

Transition and Assimilation: English Rugby and Canadian Football in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1930-1955

Robert Kossuth
School of Kinesiology
University of Western Ontario
London, Canada

Abstract

This study examines the struggle for dominance between two cultural practices, English rugby and Canadian football, prior to, during, and following World War Two in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The struggle took place at a time when the city was becoming increasingly integrated within central Canadian and North American culture, while simultaneously casting off some of the last vestiges of British colonial culture. The first decades of the twentieth century were difficult for the entire Maritime region primarily due its isolated position both economically and culturally within the Canadian union. With the onset of the Second World War a clear economic and cultural shift toward North America became evident through the adoption of a variety of social practices including sport and particularly American, and to a greater degree, Canadian football. Through the extensive influence of the Royal Canadian Navy, which effectively controlled sport in Halifax during the war, Canadian football players and coaches from central Canada were able to successfully introduce their form of football into the vacuum left by English rugby adherents who had enlisted into the services. In the years following the war, despite attempts to revive the English game, Canadian football continued to strengthen its position through the cultivation of spectator interest, by attracting younger high school and university aged players, and the attainment of support from the important non-military sport institutions including Dalhousie University and the Wanderers Amateur Athletic Club. Thus, by the mid-1950s English rugby had been entirely removed from Halifax while Canadian football enjoyed unprecedented support.

Introduction

In Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1930, there were twelve English rugby teams that represented the local university, sport club, military installations and high schools. Remarkably just 25 years later, there was no English rugby being played in the city. During the two and a half decades that separated these two dates there was a changing of the guard with the established sport of English rugby being replaced by the newly introduced sport of Canadian football. There were many reasons for this change. Primarily, the adoption Canadian football must be attributed to changes in popular culture within Halifax, specifically related to weakening post-colonial ties with Britain and a strengthening identification with central Canadian and, to a lesser degree, American popular culture during and after World War Two.

In order to trace the changes that led to the decline of English rugby and the popularisation of Canadian football in Halifax after 1940 it is necessary to explore the Maritime region's unique history within a Canadian context. This will focus on the lingering cultural ties to Britain prior to World War Two. These links were evidenced in part by the popularity of English rugby. The impact of the war upon everyday life in Halifax resulting from wartime conditions will be examined particularly with regard to the influence of central Canadian cultural practices.¹ The introduction of top quality Canadian football to the city by the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) represented one such practice. The assertion that Atlantic Canadian cities were, by the 1950s fully integrated into mainstream North American culture² in part explains the willingness of Halifax's football community to adopt Canadian football and abandon one of the last vestiges of British colonial culture, rugby union. Yet, within the context of Halifax's integration into mainstream Canadian culture following the war, support for Canadian football at the expense of English rugby must also be understood as it related to changing attitudes toward the two sports by players, coaches, administrators and spectators. In order to determine the relative popularity of the two sports over the period under consideration it will be necessary to rely upon evidence of interest as expressed through the numbers of teams and leagues in existence, spectator attendance figures where available, and the coverage within local newspapers. As indicated in Table 1, coverage of English rugby in the *Halifax Herald* newspaper declined dramatically, while that of Canadian football increased between 1930 and 1954.

Table 1: Coverage of Football on Mondays in the *Halifax Herald*, 1930-1954 (%).

	1930	1934	1938	1942	1946	1950	1954
English Rugby	95.0%	93.3%	91.7%	66.9%	80.5%	50.0%	7.0%
Canadian Football	2.7%	1.4%	3.3%	23.3%	14.1%	37.6%	83.6%
American Football	2.3%	5.3%	5.0%	9.8%	5.4%	12.4%	9.4%

Within the framework outlined above it will be possible to establish the manner in which the popular form of football in Halifax changed from English rugby to Canadian football following the Second World War.

The economic, political, and social character of the Maritime region has been uniquely shaped since the nineteenth century by its relative isolation from the rest of Canada.³ Atlantic Canadian historians have attempted to discern the

reasons the region was unable to achieve its political and economic potential during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These inquiries have, for the most part, focussed on the negative influences of isolation within federal Canadian union. T.W. Acheson has argued that although the Maritime region was fully industrialised by the late nineteenth century its economic stability, which existed at the mercy of the actions of central Canadian financial centres, was unable to adjust from an Atlantic to a Continental focus. This resulted in a weak economic union that was unable to influence broader national policies.⁴ The reaction to these circumstances, according to E.R. Forbes, was the 'Maritime Rights' movement that arose in the 1920s as a response to the region's declining political influence within Canada. This attempt to reassert a Maritime presence in both national political and economic policies was unsuccessful primarily because the region was already in a weakened political and economic position when compared to Central and Western Canada.⁵ Finally, David Alexander asserts that the Atlantic region was never afforded the opportunity to become part of Canada as a full and equal political and economic partner because of policies that served to perpetuate the disadvantaged position of the Maritimes.⁶ The arguments forwarded by these historians provide some understanding of the roots of political and economic disadvantages experienced by the Maritime provinces during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These disadvantages resulted in the Maritimes' isolated position within the Canadian union during the early twentieth century and clearly were a strong influence upon the social character of the region and its people. Isolation and economic hardship were, in part, responsible for a way of life different from the rest of Canada.

Considering the subordinate political and economic position of the Maritime provinces within the process of Canadian Confederation, while also recognising the strong military and economic links that were forged with Britain during the nineteenth century, the argument can be made that post-colonial cultural ties with Britain were maintained to a greater degree and for a longer period than in other regions within Canada. The Maritimes' strong ties to Britain were particularly evident in the city of Halifax, a port city that had sustained British military garrisons and naval bases up to the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷ Halifax, in part because of its close military ties to Britain following Confederation in 1867, remained in many respects a British colony within which many of the cultural practices of the British Empire remained a part of everyday life. As the largest urban settlement in the Atlantic Canadian provinces, and because of its superior port and harbour facilities, Halifax was able to establish itself as the region's leading metropolitan centre. Thus, a strong connection to the British military along with Halifax's isolated location on the eastern extreme of the nation served to preserve British colonial culture in the city.⁸ Several examples of the British influence that persisted within the city are evident within one early twentieth century travel guidebook of Halifax.

It boasts, for example, that: 'The distinguished officers of the navy are no slight factor in society, and have had their part in making the "Garrison City" what it is today, the best representation of Great Britain on this side of the Atlantic'.⁹ British pastimes that remained popular in Halifax during the early twentieth century, primarily those promoted by the Royal Navy, included recitals by Royal Navy bands at society events such as picnics,¹⁰ as well as involvement in a variety of sporting activities. These leisure pursuits were important avenues through which military personnel and civilians were able to interact. This type of interaction facilitated the maintenance of strong military and cultural ties with Britain well into the early part of the twentieth century.¹¹

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the British military forces stationed in Halifax were in large part responsible for maintaining strong cultural ties to Britain through their involvement in religious, temperance, theatrical and sport organisations.¹² Of particular note was the influence of British military personnel on sport in Halifax during the nineteenth century. For the British, manly sport was considered to be one of the foundational connections to heritage and a sense of cultural identity. Robert Day argues that: 'Military personnel participated to a significant degree in nearly every sporting activity that was practised in Halifax'.¹³ The garrison at Halifax had played a primary role in the organisation of sport for decades, and this influence was present not only through the sports practices that persisted following the British navy's departure but it was also sustained through contact with visiting British ships that fielded teams to compete against local Halifax sides.¹⁴ As a result, there were a number of British sporting practices including rugby, horse racing, athletics, curling and sailing that remained popular with Halifax's middle and upper middle classes during the early decades of the twentieth century. Although North American sports such as baseball, basketball and ice hockey were also popular during this period, Canadian football was not included within this group.¹⁵ Therefore, the sport of English rugby union that by the 1880s had gained a solid foothold in Halifax remained the football code of choice through the first three decades of the twentieth century.¹⁶

English Rugby and North American Football in Pre-war Halifax

The economic hardships of 1930s were particularly challenging for the Maritime region due to the heavy dependence upon primary production and international trade. During the Great Depression few Atlantic Canadians were able to leave the region to find work because the United States, the traditional destination for unemployed Maritimers seeking work, closed its borders to job seekers. Also, other Canadian provinces that were dealing with their own unemployment problems altered their residency requirements for their social programs, effectively halting migration from the east coast.¹⁷ The inability to leave the Maritimes served to further isolate the already marginalised Atlantic provinces. The city of Halifax encountered the same difficulties that faced other

Atlantic Canadian towns and cities. Its continued isolation during the 1930s can explain, in part, the reason English rugby remained the popular form of football in the city.

English rugby union was the most popular autumn sport participated in by young middle and upper-middle class men in Halifax prior to the Second World War. This form of English rugby had been played in Halifax since the 1860s and was securely established within the sporting culture of the city by the early 1890s.¹⁸ The circumstances surrounding the introduction of English rugby to Halifax were similar to the manner in which the sport was introduced into other Canadian cities such as Toronto and Montreal during the same period.¹⁹ The difference, however, between Halifax and these cities was that in Halifax the rules standardised by the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in 1871 were not modified as they had been elsewhere in Canada. Other regions adopted modified rules primarily due to the influence of, and exposure to, American football during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In Halifax there were three primary institutions that supported rugby union teams during the 1930s. These included educational institutions such as universities, colleges, and high schools, the military and local sports clubs. At this time, the Halifax City Rugby League (HCRL), the administrative body for men's rugby in the city, was comprised of teams from Dalhousie University, Saint Mary's College (SMC), King's College, Nova Scotia Technical College, Acadia University in Wolfville, the Wanderers Amateur Athletic Club (WAAC), the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and teams representing the Air Force and Army. The HCRL operated both a senior section which was comprised of top tier teams, and an intermediate section that was made up mostly of 'B' or second sides that were not strong enough to compete in the senior section. Other rugby union teams not affiliated with the HCRL included inter-faculty teams at Dalhousie University and SMC, and high school teams representing Saint Mary's, Saint Patrick's, Bloomfield, Richmond, and Morris Street High Schools.²⁰ The strength of rugby union in the city was evident in both the number of teams and the depth of the system that fed players from the schools, to the intermediate and then to the senior level. Rugby union, at this time, represented a mainstay within the Halifax sport community.

The first North American style football game was played in Halifax at Dalhousie University in 1932. The game drew only passing interest and was quickly 'blamed' on freshmen students and the increasing American influence at the university.²¹ Despite the lack of support within the university, the students continued to play American football, and during the following year a team from Dalhousie University defeated a SMC team 13-0 in front of a crowd of 1200 spectators. The game was reported to be well organised, and it was noted that players from both Dalhousie and SMC wore standard football uniforms, padded pants and helmets that had been imported at considerable cost to the players.²² In 1934, the Halifax American Football League (HAFL) was

formed, including teams from Dalhousie University, SMC and a local American club team called the Ardmores.²³ The HAFL survived only four seasons disbanding in 1937 following the withdrawal of Dalhousie University and SMC at the end of the season.²⁴ Although the HAFL did not represent a legitimate threat to English rugby, this first attempt to introduce North American style football to the city was a sign that external influences were beginning to impact upon the exclusive position of English rugby in Halifax.

Canadian football was introduced to Halifax in 1936 by Brother Lyons, an instructor at SMC.²⁵ Over the next three years a hybrid form of Canadian and American football called 'American Sixes' was developed at SMC, employing rules from both games.²⁶ The impetus underlying the introduction of American and Canadian style football games at SMC was primarily the work of the Irish Christian Brothers, an American religious order that administered the college up to 1939. This connection, in part, accounts for the presence of American students who participated in the HAFL.²⁷ As a result, SMC students were more involved in experimentation with North American styles of football during the 1930s than any other football playing institution.

A final indication of the growing interest in North American forms of football in Halifax during the 1930s was the introduction of Canadian touch-football to city schools during the 1939 football season. Canadian touch-football was introduced by Earle Wilson, the Physical Director of the Halifax YMCA, and schools that participated in games included Tower Road, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Sir Charles Tupper, Joseph Howe, Bloomfield and LeMarchant.²⁸ The following year rugby union disappeared from city junior and high schools, a situation that persisted until after the end of the Second World War.²⁹ The disappearance of school rugby union combined with the increased exposure of youth to Canadian football during the war played a crucial role in the success of the Canadian game following the war.

The late 1930s represented a period of experimentation primarily among the youth of the city with a variety of forms of North American football. Although the HAFL, the Canadian football played at SMC and the school touch-football league did not represent a serious challenge to rugby union's popularity, participation in these games did demonstrate that new forms of football were finding their way to the city and were beginning to capture the interest of the city's young men.

World War Two: The Arrival of the Canadian Game

The city of Halifax was thrust onto the national and international stage with the onset of the Second World War. One consequence of the city's strategic importance to the war effort was a rapid increase in employment and economic opportunities for both Halifax residents and individuals from the rest of Canada. The arrival of military personnel coincided with a similar increase in the city's non-military population. One commentator referred to 'Halifax [as]

a city packed to the rafters', a resounding remark that alluded to the city's rapid population growth from 69,000 to more than 100,000 people in a period of months.³⁰ Remarkably, this population explosion occurred at the same time as many native Haligonians, particularly young male military volunteers, were leaving the city. The arrival of a large number of people, both military and civilian, had an immediate impact upon the social fabric of the city. These new arrivals represented a variety of Canadian social and geographic backgrounds and introduced and fostered new cultural ideas and social practices in the city. Among these newly imported practices was the sport of Canadian football.

Similar to the impact of the arrival of the British garrisons more than 100 years earlier, the Second World War and the involvement of military personnel resulted in many changes to the manner in which sport was organised in Halifax. This change was most notably evident in the transformation that occurred within organised football during the war. Beginning in 1940, English rugby competition all but ceased due to the departure of players and coaches, many of whom had enlisted with various branches of the armed forces.³¹ At the same time, the military bases in the city became home to officers and enlisted men from across Canada. When these men set about creating a recreation program it was no surprise that Canadian football, a sport familiar to young central Canadians, was included in the program.

As early as the autumn of 1939 there was a dramatic decline in English rugby participation in Halifax. In addition to the abandoning of high school rugby in 1940, a ban on all intercollegiate sport was imposed by Dr. Carlton Stanley, the president of Dalhousie University, as a measure to reduce unnecessary travel, forcing the cessation of matches against other Nova Scotia universities.³² Finally, the intermediate section of the HCRL folded prior to the 1940 season due to a lack of players and coaches.³³ These events resulted in a severely diminished base of support for English rugby over the remaining years of the war. At the same time that the foundation of English rugby in Halifax was being eroded, the mass influx of Central and Western Canadian service personnel, many of whom were familiar with Canadian football, created a swell in the numbers of people interested in playing and watching Canadian football. As a result, rugby was quickly overshadowed by Canadian football by 1941.

There were two important reasons Canadian football created greater public interest than English rugby during the World War Two. First, the pool of English rugby players had been greatly reduced due to recruitment and enlistment in the armed services. Second, there was an influx of military personnel with Canadian football experience into Halifax. Thus, when Lieutenant Commander A.E. Chilcott, the Chief Sports Officer for the Atlantic fighting forces and a former Toronto Argonaut Canadian football player, organised the first Canadian football teams in 1941, he had no difficulty finding quality players to field competitive squads.³⁴ This interest, both from players and administrators, created the impetus for the growth of Canadian football during the war.

The impact Canadian football had upon the local sports scene, and in particular the interest in English rugby, was assessed by *Halifax Herald* sports columnist Ken Chisholm early in the 1942 season. Chisholm posed the question, 'What about the future of English rugby?'³⁵ His answer to this question focussed on three reasons that he believed put the future of English rugby in a tenuous position. First, Chisholm made note of the number of skilled 'Canadian rugby' players who were playing the sport in Halifax at the time. Second, Chisholm pointed out that none of the junior or high schools in Halifax were playing English rugby. Finally, he noted the growing interest in American and Canadian style football games among high school students at the time.³⁶ Thus, as early as 1942, Chisholm was aware that Canadian football was capturing the interest of young players and growing through the support of the RCN, the two critical factors that he viewed as contributing to the sport's growing popularity.

Competition between the two RCN teams, the Main Guard and the Navy Stokers,³⁷ represented not only opportunities for military personnel to take a break from their duties; it also served as entertainment for both troops and civilians. The RCN's role in popularising Canadian football in Halifax was not limited to these games. Personnel from the RCN also took an active interest in promoting and teaching the sport to the city's young players. Despite efforts of English rugby administrators to increase interest in their game,³⁸ the sport's popularity among players and spectators paled in comparison to its Canadian cousin during the war. The impact of games between the senior RCN football teams and the efforts to foster youth participation resulted in a growth in interest in Canadian football over the remaining war years.

The RCN's support of high school Canadian football teams during the war was evident through a number of initiatives. Of these initiatives the most notable was the assistance provided in forming the Halifax High School Canadian Football League (HHCFL).³⁹ In 1942, the first year of the HHCFL, Saint Patrick's and Queen Elizabeth High Schools were provided with equipment and volunteer coaches from the RCN. In addition to the support provided to the HHCFL, RCN personnel also assisted with a four day Canadian football camp for junior schools run in September of 1943 by Earle 'Packy' Wilson of the YMCA, Jim MacDonald of the city touch-football league and Lieutenant-Commander A.E. Chilcott and Sub-Lieutenant Stan Teasdale of the RCN.⁴⁰ By taking an active interest in teaching Canadian football to the city's youth, RCN personnel provided the foundation for the sport's future in Halifax. Although much of the credit should go to the individuals involved with these initiatives, a large part of their success was the result of accessibility to RCN sport and recreation resources including access to sports fields and equipment.⁴¹

A further example of the benefits afforded the Canadian game due to RCN support, and which also served to increase interest in the sport, was the ability to organise matches against service teams from Toronto and Montreal. These matches that took place during the 1943 and 1944 seasons created

exceptional publicity for Canadian football. Most notable was the success of the HMCS Stadacona team representing the RCN in Halifax that won the 1943 RCN title by defeating both the Toronto and Montreal navy entries.⁴² The experience of football competition against teams from central Canada, along with the teams competing regularly in Halifax further encouraged the growth of, and interest in, Canadian football.

Between 1941 and 1944 the RCN presence in Halifax was the driving force responsible for the popularisation of Canadian football in the city. Through the formation of senior and high school leagues and the support and assistance provided to youth teams, leagues, and camps, the RCN's role in popularising Canadian football in Halifax cannot be understated. It was not until after the end of the war that the military's influence over all aspects of life, including sport, began to decline. With this loss of support, Canadian football was no longer assured its pre-eminent place as Halifax's football game of choice. Therefore, the return to peacetime set the stage for a struggle between returning English rugby adherents and the newly anointed supporters of Canadian football to win the allegiance of the city's football community.

Post-war Reorganisation: The Football Decision

Life in Halifax was in many respects altered through the changes brought about by the Second World War. The most notable change was the city's increased integration into the dominant popular culture of North America. This integration was evident not only in Halifax, but 'in every corner of Atlantic Canadian society, [where] mass consumer culture, with its cheap manufactured products and hard sell, replaced the old order based on scarcity and hard work'.⁴³ This fundamental alteration to life in the region and the city of Halifax was particularly evident within organised sport. Baseball, for example, was affected by the strengthening of ties to the rest of the continent during and after the war. Colin Howell in his book *Northern Sandlots* suggests that Maritime Canadian baseball was profoundly influenced by the changes brought about by the Second World War. He argues:

The successful policy of mixing locals and imported talent that had been encouraged, even necessitated, by wartime circumstances, meant an end to the pure amateurism that had characterized community baseball in the interwar period. It also inaugurated a process whereby the traditional connection of home-brews to their home town began to dissolve, and where imported players began to squeeze locals off club rosters.⁴⁴

As with baseball in Atlantic Canada, football in Halifax was altered markedly by the experiences of the war. The decade that followed the war represented a critical period during which the supporters of Halifax's traditional football

game of English rugby and the emerging sport of Canadian football set about determining the city's football future.

The most apparent influences upon football in Halifax following the war were the policies implemented, and decisions made, by administrators of both Canadian football and English rugby. Primarily, the actions of these groups were focussed on strengthening interest in their sports amongst players and spectators through a variety of methods including changes to the rules of play and the promotion of their sport to the city's boys and young men. With respect to the above innovations, Canadian football enjoyed several distinct advantages over English rugby that assisted in fostering its popularity amongst players and spectators. The most important of these were the sport's superior overall organisation and its capitalisation on the broader popular appeal based on the interest cultivated by events taking place outside Atlantic Canada. As well, Canadian football was able to build from the solid foundation formed by the RCN during the Second World War. Therefore, although growth in the interest in Canadian football was not immediately apparent following the war, over the ensuing decade it became increasingly apparent that the Canadian game had become the football game of choice in Halifax.

During the first two years following the end of the Second World War, English rugby briefly returned to its prewar dominance.⁴⁵ When the 1945 season opened the two most influential prewar English rugby leagues, the Maritime Intercollegiate Rugby League (MIRL) and the HCRL, reconvened. These leagues were comprised of nine university and college teams, as well as an RCN entry. In comparison, only two senior and three high school Canadian football teams operated in the city the same year. In 1946, the WAAC entered an English rugby team in the HCRL furthering the base of English rugby in the city.⁴⁶ Despite the relative success experienced by English rugby, interest in Canadian football began to revive in 1946 with the formation of a team at SMC.⁴⁷ Although Canadian football was sustained by only a few teams during the two years following the war, games continued to attract larger crowds than English rugby.⁴⁸ Because there were more teams and players, on the surface it appeared that English rugby had returned to its prewar dominance. In reality, Canadian football, particularly among university and high school students, was already beginning to overshadow English rugby's brief postwar renaissance.

The growing interest in Canadian football following the war was apparent through the public debate concerned with the relative merits of the English and Canadian games. The fundamental question driving this debate was simply which form of football should be adopted within the city. The debate engaged a wide range of interests including players coaches and spectators and it received coverage in both the local and university newspapers.

The first comprehensive investigation to explore the issue of which form of football should be adopted in Halifax took place at SMC in the autumn of 1945. This examination was initiated by Larry Murphy, writing for the *Saint*

Mary's Journal, who argued that a decision had to be made about which form of football should be played by the college's high school students. Murphy objected to the suggestion that the high school students should play English rugby because no other teams in the province, apart from those in Halifax, were playing the Canadian game. He wrote:

It seems to me that the choice of one of these two games is up to the high school boys who will be playing the game, rather than to a group of men, more or less interested in the welfare of English rugger than in the fun the boys have in playing THEIR game.⁴⁹

The controversy raised by Murphy's article resulted in the marshalling of an opinion poll by the *Saint Mary's Journal* to gauge the popularity of the Canadian and English games. The results of the poll, which was administered both in the high school and college, was summed up by the *Journal's* headline that read 'S.M.C. Wants Canadian Game . . . Overwhelmingly Reject Rugger in Student Survey'.⁵⁰ Of the college students surveyed 39 favoured the Canadian football while only four preferred to watch or play English rugby. Similarly in the high school 108 of the 128 students polled indicated that they preferred the Canadian game. Thus, the poll results reflected the strong support for high school Canadian football at Saint Mary's College, and explained the impetus behind the college's formation of the first non-military senior team in 1946.

The question of which form of football to adopt was also debated at the Nova Scotia Technical College in 1946. At the first meeting of the year the Engineering Society addressed 'the question of whether the increasingly popular Canadian football should replace the older, and more rugged, English version in Tech's grid-iron activities'.⁵¹ The need to consider this question was argued to be inevitable:

considering the fact that Canadian football [was] receiving so much attention of late by Halifax fans due to [the] smart brand of football displayed by local High School pigskin squads. The newer and faster Canadian game [was] getting a decided boost in a sports centre where the English counterpart [had] long been one of the major sports.⁵²

Although a strong argument was presented to consider adopting Canadian football, the College continued to field an English rugby team. One reason the Engineering Society may have decided to keep its rugby team could have been to defend its MIRL championship. Nova Scotia Technical College continued to play English rugby in the MIRL and the HCRL during the decade that followed the war and was the last active English rugby team based in Halifax, competing in its final season in 1954.⁵³ Clearly, for a team with such a strong rugby

tradition to consider switching to Canadian football suggests that interest in the sport was no longer confined to the RCN and the high schools.

Rhetoric about these issues and the future of football in Halifax was also addressed in the *Halifax Herald* newspaper. An article published in November 1945 presented the positions of several prominent sport and football administrators on the future of football, both English and Canadian, in the city. Dr. J.T. Landry, the Physical Education Director of Halifax schools, Major A. Crich, the Army District Sports Officer, L.B. Hannon, the Director of Sports for Queen Elizabeth High School, and Jim Arnott, the Sports Officer at HMCS Stadacona, argued that Canadian football was the sport of the future. The lone voice of dissent was that of Burnie Ralston, the Physical Education Director at Dalhousie University, who predicted that Canadian football would remain limited to the high schools and the RCN.⁵⁴ Thus, among the city's sport and football leaders, the dominant opinion was that Canadian football would supplant English rugby as the city's popular form of football, indicating that sport administrators in Halifax were well aware of its growing popularity.

The underlying reasons for the above opinions concerning the future of football in Halifax were outlined in an article by the respected sports writer 'Gee' Ahern. Ahern predicted that English rugby would perish due to the absence of the sport in city high schools and that Canadian football would succeed because of the support provided by the senior teams to the high school squads.⁵⁵ These observations provided a clear indication that English rugby was perceived to be falling out of step with what the youth of the city wanted in a football game, whereas Canadian football, as a distinctly popular Canadian cultural practice, was supposedly able to satisfy the changing interests of the city's youth.

The most notable event to coincide with the opening of the 1947 football season in Halifax was the return of a senior Canadian football league to the city. The Halifax Senior Canadian Football League (HSCFL) was formed following commitments by Dalhousie University and the WAAC to form teams to compete against HMCS Stadacona, Dartmouth Air Station of the Fleet Air Arm, and SMC Grads squads. The difference between this new league and the league that had operated during the war was that it included representatives from all the traditional football playing institutions. Of these institutions, Dalhousie and the WAAC were the key league members based on their historical leadership positions in sport within Halifax and the Maritime region.

The primary impetus behind Dalhousie University's and the WAAC's decision to form Canadian football teams in 1947 was the interest expressed by students and younger club members in playing Canadian football. Player enthusiasm combined with existing spectator interest that had been cultivated during the war clinched the decision. Dalhousie University's officially stated reasons for forming a Canadian football team were the success of the city high school league, the number of students with Canadian football experience who

wanted to play the game and the probability that other Maritime universities would form teams in the near future.⁵⁶ The Dalhousie University Canadian football team enjoyed immediate success with more than 3000 people attending four of the five games they played in 1947.⁵⁷ Although the WAAC team drew fewer spectators, their debut season was also successful. Two years later, in 1949, the WAAC completed its most successful season when it reached the league finals.⁵⁸ The involvement of these two teams combined with the continuing efforts of HSCFL organisers to publicise and promote Canadian football resulted in prosperity for the sport during the late 1940s.

The reasons why Canadian football prospered in Halifax during the late 1940s and early 1950s can be attributed to the continued support for the sport in the high schools and universities and the military's strengthened presence in the city during this period.⁵⁹ Based on the actions taken and the opinions expressed by administrators, coaches and players, it was becoming clear that Canadian football embodied those elements of a sport that appealed to both athletes and spectators. At the same time, English rugby continued to lose touch with the people of Halifax as they shed pre-war attachments to certain British practices while continuing to forge their own Canadian identities.

The changing of the guard among football administrators in Halifax was most evident at Dalhousie University, the traditional leader among football playing institutions in the city. The decreasing influence of rugby administrators and the increasing power of Canadian football leaders was evident at Dalhousie when one considers that in 1945 the Athletic and Physical Education Director was rugby coach Burnie Ralston, while in 1951 the position was held by head football coach Gabriel E. Vitalone. Vitalone in the above capacity was also successful in petitioning then university president Dr. A.E. Kerr to continue supporting the Canadian football program.⁶⁰ Thus, the growing influence of Canadian football administrators represented one avenue through which the sport of Canadian football had, by the early 1950s supplanted English rugby as the football game of choice in Halifax.

Another advantage enjoyed by Canadian football over English rugby in Halifax was the opportunity to host teams from central Canada, including a team from the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario in 1952 and a team from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario in 1954.⁶¹ There was a great deal of interest in these games that was evident when more than 6000 spectators attended the two games played in Halifax in 1952.⁶² Although the tours represented highlights for Canadian football in Halifax and generated important interest in the sport, these events must be recognised as only two of the many ongoing promotional activities undertaken by Canadian football organisers.

A large measure of credit for the promotion and popularisation of Canadian football during the early 1950s must be given to the league and team administrators. One example of a successful innovation implemented by the sport's administrators was the formation of the Nova Scotia Junior Canadian

Football League (NSJCFL) in 1953, comprised of teams from SMC, HMCS Stadacona, HMCS Shearwater and a city of Dartmouth team.⁶³ This new league filled the gap between high school and senior leagues and assisted in solidifying a strong infrastructure for promoting Canadian football in Halifax and the surrounding regions. Thus, the tours by teams from central Canada, the formation of the NSJCFL, along with initiatives to foster spectator interest during games,⁶⁴ radio broadcasts⁶⁵ and free rules and refereeing clinics,⁶⁶ continued the rise in the popularity of Canadian football in Halifax during the early 1950s.

The disappearance of English rugby in Halifax, however, was not solely the result of the increased interest in Canadian football during the early 1950s. Many of the difficulties that plagued English rugby stemmed from events that occurred during the late 1940s and early 1950s, resulting from a failure on the part of administrators to implement measures to maintain and attract player and spectator interest to keep pace with the Canadian game. Specifically, this failure was evident in the inability to deal with the problems of the quality of play and refereeing that had been addressed as early as the 1947 season. At this time, it was suggested that 'if the English form of the gridiron game is to hold its own with its Canadian counterpart in the eyes of Maritime sports fans, strong steps must be taken to better the brand of play "dished up" for Mr. John Q. Fan'.⁶⁷ This advice was not heeded. At the 1948 meeting of the Maritime Rugby Union (MRU) a number of suggestions were introduced by members from Halifax to improve the sport including the formation of a referees association, the use of signals by referees to inform spectators about stoppages in play and the need for a permanent paid secretary to promote rugby in the Maritimes. The only suggestion to be implemented following this meeting was the formation of a referees' society. No action was taken to implement the other ideas.⁶⁸ A second example of the deference to improving English rugby in Halifax occurred in 1950 when Hugh Noble, the Director of Physical Education for Nova Scotia, organised a series of clinics for referees and coaches. None of these clinics were held in Halifax, which suggests that there was either little interest expressed from within the city in improving the sport or that administrators saw no reason to promote rugby from outside the city.⁶⁹ Thus, whether the disinterest in promoting English rugby in Halifax stemmed from organisers inside or outside the city is not clear, yet it was apparent that neither group was willing or able to stem the sport's decline. As the broader societal changes that followed World War Two resulted in the growing awareness of Canadian culture in the Maritimes, it is evident, therefore, with respect to Canadian football, that these changes appeared first in Halifax. This in part explains the initial inaction of MRU members during the late 1940s, the majority of whom were from outside Halifax, but does not explain why English rugby enthusiasts in the city did not do more to save their sport during the early 1950s.

By 1951, the declining interest in English rugby was clearly apparent. At this time there were eight teams in the Halifax City English Football League

(HCEFL), yet only five of the teams were actually based in the city. These teams included Dalhousie University, the WAAC, Kings University College, and two HMCS Shearwater teams.⁷⁰ By 1954, none of the four teams that made up the HCEFL were actually based in Halifax.⁷¹ Dalhousie University disbanded its English rugby team following the 1953 season when the students' council passed an unopposed motion to drop the team.⁷² The loss of support for English rugby at Dalhousie clearly demonstrated that the sport's future in the city was lost. When the 1955 football season opened there were no English rugby teams competing in the city of Halifax.⁷³ Thus, in the end, English rugby was unable to win support from players and spectators, sealing the fate of the once proud sporting tradition that had been a fixture in the city since it was introduced by the British in the late nineteenth century.

Conclusion

An answer to the question of why English rugby gave way to Canadian football as the popular form of football in Halifax requires a dual answer that considers both sports and their relationship to changes in broader society. First, it is necessary to recognise that life in the city of Halifax changed dramatically during and following the Second World War. Over this period the city was transformed from a relatively isolated Atlantic Canadian port city that was still strongly influenced by its British Colonial past prior to the war, to an increasingly integrated and connected North American urban centre in the years following the war. Second, in concert with the movement toward embracing Canadian in lieu of British cultural practices, young football players in Halifax increasingly identified with Canadian football and not English rugby when a choice was presented between the two sports. Although there was interest in North American styles of football prior to 1939 it was not until the start of the war, when Canadian football was introduced by the RCN, that there was evidence of widespread interest in the Canadian game. Following the war, the base of support for Canadian football remained with the younger players, who initiated the sport's entry into Dalhousie University, SMC, and the WAAC. English rugby supporters, on the other hand, were unable to challenge the popular appeal enjoyed by the Canadian game, and by the early 1950s their sport was no longer a viable sporting entity in Halifax. Therefore, a new North American based cultural practice, Canadian football, replaced English rugby, a sport that up to the Second World war had persisted as a remnant of Halifax's British colonial past.

NOTES:

1. Central Canada includes the provinces of Quebec and Ontario.
2. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto, Fredericton: University of Toronto Press and Acadiensis Press, 1993), 382.
3. The Maritime provinces of Canada during the period under investigation included, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.
4. T.W. Acheson, 'The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes. 1880-1910', *Acadiensis* 1 (Spring 1972): 27-8.
5. Ernest R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1979), vi-x.
6. David G. Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, compiled by Eric W. Sager, Lewis R. Fisher and Stuart O. Pierson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 73.
7. Thomas H. Raddall, *Halifax, Warden of the North* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 231. Britain maintained a naval base in Halifax for 157 years prior to their departure in February of 1906.
8. Graham Metson, *An East Coast Port: Halifax at War 1939-1945* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1981), 17. The British Royal Navy had a large presence in Halifax during the early part of the Second World War. It was not until later in the war that the Royal Canadian Navy vessels became a visible presence in the port.
9. *Halifax, Nova Scotia and its Attractions*, (Halifax: Howard and Kutsche, c. 1900).
10. Raddall, *Halifax, Warden of the North*, 229.
11. Robert D. Day, 'The British Garrisons at Halifax: Its Contribution to the Development of Sport in the Community', in *Sport in Canada: Historical Readings*, ed. Morris Mott (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1989), 28.
12. Day, 'The British Garrisons at Halifax', 28-9.
13. Day, 'The British Garrisons at Halifax', 35.
14. During the 1910s and 1920s it was not uncommon for visiting Royal Navy ships to field rugby union teams to compete against Halifax teams.
15. A.J. Young, *Beyond Heroes: A Sport History of Nova Scotia*, Vols 1 and 2, (Hantsport, Nova Scotia: Lancealot, 1988).
16. Alan Metcalfe, *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807 - 1914* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 73-4.

17. Ernest R. Forbes and Delphin A. Muise, eds, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 272.
18. Eugene Brown, 'Before Canadian Football, English Rugby was King', *The Halifax Daily News*, 27 November 1985, 27. The Halifax City Senior League was organised in 1891 and continued until the mid-1950s.
19. Don Morrow, Mary Keyes, Wayne Simpon, Frank Cosentino and Ron Lappage, *A Concise History of Sport in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 141-6.
20. This information is taken from records of leagues and teams found in the *Halifax Herald*, *Dalhousie Gazette* and *Saint Mary's Journal* from 1930 to 1940.
21. *Dalhousie Gazette*, 23 November 1932, 4.
22. *Dalhousie Gazette*, 16 November 1933, 4; *The Collegian*, December 1933, 45.
23. *Dalhousie Gazette*, 4 October 1934, 4; *The Collegian*, December 1934, 53. The Ardmores club drew mainly from the American population of Halifax.
24. *The Collegian*, May 1937, 58.
25. *Saint Mary's Journal*, 4 November 1936, 54.
26. *Saint Mary's Journal*, 30 November 1939, 1.
27. Kevin Cleary, interview by Robert Kossuth, 21 August 1995, Halifax, Nova Scotia. At the time of this interview, Cleary was the Senate Secretary of Saint Mary's University.
28. *Halifax Herald*, 10 November 1939, 7.
29. Extensive investigation of the *Halifax Herald* newspaper during the 1939 through 1945 football seasons produced no evidence of any high school rugby teams playing in Halifax.
30. Metson, *An East Coast Port*, 28.
31. Forbes and Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, 309. 47.6 per cent of eligible male Nova Scotians joined the armed services, the highest percentage in Canada after British Columbia and Prince Edward Island.
32. *Dalhousie Gazette*, 30 September 1940, 4.
33. *Dalhousie Gazette*, 30 September 1940, 4.
34. David W. Brown, 'The History and Development of Organized Canadian Football in Nova Scotia' (Master's Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1980), 1; *Halifax Herald*, 10 October 1941.
35. *Halifax Herald*, 14 October 1942, 5.

36. *Halifax Herald*, 14 October 1942, 5.
37. *Halifax Herald*, 10 October 1941, 5.
38. *Halifax Herald*, 7 October 1943, 5; *Halifax Herald*, 12 September 1944, 4. These efforts included the adoption of the rugby league rules in 1943 and 1944 in order to present a faster and more exciting brand of English rugby.
39. Brown, 'The History and Development of Organized Canadian Football', 22. Saint Mary's College high school was the other team participating in the HHCFL.
40. *Halifax Herald*, 22 September 1943, 5. The camp was a success with over 200 students turning out at the first day.
41. Ralph Davies, 'A History of Rugby in Nova Scotia', (Masters Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979), p. 67. In 1942 the RCN took over the Wanderers Amateur Athletic Club grounds and changed the name to the Navy League Recreation Centre. Most of the senior Canadian football played in Halifax during the war was played here.
42. The combined attendance for these matches was over 5000 spectators.
43. Forbes and Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, 383.
44. Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 201.
45. It is important to note that the revival in English rugby did not include the high school game. The only evidence on high School rugby in Halifax after the war was a team from Queen Elizabeth High School that existed for two years from 1946 to 1947.
46. *Halifax Herald*, 5 September 1946, 4.
47. *Halifax Herald*, 23 October 1946, 4.
48. In 1945 and 1946 there were eight Canadian football matches played that attracted crowds of over 1000 spectators. In comparison, there were only three recorded English rugby games during this time that attracted a crowd of more than 1000 people.
49. *Saint Mary's Journal*, 1 November 1945, 2.
50. *Saint Mary's Journal*, 15 November 1945, 1.
51. *The Tech Flash*, November 1946, 36.
52. *The Tech Flash*, November 1946, 36.
53. English rugby disappeared completely from Halifax following the 1954 season.
54. *Halifax Herald*, 10 November 1945, 4.
55. *Halifax Herald*, 3 November 1945, 4.

56. Dalhousie University Archives: President's Office Papers, Athletics and Physical Education 1945-52, Athletic Directors Report, 2 May 1947. Administrators believed that an intercollegiate league would develop.
57. Attendance figures are drawn from the *Halifax Herald* and the *Dalhousie Gazette* for the months of September, October and November 1947.
58. *Chronicle Herald*, 22 September 1950, 18.
59. *Chronicle Herald*, 22 October 1952, 4. The RCN increased its personnel in the Maritime provinces from 10,687 in 1951 to 14,700 in 1952.
60. Dalhousie University Archives: University President's Correspondence, Athletics and Physical Education 1945-1952, Letter, Gabriel E. Vitalone to Dr. A.E. Kerr, 6 February 1951. In the letter Vitalone argued that if the Canadian football team was disbanded the players would not play English rugby, but would join another Canadian football team elsewhere in the city.
61. *Chronicle Herald*, 12 October 1954, 12
62. *Chronicle Herald*, 20 October 1952, 14
63. *Saint Mary's Journal*, 16 October 1953, 3. Players in this league were required to be under twenty-one years of age as of 31 December 1953.
64. *Chronicle Herald*, 1 October 1949, 3. Entertainment during games included bands, clowns, and musicians.
65. *Dalhousie Gazette*, 8 October 1948, 4; and *Chronicle Herald*, 5 September 1953, 6.
66. *Chronicle Herald*, 12 September 1953, 6.
67. *The Tech Flash*, February 1947, 24.
68. *Halifax Herald*, 30 October 1948, 9; *Halifax Herald*, 2 November 1948, 6.
69. *Chronicle Herald*, 20 September 1950, 16.
70. After the formation of Canadian Football teams at Dalhousie University and the WAAC in 1947 the clubs continued to field English rugby teams until 1953.
71. Teams in the HCERL in 1954 included Acadia University, the Windsor Swastikas, the Truro Bearcats, and the New Glasgow Grads.
72. Davies, 'A History of Rugby in Nova Scotia', 75.
73. During the course of my research for this project while living in Halifax I played rugby union for the Halifax 'Tars' rugby team. Rugby has reappeared in Halifax after its disappearance in 1954, although it remains in the 1990s only a sport of minor interest.