Australian Rugby League (the renamed New South Wales Rugby League). By 1998 Murdoch's News Limited was firmly in control of an unhappily unified competition through a new entity styled the National Rugby League (NRL).⁶³

With the benefit of hindsight the sudden trauma inflicted by the Super League imbroglio reflected evolutionary as much as revolutionary change. Just as blue-collar jobs and union membership declined⁶⁴ and fewer Australian wage earners perceived of themselves as working class, in the period after 1983 when a palace revolution occurred at its Phillip Street headquarters, rugby league was subject to 'middle-classing'. Its working-class roots increasingly submerged, the game had long struck a series of Faustian compromises with big business. From the 1970s television and commercial sponsorships had greatly augmented both the game's exposure and its capital base while encouraging dependency on business interests which could and did prove capricious and hostile to rugby league's ethos. The game's links with community and class had been eroded as early as 1959-60 when the League abolished local residency qualifications. Demographic change – principally the gentrification of the inner-city – had long affected the community basis and tribalism of local rugby league clubs. As one Balmain prop forward recalled in his ghost-written memoirs, published in 1992:

Balmain is no longer a rugby league area ... Go into any Balmain pub on a Friday or Saturday night and you'll see that the patrons are hardly types who have a passionate interest in football. I don't know if they're yuppies, macrame makers or up-front, environmentally friendly, whale-saving, thong-wearing, macrobiotic-dieting, bearded leftovers from the flower power era. I just know rugby league would not get a start in their top 50 recreational activities.⁶⁵

There was a sense, too, in which rugby league's labour connections had been gradually muted. Perhaps this began as early as the Cold War. Several football clubs were evidently influenced by the internecine sectarianism of the 1950s and partly succumbed to the Democratic Labor Party and the related 'industrial groups' of B.A. Santamaria. 'Groupers' like South Sydney's Ernie Willmott, secretary of the Transport Workers' Union, apparently came to control some football clubs.⁶⁶ Rugby League's Catholicism made it exposed when the automatic links between blue-collar workers, the ALP and the Catholic Church began to unravel. Without a players' union of any substance, the gradual dismantlement of the complex links between community, class and culture, combined with its 'middle-classing', made the 'people's game' vulnerable when News Limited launched its 1995 raid. Unlike 1907-08, the 1995 raid contained no industrial issues of any pressing significance,⁶⁷ though

with rival competitions, a buoyant labour market transformed the income and lifestyles of elite players, thus further diminishing their identification with the game's patrons and working-class life.

Finally, the Super League dispute mirrored the changing relationship of the ALP with its constituency. Given the historical links between Labor and rugby league, the status of these football clubs as non-profit community assets and widespread public concern about the demise of community football, there were reasons why Labor governments in Canberra and New South Wales might have rallied to defend the Australian Rugby League. This did not happen. With noteworthy exceptions, Meredith Burgmann in the New South Wales parliament and Mark Latham in Canberra⁶⁶, the social democrats preferred to argue that the issue was an internal matter related to sport best settled by the parties involved, or even that Super League might provide a little additional 'pizzaz'. In the final analysis it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the shifting sands of media policy- in particular a growing concordat with Rupert Murdoch- shaped the Labor government's laissez-faire attitude towards the 'people's game'.⁶⁹ The Super League saga was a further reminder of the extent to which the ALP was prepared to ignore its traditions and roots, evident in so many other policy areas since 1983.⁷⁰

In the aftermath of the 1995 'Pearl Harbour Raid', rugby league's identification with the labour movement remains an erratic heartbeat. The outstanding player of the modern period, Queenslander Wally Lewis, for instance, was a prominent supporter of the Maritime Union of Australia during the 1998 waterfront dispute.⁷¹ Leading trade unionists like Paddy Crumlin of the Maritime Services Union took an active role in opposing Super League. Speaking at an anti-Super League rally in the Sydney Town Hall in April 1995, Crumlin argued that rugby league is 'about the development of community life for working men and women. For a large section of our union it [rugby league] is the basis of our leisure'.⁷² Throughout 1999 officials and rank and file members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union energetically supported the right of the South Sydney club to remain in the 2000 competition, organised fundraising and threatened to boycott Murdoch related building sites. In December 1999, the Labor Council of New South Wales passed a unanimous resolution supporting South Sydney's 'democratic right' to remain in the NRL competition.⁷³ In marked contrast, the New South Wales Labor premier, Bob Carr, shunned the Rabbitohs, arguing that the 'game is bigger than any one person or any club'.⁷⁴

Obtaining a sense of perspective about events so recent is difficult. Rugby union's recent 'professionalism', also accomplished via News Limited gold, has further muddied the waters and for the first time competent league players have been lured to play rugby union. Roy Masters was perhaps too premature when he announced in 1995 that rugby league had shed 'its cloth cap and most of its earthy, egalitarian principles forever'. According to Masters, Murdoch League signalled 'the decline of working class culture'.⁷⁵ The resilience of cultural practices ought not to be underestimated, though there is evidence that grass roots community rugby league has been diminished along with the game's more elite echelons.⁷⁶ Rugby league's 'unbroken chain' with Labor has been broken, and the game's rich, historical cultural context is in disarray. As one correspondent to the *Sydney Morning Herald* lamented in October 1999:

Rugby league in the new millennium will be, I fear, rather like those Buffalo Bill Wild West Shows that toured the world 100 years ago. All the skills will be preserved and on show, but they will be entirely divorced from the landscape and culture that nurtured them.⁷⁷

Endnotes

- * For comments on an earlier draft of this article I am grateful to Humphrey McQueen. John Low, Grant Michelson and John O'Hara and two anonymous referees subsequently provided useful feedback for which I am also thankful.
1. J. Munday, *Green Bans and Beyond*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1981, pp. 16-18. Munday's early promise as a footballer was not fulfilled, principally playing halfback in reserves.
 2. T. Uren, *Straight Left*, Random House, Sydney, 1995, p. 8.
 3. H. Greenland, *Red Hot: The Life and Times of Nick Origlass 1908-1996*, Wellington Lane Press, Sydney, 1998, p. 8.
 4. *Metal Worker*, September 1987, p. 15.
 5. Draft entry, 'Savage, Robert Emmet (Bob) 1895-1959', by P. Sheldon in *Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement 1788-1975* in author's possession; I. Heads *True Blue: The Story of the NSW Rugby League*, Ironbark Press, Sydney, 1992, pp. 72, 164, 166, 177, 189, 207, 223.
 6. *Rugby League News*, 23 September 1951; 29 May 1954; 11 June 1955; December 1965.
 7. Apart from the late Ian Turner, whose work in the area of sport and Australian Rules football sometimes earned him the dismissive sobriquet, the 'footy prof', other important exceptions are G. Parsons and D. Cottle. See, in particular, the book Turner co-wrote with L. Sandercock, *Up Where, Cazaly? The Great Australian Game*, Paladin, Sydney, 1982; G. Parsons, 'Labour, Rugby League and the Working Class: The St George District Rugby League Football Club in the 1920s', *Teaching History*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1978, pp. 22-35 and G. Parsons, 'Capitalism, Class and Community. "Civilising" and Sanitising the People's Game', in D. Headon and L. Marinis (eds), *League of a Nation*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1996, pp. 8-15; D. Cottle, 'A Social History of the Workers Sports Federation in Victoria, c. 1934-1939', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1998, pp. 71-80.
 8. R. Gollan, 'Labour History', in *Bulletin of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, no. 1, 1962, p. 4.
 9. An important article on sport and working-class culture whose theoretical tenets influence the contextual presentation of sport here is C.J. Nottingham, 'More Important than Life or Death: Football, the British Working Class and the Social Order', in L.H. Van Voss and F. van Holthoorn (eds), *Working Class and Popular Culture*, Stichting van Beheer IISG, Amsterdam, 1988, pp. 147-159. While dismissive of a functionalist perspective of the role of sport, Nottingham includes the information that in 1919 the British intelligence official Sir Basil Thomson evidently regarded soccer's popularity among working-class males, together with 'the continuing popularity of the Royal Family' as the two major factors likely to sustain social peace'. For this reference I am grateful to Lucy Taksa. Another excellent guide through the minefield of issues related to 'culture' is Bailey (see her paper in this collection).
 10. See, for instance, 'Rugby League', *Australian Left Review*, no. 100, July-August 1987, pp. 42-43.
 11. A. Howkins, 'Labour and Culture: Mapping the Field', in J.E. Martin and K. Taylor (eds), *Culture and the Labour Movement*, The Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1991, p. 26.
 12. Heads, *True Blue*, p. 29.
 13. Parsons, 'Capitalism, Class and Community', p. 9.
 14. T. Collins' reinterpretation of the events that led to the George Hotel meeting, *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football*, Frank Cass, London, 1998, is a particularly important piece of labour history. Collins would, however, argue that the emergence of rugby league football and socialist politics were unrelated. See also D. James, *Class and Politics in a Northern Industrial Town: Keighley 1880-1914*, Keele University Press, Keele, 1995.
 15. On the history of rugby league in Newcastle see B. Power, *The Saga of the Western Men*, privately published, Newcastle, 1966; B. Power, *The Rebels of Rugby: 'The Bolsheviks' v. 'The Lilywhites' 1907-1920*, privately published, Newcastle, 1992.
 16. E. and S. Yeo, 'Perceived Patterns: Competition and Licence versus Class and Struggle' in their edited collection, *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914*, Harvester, Brighton, 1981, p. 278 cited in Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*, p. 232.
 17. For the early history of rugby union in New South Wales see T. Hickie, *They Ran with the Ball*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1993.
 18. Heads, *True Blue*, p. 26.
 19. Accounts of the origins of rugby league can be followed in: C. Cunneen, 'The Rugby War: the Early History of Rugby League in New South Wales, 1907-15', in Richard Cashman and Michael McKernan (eds), *Sport in History*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1979, pp. 293-306; C. Cunneen, 'Men, Money, Market, Match', in Headon and Marinis (eds), *League of a Nation*, pp. 20-28; Parsons, 'Capitalism, Class and Community'; M. Phillips, 'Football, Class and War: The Rugby

- Codes in New South Wales, 1907-1918', in J. Nauright and T.J.L. Chandler (eds), *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, Frank Cass, London, 1996, pp. 158-180. An outstanding, theoretically informed account is provided by M. Smith, *A Game of Class: An Interpretation of the Sydney Rugby Split 1907-1914*, unpublished manuscript, 1999. For a copy of this manuscript I am grateful to T. Williams of the New South Wales Rugby League.
20. H.M. Moran, *Viewless Wind: Being the Recollections and Digressions of an Australian Surgeon*, Peter Davis, London, 1939, pp. 36-37; Heads, *True Blue*, p. 41.
 21. B. Kidd, *The Political Economy of Sport*, CAHPER Sociology of Sport Monograph Series, Ottawa, no date, pp. 18-19 discusses the evolution from ascriptive to meritocratic standards of judging sporting performance in the late nineteenth century with great clarity.
 22. R. Stremski, 'Australian Rules Football', in W. Vamplew, K. Moore, J. O'Hara, R. Cashman and I. Jobling (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 37.
 23. Cunneen, 'Men, Money, Market, Match', p. 27.
 24. L. Blackwell, *Class, Community and Rugby League*, unpublished BA Hons thesis, Macquarie University, 1984, cited by R. Cashman, *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 95.
 25. See L. Hall (compiler), *Down the Bay: The Changing Foreshores of North Sydney*, North Sydney Council, North Sydney, 1997, in particular, reminiscences of North Sydney rugby league stalwart, F. Orreill, pp. 16-18.
 26. R. Masters, '100 Years of League', *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 26 August 1995.
 27. R. Cavalier, 'The Australian Labor Party at Branch Level, Guildford, Hunters Hill and Panania Branches in the 1950s', in *A Century of Social Change: Labor History Essays*, vol. 4, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1992, p. 93; *NSW Tramway Journal*, 17 December 1947; for further details of these early figures associated with the North Sydney RLFC see A. Moore, *The Mighty Bears! A Social History of North Sydney Rugby League*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1996, pp. 37-38.
 28. Heads, *True Blue*, p. 41; information from Mr T. Brock, 15 May 1996.
 29. *Railway and Tramway Officers Gazette*, 20 September 1925.
 30. C. Cunneen, 'Larkin, Edward Rennix' in B. Nairn and G. Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 673.
 31. E. Scott, *Rugby League in Brisbane: from the Genesis to the Formation of the Brisbane Rugby League*, unpublished Masters thesis, Human Movement, University of Queensland, 1990, p. 7. For this reference I am grateful to Dr G. Mallory.
 32. J. Shields, 'Craftsmen in the Making: the Memory and Meaning of Apprenticeship in Sydney between the Great War and the Great Depression', in J. Shields (ed.), *All Our Labours. Oral Histories of Working Life in Twentieth-Century Sydney*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1992, p. 89.
 33. North Sydney RLFC general committee minutes, 12 May 1914. Records held at football club offices, Mann Street, Gosford.
 34. *Railway and Tramway Officers Gazette*, 20 September 1925.
 35. Moore, *The Mighty Bears!*, ch. 1.
 36. Cited in Heads, *True Blue*, p. 157.
 37. *The New South Wales Rugby Football League Annual and Souvenir*, 1928, pp. 130-132.
 38. L. Taksa, 'Toil, Struggle and Repose: Oral History and the Exploration of Labour Culture in Australia', *Labour History*, no. 67, 1994, p. 121.
 39. M. Solling, *Glebe District Rugby League Football Club 1908-1929*, unpublished manuscript, p. 19. For allowing me access to this manuscript, shortly to be published, I am grateful to Mr Solling.
 40. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
 41. *The Counsellor*, no. 3, 1958, p. 33.
 42. *The Locomotive Journal*, 8 May 1958.
 43. *Maritime Worker*, 9 November 1976.
 44. T. Brislan, *A Maverick Among Marxists*, unpublished Manuscript, pp. 106-109, Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University, M67. For further discussion of this dual union, see A. Moore, 'The Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union 1930-1937', *Labour History*, no. 49, 1985, pp. 61-74.
 45. 'The Legend of Fred Paterson', film documentary with research by R. Fitzgerald, ABC, 11 April 1996; see also R. Fitzgerald, *The People's Champion: Fred Paterson: Australia's Only Communist Party Member of Parliament*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1997, p. 41.
 46. Personal interview, Mrs N. Jeffery, Balmain, 17 May 1985.
 47. Blackwell, 'Class, Community and Rugby League' cited by Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, p. 95.
 48. Moore, *The Mighty Bears!*, pp. 142-143.
 49. Power, *The Saga of the Western Men*, p. 63.
 50. *Rugby League Week*, 4 September 1971.
 51. *Worker*, 26 November 1904.
 52. Heads, *True Blue*, p. 24.
 53. *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates (NSWPD)*, vol. 17, 22 August 1956, p. 1785.
 54. Moore, *The Mighty Bears!*, Chapter 6; See also, for a related initiative, B. Phillips, *The Red Inn: The First 50 Years of Newcastle Workers Club*, Newcastle Workers Co-operative Club Limited, Newcastle, 1998.

55. *Seamen's Journal*, August 1967.
56. Heads, *True Blue*, p. 237.
57. H.R. Miller, 'Soviet and Australian Sport', in NSW Aid Russia Committee, *Sport in Russia*, 1941, pp. 9-10.
58. North Sydney District RLFC, Annual Report, 1941, p. 13 in records of North Sydney RLFC.
59. Heads, *True Blue*, p. 335.
60. For an argument as to the reasons why rugby league became established in New South Wales and Queensland, but not other countries, see A. Moore, *Jimmy Devereux's Yorkshire Pudding: Reflections on the Origins of Rugby League in New South Wales and Queensland*, Australian Society of Sports History, Tom Brock Foundation, (forthcoming).
61. In *Rugby's Great Split* Collins argues, 'Given the lower levels of social deference and the ostensibly more democratic norms of Australian society (at least for whites) it was clear that the imposition of the amateur ethos could not last' (p. 217). Elsewhere he writes 'In Australia, the social strictures of amateurism were largely incompatible with the organisation of daily life' (p. 224).
62. Ongoing litigation by the South Sydney Rabbitohs may yet facilitate their revival. At the time of correcting the final draft of this article the result of these legal maneuvers was unclear. Two other foundation clubs (Balmain and Wests) were induced to merge, an issue that is discussed in D. Cottle, 'The Death of the Magpies', *Football Studies*, (forthcoming). The fourth, North Sydney, was forced into receivership in September 1999 and a subsequent merger with Manly-Warringah.
63. The Super League War awaits complete documentation. Perhaps the most valuable contextual account is provided by M. Westfield in *The Gatekeepers: The Global Media Battle to Control Australia's Pay TV*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, pp. 302-305, 309-311, 315-316, 327-334; 357-359, 375; M. Colman's *Super League: The Inside Story*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1996 is a useful preliminary report by an outstanding sports journalist. See also J. McKay and D. Rowe, 'Field of Soaps: Rupert v. Kerry as Masculine Melodrama', *Social Text*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1997. An important scholarly contribution of its historical backdrop is provided by M. Phillips, 'From Suburban Football to International Spectacle: The Commodification of Rugby League in Australia 1907-1995', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 110, 1998, pp. 27-48. Some of the themes illuminated by the affair are discussed in A. Moore, 'Television, Tradition and Vision in Australian Rugby League: Premature Reflections on the 1995 "Pearl Harbour Raid"', Paper presented at the British Sports History Society Conference, University of Huddersfield, 15-16 July 1995, and 'Super League and the "Decline of Working Class Culture"', *Overland*, vol. 149, 1997, pp. 69-73.
64. G. Griffin and S. Svendsen, 'The Decline of Australian Union Density - A Survey of the Literature', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1996, pp. 505-547 provides a valuable overview of scholarly literature in this area. I am also grateful to John Shields for his advice.
65. S. Roach (with R. Chesterton), *Doing My Block*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1992, p. 158.
66. Information from T. Brock, former historian of South Sydney RLFC; see also Munday, *Green Bans*, p. 16.
67. A. Moore, 'The Industrial Relations of Super League: A Response to Brett Hutchins', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1997, pp. 167-169.
68. *SMH*, 1 June 1995; *NSWPD*, vol. 245, 25 May 1995, p. 219.
69. R. Tiffen, 'The Packer-Labor Alliance, 1978-98: RIP', *Media International Australia*, no. 77, 1995, pp. 20-34; The Keating government's relations with Murdoch and Packer are discussed in detail in Westfield, *The Gatekeepers*, pp. 178-180, 253-254, 281, 283-284, 307-308.
70. In a growing literature on this topic G. Maddox's account in *The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1989, remains a convincing scholarly account.
71. *Labor Times*, June 1999.
72. *Sun Herald*, 30 April 1995.
73. *SMH*, 10 August 1999; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1999. An excellent account of South Sydney's battle to remain in the 2000 competition is provided by D. Leser in 'Skinned', *Good Weekend*, 13 November 1999, pp. 18-25.
74. *SMH*, 3 February 2000.
75. R. Masters, "'And I Awoke and Found me here on the Cold Hill Side': Rugby League and the Decline of Working Class Culture", *Meanjin*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1995, p. 26.
76. For instance *Loosehead Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, p. 5 reports that both the chair and juniors secretary of the Cairns Rugby League had resigned from their positions. 'We're not going to be unpaid workers for Rupert Murdoch and News Ltd', they argued. The author's personal experience of rugby league in the North Sydney district suggests that this is a widespread experience.
77. *SMH*, 21 October 1999.

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