

Welsh Indigenous! and British Imperial?—Welsh Rugby, Culture, and Society 1890–1914¹

David L. Andrews*

Department of Kinesiology

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Deconstructing Wales and Rugby

The bourgeois assertion and popular accommodation of ethnic and neo-colonial identities was an intriguing development for the Welsh national character at the turn of the twentieth century. These seemingly incongruent and divergent strands of a burgeoning national philosophy became cornerstones of a Wales preoccupied with asserting equal nation status within the British Imperial configuration. Rugby's central role in the popular incorporation of Welsh indigenous and British Imperial personas into the new definition of Welshness provides the focus of this paper. Implicit within this discussion is an exposition of the dialectic relationship between power, culture, and sport within the context of late Victorian and Edwardian Wales.

As a result of over seven hundred years of English oppression and exploitation the Welsh nation has consistently displayed an inhibiting lack of political or economic autonomy. The suffocating influence of England resulted in the Welsh focusing upon the cultural realm as a key source of distinctive national identity. Wales and Welsh identity are cultural productions derived from the meanings associated with specific cultural forms, practices, and relations. In Dick Hebdige's terms, Wales has attempted to win some space from England through the creation of a Welsh cultural style.²

That is not to say there is something akin to a constant Welsh identity; changing social contexts have caused the populace to re-examine and

1. From the outset I would like to acknowledge the great debt owed to the research of both Gwyn A. Williams and Gareth Williams. The work of these outstanding scholars directed me toward the problematic addressed within this paper; moreover in synthesis their research has enabled me to further my understanding of the relationship between Wales and rugby. Gwyn A. Williams has produced numerous indispensable monographs relating to the historical understanding of Welsh culture and society. His Gramscian oriented cultural Marxism has been a significant influence in shaping my own socio-political commitment and concerns. Gareth Williams has produced excellent studies which represent the logical starting point for anyone interested in the history of Welsh rugby. It was never my intention to improve upon Gareth Williams' historical studies—this would prove an impossible task—rather I have used many of the products of his meticulous historical probing to substantiate and hopefully enliven my more critical and culturally focused interests.

* I would like to express my sincere thanks to John Loy, Syndy Slowikowski, and Darren Treasure, all of whom greatly assisted the writing of this paper.

2. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

periodically re-define their understanding of the Welsh experience. As Gwyn A. Williams has pointed out:

Wales is a process. Wales is an artifact which the Welsh produce. The Welsh make and re-make Wales day by day, year by year, generation after generation.³

In this respect Wales can be seen as a dynamic cultural montage, its cultural constituents being conjuncturally specific as is their relative positioning be it central, peripheral, or occupying a part of the expansive middle ground between these polar opposites.

John Bale has stated that rugby is characteristically Welsh;⁴ more accurately expressed, the game has been made to be Welsh by the interpretive actions of the Welsh populace over the last 100 years.⁵ This process of connection resulted in a distinctive cultural practice becoming the social and political declaration of modern Welsh nationhood. Meanings have been resolutely cemented between Wales-the nation, and rugby-its national game. To the popular consciousness rugby is as Welsh as coal mining, male voice choirs, "How Green Was My Valley," Dylan Thomas, and Tom Jones. As Gerald Davies, the celebrated Welsh wing-three quarter of the 1970s, once remarked "rugby engages a nation in need of an identity. From childhood onwards, it holds the imagination."⁶

Rugby and the Imperial Discourse of Welsh Nationhood

The process of rapid and concerted Welsh industrialization, which occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century, produced significant demographic changes within Wales. In-migrants from rural Wales and immigrants predominantly from England, but also from other parts of the British Empire, converged on the prospering South Walian industrial region. Wales became dominated by a southerly located and largely anonymous workforce whose lack of homogeneity was a very real concern to the national development of Wales. By the advent of the 1890s a maturing Welsh industrial middle class sought to create a united, harmonious, and liveable present through the creation of a unifying Welsh national identity which was relevant to the modern industrial experience. This was arrived at through the manufacture of an Imperial Wales; a

3. Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* (London: Penguin, 1985), 7.

4. John Bale, "Sport and National Identity: A Geographical View," *British Journal of Sports History* 3 (May 1986), 18-41.

5. Despite common misconceptions, there is nothing inherently Welsh about rugby. In fact the game has its roots in the English public school system, from where it emerged during the 1820s and 1830s. The game was introduced into Wales around the middle of the nineteenth century by returning clergy and upper class students, who played the game at their respective English educational institutions. Although initially confined to the minuscule Welsh upper class, rugby was soon appropriated by an expanding industrial middle class. Between 1870 and 1890 the Welsh urban bourgeoisie dominated the game in terms of administration and participation. However, as the twentieth century beckoned, rugby, both as a spectator and participant sport, became an increasingly important aspect of Welsh working class existence. A more detailed account of the origins of rugby can be found in Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarian, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (New York: New York University Press, 1979). For work of special relevance to rugby in Wales, refer to David Smith and Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise: Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union 1881-1981* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), and David L. Andrews, "The Socio-Cultural Development of Welsh Rugby Union 1890-1914" (Masters thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1991).

6. Gerald Davies, *Welsh Rugby Scrapbook* (London: Souvenir Press, 1983), 18.

proto-nation founded upon a nationalist ideology which was simultaneously progressive and historic, classless and democratic, and both Welsh and British.⁷ Through the promotion of this Imperial identity the dominant industrial bourgeoisie hoped to mesh the divergent interests, aspirations, and backgrounds of the flourishing but potentially disruptive Welsh industrial workforce.

The period 1890-1914 represents the zenith of the modern Welsh nation, culminating in a period of unrealistic Cambrian euphoria later dubbed “the High Noon of Edwardian Wales.”⁸ Wales had begun to assert its influence upon economic, religious, and political realms, and yet it was rugby that was to play a major part in the realization of the aspiring Welsh nation. From being an emergent popular pastime the game was transformed into a high profile symbol of a vibrant and self confident national ideology. The frequent outpourings of the Welsh media agencies, as well as numerous symbolic practices and actions, were the avenues via which the professional class was able to initiate and consolidate the relationship between rugby and an unfolding Welsh nationality. These mechanics of articulation were described by Gareth Williams as the “literary bread and literal circuses” of Imperial Wales.⁹ Immersed into a solidifying national discourse the game acted as a pivotal hardening agent. Rugby in an Imperial context ultimately playing a similar role to that which religious dissent had executed in the production of Nonconformist Wales.¹⁰

While the process of creating articulatory connections was a gradual one, 1905 was a significant benchmark. Many of the interpretive links so vital to the accession of the Imperial nation were cemented at this point in time. The popular meaning and identity of both Imperial Wales and Welsh rugby was involved in a process of change which was rubber stamped by the events of 1905. This was the year in which Welsh coal fired the Japanese defeat of the Imperial Russian Navy, David Lloyd George burst onto the British political scene, and Wales defeated the previously invincible First-All Blacks.¹¹ The Welsh victory over New Zealand in December of 1905 was situated-indeed, it helped to create-a conjuncture out of which the popular acceptance of the Imperial nation, in reciprocal tandem with that of its national game was confirmed. As Gareth Williams recounted, the “high noon” of Edwardian Wales

7. The diverse constituents of the Welsh Imperial national ideology is discussed at length in Gwyn A. Williams, *The Welsh in Their History* (London: Croom Helm, 1982); and *When Was Wales?* (London: Penguin, 1985).

8. Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

9. Gareth Williams, “From Popular Culture to Public Cliche: Image and Identity in Wales, 1890-1914,” in *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism-British Culture and Sport at Home and Abroad 1700-1914*, ed. J. A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass, 1988), 132.

10. The romantic vision of Wales propagated by the Welsh middle class in the late eighteenth century was destined to be dismissed once Wales began to experience the rigors of industrialization. By the 1830s and 1840s the Welsh working class had rejected the bourgeois imposition of an incongruous national consciousness and identity. It was a protestant and populist religious dissent-opposing the Church of England-which usurped Romanticism and became the dominant definer of the Welsh condition. This ideological coup d'état was far from an overnight process, but from roughly 1850-1890 Wales was predominantly a nation of religious nonconformity.

11. David Smith, “People’s Theatre: A Century of Welsh Rugby,” *History Today* 31 (March 1981): 31-36.

coincided with Welsh rugby's "Golden Era," as rugby was locked into "the socio-matrix of Welsh society."¹²

The nationalist ambitions of the industrial bourgeoisie initiated the process which transformed Wales and made rugby Welsh. The Welsh power elite successfully achieved their goals through the articulation of rugby within the diverse discourse of Imperial Wales. Carried on the shoulders of an increasingly rugby obsessed populace, the Imperial nation was elbowed to the forefront of national popular consciousness; demonstrating the dialectic relationship between popular cultural practices, representations, and the dynamic Welsh condition. This paper illuminates the precise ways rugby was affiliated to the Welsh indigenous and British Imperial strands of the solidifying national ideology. The realization of such interpretive connections ultimately guaranteed the popularity and common acceptance of the new Wales.

Welsh Indigenous!

The rugby pitch has long been a setting upon which Wales has sought to win some space from the smothering grasp of an overbearing England. Skulking behind the facade of national equality, the English nation state expanded by:

absorbing the small nations near it into its imperial self, expunging the little clans and calling the new unit-as a sop to their sense of identity-Great Britain.¹³

Within the British schema Welsh national solidarity was fuelled by a "sense of antagonism towards the English as the politically and economically dominant force."¹⁴ Predictably this collective Cambrian resentment manifested itself at the rugby arena where:

To win at the game, especially against England, is as important as gaining victory in the long war Wales began fighting for its independence centuries ago.¹⁵

It is highly likely that rugby was a torchbearer of aggressively anti-English sentiment during the depression of the 1920s and 1930—what Idris Davies described as the "Gwalia Deserta"¹⁶—or the chronically depleted Welsh nation of the Thatcherite 1980s. However, it is dangerous to arbitrarily apply cultural significations across the dynamic continuum of history. Rugby was anything but a focal point for Welsh hostility and resistance during the two and a half decades leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. This was an era during which modern Wales experienced its productive peak in terms of economic, political, cultural, and ultimately national output.

Between 1890-1914 the Welsh were looking to create a nation which would contrast with and yet compliment England. Within the parameters of a Great Britain, Wales was intent on developing a separate identity out of historical

12. Gareth Williams, (From Grand Slam to Great Slump: Economy, Society and Rugby Football in Wales During the Depression," *Welsh History Review* IX (June 1983): 340.

13. Geroge Ewart Evans, *The Strength of the Hills: An Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 59.

14. Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 237.

15. Evans, *Strength of the Hills*, 59.

16. Idris Davies, *Gwalia Deserta* (London: Dent, 1938).

difference, rather than one based upon hostile resistance. The Welsh industrial bourgeoisie promoted an indigenous Welsh culture by connecting the distinctive aspects of contemporary Wales (particularly rugby), to a distant but acknowledged Celtic past. The Celts were not the first inhabitants of Wales, but they were widely regarded as being racially representative of the nation. By perpetrating this interpretive sleight of hand the professional classes created historic and traditional features to the Imperial nation.

In spite of the English origins of rugby and the presence of large numbers of gifted exponents of the game emanating from England, the Welsh populace—somewhat conveniently—lost their short term memories as rugby rapidly became Welsh. The industrial middle class immersed the game into the discourse of Cambrian celticism, which explained national progress in terms of the supremacy of the celtic race. As Gareth Williams pointed out:

Such ideas were not merely the stock-in-trade of contemporary racial theorists. They had a special resonance in an Edwardian Wales of political self-confidence, cultural creativity, national self-awareness and material prosperity.¹⁷

Through linking contemporary progress with celtic virtuosity, there emerged an immediate line of descent to a successful and celebrated past.

Various media sources were responsible for producing and disseminating the literary bread of the Welsh indigenous articulatory link, “it was the ‘Celtic’ characteristics, which were lauded by magazines and newspapers.”¹⁸ A clear example can be gleaned from the liberal *South Wales Daily News*, which provided interesting explanations for the Welsh victory against the undefeated New Zealand All-Blacks in 1905:

The men that represented Wales embodied the best manhood of the race . . . We all know the racial qualities that made Wales supreme on Saturday: but how have they been obtained? Wales has a more restricted choice of champions than the other nations. She has had fewer opportunities in the exercise of some of the mental and physical powers than the nations with ancient universities and wider fields of training. It is amazing that in the greatest of all popular pastimes she should be equally distinguished. . . . [T]he great quality of defence and attack in the Welsh race is to be traced to the training of the early period when powerful enemies drove them to their mountain fortresses. There was developed then those traits of character that find fruition today. “Gallant little Wales” has produced sons strong of determination, invincible stamina, resolute, mentally keen, physically sound.¹⁹

Without specifically mentioning the Celtic connection, the commentary explicitly adopts the hypothesis as explanation for the Welsh victory. The more conservative national daily newspaper, the *Western Mail*, was equally forthright in its explanatory zeal of the victory against New Zealand:

The prestige of Wales has been enhanced tremendously as a nation possessed of those splendid [Celtic] qualities-pluck and determination.²⁰

17. Williams, *Popular Culture to Public Cliche*, 130.

18. Smith, *People's Theatre*, 32.

19. *South Wales Daily News* (Cardiff), 18 December 1905.

20. *Western Mail* (Cardiff), 18 December 1905.

The Welsh daily press was by no means the sole patron of the ideology of residual celtic supremacy. The 1906 edition of George Borrow's popular travelogue *Wild Wales* (first published in 1856) included a much needed explanatory foreword written by Theodore Watts-Dunton. This revision of the Cambrian condition became a virtual necessity; the Wales of 1906 was far different from that which Borrow's original prose had described half a century earlier. Rugby was one prominent aspect of early twentieth century Wales barely visible in the 1850s. In order to address what by 1906 had become a glaring oversight, Watts-Dunton related Borrow's preoccupation with the Cymric athlete to the emergence and success of Welsh rugby:

I can but regret that he did not live to see the great recrudescence of Cymric energy which we are seeing at the present moment in "Cymru, gwlad y gan,"—an energy which is declaring itself more vigorously everyday, and not merely in pure intellectual matters, not merely in political matters, but equally in those same athletics which to Borrow were so important.²¹

Celtic athletic prowess became viewed by the Welsh populace as a major contributory factor in Welsh rugby's successes against those of Anglo-Saxon descent. Within this context, the Welsh construed the rugby field as a site of struggle upon which a battle of races—and hence nationalities—was symbolically re-enacted.

Even critics of the Celtic quality of modern Welsh life found the recent manifestations of celticism impossible to ignore. O. M. Edwards, the Oxford scholar and popular historian of Wales was concerned with the lack of unity caused by the demise of the Iberian within the Principality. This he attributed to the longterm intrusion of aliens, beginning with the Celts, and ending with the later day Anglo-Saxon (English) incursion associated with industrialization.** The diluting of the Iberian race, which Edwards saw as representing the original Welsh, caused the identity crisis currently affecting Wales:

The Iberian was short and weak; dark of countenance, black hair and eyes; narrow forehead and long head . . . there was a strange life within him; the weakness of his body made his soul active. Britain was once his. He came over the shores of the Mediterranean from Egypt and Arabia. He is the Silure of Gwent and Morgannwg and may be seen on Saturday nights at Cardiff and Newport, is the adjudicator of the Eisteddfod, and not unfrequently met at Jesus College, Oxford. . . . The spirit of the Iberian still battles with the spirit of the Celt (who came after) . . . Every religious movement is a victory of the Iberian. The discovery of coal and of precious metal is due to the Celt . . . In every new song is heard the voice of the Iberian; in the history of the chase or of football you hear that of the Celt.²³

Despite the racial absurdities and inaccuracies of O. M. Edwards Cambrian Darwinism his thoughts reached many. Welsh success in every sphere, including rugby, became articulated into the persuasive discourse of Celtic racial

21. Theodore Watts-Dunton, "Introduction: Talk about 'Wild Wales';" in G. Borrow, *Wild Wales: The Peoples, Language and Scenery*, (London: Dent, 1906), xxii.

22. O. M. Edwards, *Wales* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1901).

23. O. M. Edwards, *Wales* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1901) quoted in David Smith and Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise: Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union 1881-1981* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), 67.

superiority. In doing so the Celtic pedigree of Wales and rugby was confirmed to the popular imagination. With the benefit of hindsight it is all too easy to dismiss the widespread impact exerted by “the full range of Darwinian organic biology, as related to the comparative qualities of different races.”²⁴ Yet at the turn of the century, when such notions were in the ascendant, the widespread impact of this ludicrous supremacist ideology should not be overlooked.

The widespread rereading of George Owen’s sixteenth century *Description of Pembrokeshire*, published in standard form in 1892, also had a conspicuous influence upon the historical signification of rugby.²⁵ Owen’s account of south west Wales detailed a version of Tudor folk-football known as *cnappan*. The inherent similarities between rugby and *cnappan*, and indeed any other of the localized versions of folk football, provided many commentators with a direct line of historic Welsh descent for rugby. This Tudor pedigree was apparently vindicated by *cnappan*’s longevity, as the game endured into nineteenth century Wales. Indeed:

as late as 1884 the town of Neath became a Shrove Tuesday Pamplona as “all shutters are put up and the principal thoroughfare is given over to the players.”²⁶

Despite the fact that the origins of the rugby code lay with the popular, if ambiguously defined phenomenon of folk football, the late Victorian Welsh linked their contemporary preoccupation with rugby to their parochial rendition of folk football. As engaging as this genealogical fantasizing may have been, it was purely fictitious. However the connection made between rugby and *cnappan* did contribute to the invention of an instant historic Welsh pedigree for the modern game.

The representation of rugby as a historic and traditional aspect of Welsh culture became a common feature of published material within the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras. There were however more demonstrative expressions of this process of historical ascription, with rugby being thrust into literal circuses of the new Wales whose objectives were to substantiate the Imperial nation by presenting it with a visible and seemingly established Welsh ancestry. These appeals to “ceremonial and monumentality”²⁷ were veiled in differing guises; rugby becoming attached to the fresh-faced inventions of modern Welsh culture, such as the emergent national institutions, symbols, emblems, anthem and pageantry. These associations helped to create the historic department deemed necessary of an aspiring modern historic nation in the late nineteenth century.

The self-realization of Wales’ importance to the British and hence world economic structure, in amalgamation with the trend for assessing national progress through the establishing of representational symbols and institutions,

24. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 123.

25. For a recent publication of Owen’s travelogue see Brian Howells, ed., *Elizabethan Pembrokeshire: The Evidence of George Owen* (Pembrokeshire Record Society Series 2, 1973).

26. Smith and Williams, *Fields of Praise*, 19.

27. Prys Morgan, “Keeping the Legends Alive,” in *Wales: The Imagined Nation*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986). 38.

initiated “the institutionizing of Welsh national aspirations in a scatter of educational and cultural foundations.”²⁸ This proved indicative of the Welsh bourgeoisie’s need to assert a historically founded nation status within the current definition of the concept, thus ascribing a historic and homogenizing identity to an (a)historic and divergent populace.

Such national aspirations were by no means the preserve of late nineteenth century Welsh patriots, the archetypical Welsh *eisteddfod* having been revived as an annual institution at Llangollen in 1858.²⁹ However, the patriotic enthusiasm of the 1890s laid the foundations for a proliferation of Welsh institutions; the concrete manifestations of nationhood and more literal circuses of articulation. Included within these creations was the University of Wales (chartered in 1893), and the National Library and Museum (both chartered in 1907). While Morgan and Thomas were specifically referring to the University of Wales, their assertion that the aim of these national institutions was “to give Welshmen all the advantages which Englishmen and Scotsmen then had to get on in the world,”³⁰ reflects a further example of the Welsh aspiring for parity with their more established neighbors.

In conjunction with a tangible national institutional structure the Welsh also promoted symbolic nationally representational signs-symbols, emblems, and an anthem-which proclaimed an independent and national formation. These “badges of membership”³¹ to the Welsh nation were brought to the fore in the late Victorian era. They were indicative of a nation attempting to demonstrate the progress it had made in asserting an autonomous historic identity. An identity out of difference to its British counterparts was hopefully going to aid the unification of the Welsh agglomeration of cultures and experience.

Rugby entered into the institutionalizing of Welsh life remarkably early with the founding of the Welsh Football Union in 1881. In the proceeding 20 years the game became intertwined with the proliferating allegorical expressions of Welsh nationhood. Cultural emblems such as the leek; the goat; the three-plumed motif of the Prince of Wales; the dragon of Cadwaladr; and latterly the daffodil, were all publicized as having symbolic meaning for Wales. This system of representations was subsequently transposed to the rugby arena. The accompanying cartoon (see figure 1) from the *Daily News* of December 18th 1905 illustrates how rugby was related to Welsh cultural symbols by media agencies from outside the Principality. The triumphant Welsh rugby XV is characterized by a goat which is ramming the defeated New Zealanders, in the persona of Prime Minister Seddon, who according to the attendant commentary would have greatly prized the scalp of the Welsh goat. Evidently the English

28. Gareth Williams, “Community, Class and Rugby in Wales 1880-1914,” *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labor History* 50 (Spring 1985): 10.

29. D. Gareth Evans, *A History of Wales 1815-4906* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), 227.

30. Prys Morgan and David Thomas, *Wales: The Shaping of a Nation* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1984), 217.

31. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 11.

national press had little doubt to rugby's place within Edwardian Wales, and the Welsh game was covered accordingly.

Around the turn of the century, the popularity and symbolic national meaning of the song *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau* ("Land Of My Fathers") became apparent.³² At the celebrated international match against New Zealand in 1905 the Welsh team chose to sing it in response to the *Haka*—a Maori war dance and symbol of New Zealand nationalism. Importantly, the first notable public airing of what was to become the Welsh anthem was in a rugby context; emphasizing the process whereby two strands of a burgeoning nationality were fused, positively affecting the common acceptance of both. Wales was rapidly acquiring a national anthem, national institutions, national emblems, national symbols, and a national game, all of which aided the consummation of the new nation.

The National Pageant of Wales held at Cardiff castle in 1909 was a self-conscious celebration of Welsh history. It essentially recited how the Edwardian Welsh perceived their forefathers impact upon a predominantly Anglocentric understanding of British history. In episode after episode the great events of Welsh history were acted out, culminating in the crowning of a Welsh king—the ultimate Cambrian climax—which followed Henry Tudor's victory at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485.

During the high noon of Edwardian Wales, the National Pageant was a symbolic, if narcissistic, demonstration of past Welsh triumphs. Enscathed within Welsh rugby's first golden age (1900-1911³³) the heroic exploits of the Principalities rugby brethren were deemed worthy of inclusion, if indirectly, within the Pageantry. Rather than reconstructing one of their many football triumphs, numerous Welsh internationals were transposed to the site of a previous Welsh struggle against some marauding alien foe. Contemporary defenders of the Welsh nation, such as Gwyn Nicholls; Rowe Harding; R. T. Gabe; Charlie Arthur; Alex Bland; Bobby Brice; Billy Douglas; Reggie Gibbs; Billy Spiller; and Johnnie Williams, assumed the symbolic role of a local tribal group storming a Norman held castle, just as they would have attacked an opponents try line.

By the Edwardian period it was clear rugby was worthy of some sort of representation in the inventory of Welsh history, as compiled by the contemporary definers of Welsh society. The Welsh history of the imagination had appropriated rugby and retroactively extended its Welsh lineage from the contemporary, back through the Middle Ages, and even into the realms of Celtic pre-history. It is little wonder that Watts-Dunton believed George Borrow would have been rightly proud of the exploits of the Welsh XV, which "being historic must be mentioned in connection with his own Welsh pages."³⁴

32. The song was written in 1856 by two brothers from Pontypridd, Evan and James James. Toward the end of the Victorian era the song grew in popularity as the modern Welsh nation began to develop a sense of collective national identity.

33. Gareth Williams, "How Amateur Was My Valley," *British Journal of Sports History* 2 (December 1985): 248-269.

34. Watts-Dunton, *Introduction*, xxii.



◀.Mr. Seddon's last words to the New Zealand team were :—" Beat Wales ; never mind the rest ; beat Wales."

Figure 1. The Welsh goat ramming New Zealand Prime Minister Seddon.
From the *Daily News*, (London) December 18th 1905.

British Imperial?

The Wales being constructed at this time was no less pro-British, in an Imperial sense, as it was aggressively Welsh. It may appear somewhat of an anomaly for a sense of Cymric nationalism to be simultaneously Welsh and British, however, it is only the egocentric English who seem to associate British exclusively with being English. Undoubtedly the Welsh have historically associated themselves with a British identity; they being the last remnants of the original Brythons and arguably the first Britons.³⁵ As Gwyn A. Williams has commented, “Welsh identity has constantly renewed itself by anchoring itself in variant forms of Britishness,” in doing so, the marginal Welsh have done little more than live within “the interstices of other peoples history.”³⁶ Nowhere is the duality of the Welsh condition better exemplified, than in Wales’ placement in the British Imperial structure of the late nineteenth century.

It was in fact a Welshman-John Dee-who invented the expression British Empire, as a means of creating a niche for the ambiguous sixteenth century Welsh condition. In the early nineteenth century, the previously disregarded Welsh mineral deposits came to the attention of English capitalist predators. Consequently, and for the first time, the British Imperial economy acquired a meaningful Atlantic armature. In order to exploit Welsh natural resources to the full, the English needed to provide Wales with some sort of cohesive British identity. In short, Wales needed to be connected to the triumphs of British colonial expansion so that a growing workforce would willingly contribute, in terms of labor and primary resources, to the consolidation and expansion of the Imperial economy.

The desired Welsh Imperialism was representative of:

a more explicit state environment in which a sense of British identity associated with the idea of Empire was diffused through new state-controlled agencies of ideological control.³⁷

A British Imperial ideology increasingly penetrated the faltering Nonconformist Welsh condition throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This can be evidenced from the sales returns of Wilkins-the workman’s book-sellers, in Merthyr. In 1850 this outlet was selling 189 copies of the *News of the World* to every 12 copies of the Chartist *Northern Star*. This figure is particularly significant when one considers the *News of the World* was promoting a “British jingoism proper to an imperial working class, a music-hall in print.”³⁸

It would be erroneous to think that the English power elite merely imposed an Imperial British consciousness upon the Welsh population. Rather, Imperial British capitalism had developed to such a level of hegemonic influence that the Welsh actively sought a position of prominence within the Imperial framework.

35. Prys Morgan, “Keeping the Legends Alive,” in *Wales: The Imagined Nation*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press), 17-42.

36. Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?*, 194.

37. Glyn Williams, “Introduction” in *Crisis of Economy and Ideology: Essays on Welsh Society, 1840-1980*, ed. Glyn Williams (London: S.S.R.C./B.S.A. Sociology of Wales Study Group, 1983), 8.

38. Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales*, 202.

The industrial middle class clearly wished to attach the diverse advances made by the Welsh nation to the glorious and all-conquering British Empire. Welsh developments and successes were thrust onto the world stage, and their profile was heightened by articulating them as constituent components of the British Empire. As David Smith stressed:

The new Wales was, in important respects, profoundly pro-imperialist—the Empire of nations was, after all, its own highest justification for within the imperial framework could be made the Welsh contribution.³⁹

The emergence of Wales into the Imperial economy meant a rearticulation of Welsh identity. Wales became a vibrant, if powerless, junior partner in the British Empire; an Imperial Wales. Rugby was able to bridge the gap between being an emergent and a fully established Welsh popular practice by entering into the British discourse which subsumed the new nation. Moreover, the spiralling popularity of rugby was such that, as a high profile aspect of Welsh life, successes associated with the game actually helped to constitute and consolidate the Imperial dialogue.

Smith and Williams cogently expressed the British aspect of Welsh rugby:

The W.F.U. itself has to be understood at this time within the context of a Wales at once confident of the future within the British Empire as one of the jewels in that crown and, though fiercely loyal, in charge of its own proud destiny. When they were not acting within the strict boundaries of Welsh football, the W.F.U., like most of the Welsh people, chose to emphasize their Britishness.⁴⁰

There are numerous examples of rugby being connected to the contemporary British discourse. The rejection of the leek and the subsequent adoption of the Prince of Wales' three plumed insignia as the motif worn on Welsh international jerseys, along with his motto *Ich Dien* (I Serve), represented a move by the Welsh rugby administration to demonstratively underline its loyalty to and place within the British Imperial state formation.

The pro-Imperialist sentiment of the W.F.U. was further demonstrated on the occasion of the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. Rugby grounds were closed throughout Wales for a two week period until after the state funeral, as a mark of respect for their Queen, and as an expression of Welsh allegiance to British sovereignty. Far from dismissing any notion of Welsh individuality, these expressions of loyalty signified a contemporaneous need to express Welsh nationalism within a distinctly British context.

Cambrian isolationism-in sport as well as politics-was viewed by the dominant Welsh industrial middle class as a redundant avenue for a nation wishing to develop within British capitalism. Thus the Welsh national XV was articulated as the sporting equivalent of army regiments from the Principality, such as the Welsh Guards, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and the Royal Regiment of Wales. These military units were nationally associated elements of the British

39. David Smith, "Wales Through the Looking Glass," in *A People and a Proletariat*, ed. David Smith (London: Pluto Press, 1980). 225-226.

40. Smith and Williams, *Fields of Praise*, 121.

army, likewise rugby became a prominent Welsh torchbearer within a wider British context. The national rugby side vied in competition with its, supposedly equal, national adversaries in the British Home International Championship, which Wales first won in 1893. On a more cohesive level, Welsh players who were selected as members of British touring team to the far reaches of the Empire reinforced the British identity of the Welsh. Prominent tourists such as Gwyn Nicholls (1899, Australia) and R. T. Gabe and P. F. Bush (1904, Australia and New Zealand) truly were British Lions, and their exploits as such were followed with great interest throughout the Principality.

The Welsh Rugby Union was also prepared to support the more combative national representatives abroad. The £250 donation in 1899 to the dependents of South Walian volunteers to the Boer War, and the considerable gift in 1900 to the Welsh hospital in South Africa bore witness to the Welsh commitment to this British conflict.⁴¹ Such a feeling of Britishness also permeated across the Welsh social spectrum:

That January (1900) in Swansea the crowd of almost 40,000 who had come to see Scotland sang ‘God Saved the Queen’ with some feeling--the immediate news of the war had been of General Warren’s bloody retreat from Spion Kop.⁴²

It seems clear that the majority of the Welsh populace were concerned yet wholehearted supporters of their involvement in this British conflict, demonstrating a Welsh vindication of a British identity and of Britain.

Rugby played a major role in reinforcing the British Imperial identity of Wales, nowhere is this better exemplified than in the media coverage surrounding the international match played against the All-Blacks in 1905. The Imperial Welsh nation, centered on Cardiff—the other carbon jewel in the crown of the British Empire—was a product of both Welsh nationalism and British Imperialism. This dual identity was relocated to the rugby field, as the national XV became the proud representatives, and sometime saviours of “the honour of Great Britain.”⁴³ This is further illustrated by the following quote from the *South Wales Daily News* pertaining to the 1905 defeat of New Zealand, “Wales has won! What the other nations of these islands have failed to do has been achieved by those sons of the Ancient Britons.”⁴⁴ On the same day, the *Western Mail* stressed the Imperial importance of the victory by stating that in beating the undefeated All-Blacks, Wales “came to the rescue of the Empire.”⁴⁵ More graphically portrayed, the accompanying cartoon from the *Western Mail* displays the “Welsh Game” defending the “Home Country” (presumably Britain) from the marauding “New Zealand Game” (see figure 2).

It is evident that rugby played a considerable role in nurturing the Imperial Welsh identity. The widespread pro-royalist feeling engendered was soon exploited by Lloyd George’s shrewd and politically motivated maneuvers. The

41. Smith, *Wales Through the Looking Glass*, 227.

42. Smith and Williams, *Fields of Praise*, 121-122.

43. Watts-Dunton, *Introduction*, xxii.

44. *South Wales Daily News* (Cardiff), 18 December 1905.

45. *Western Mail* (Cardiff), 18 December 1905.

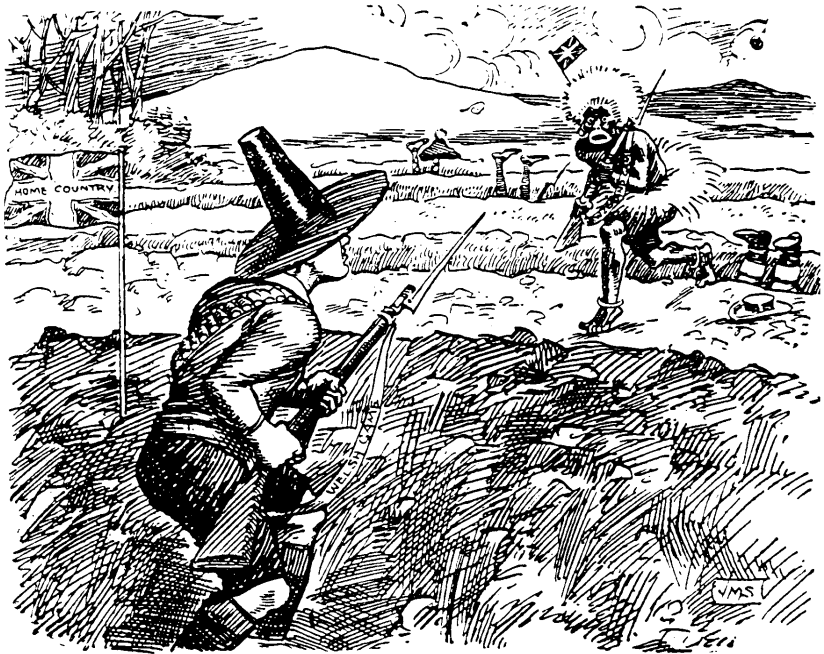


Figure 2. Last ditch Welsh defence against the all-conquering New Zealanders. From the *Western Mail*, (Cardiff) December 16th 1905.

result was his invention of the Welsh pageantry and ceremonial surrounding the investiture of the Prince of Wales, which was initially enacted in 1911. Welsh rugby must take at least partial responsibility for creating the conjecture in which such an act of royalist homage and acclamation was so enthusiastically embraced by the Welsh populace.

Endnotes on Reconstructing Welsh Rugby 1890-1914

Within less than three decades rugby experienced a relatively smooth transition from being an emergent, if somewhat alien pastime, to becoming a traditional dominant popular practice “stitched into the pattern of Welsh life forever.”⁴⁶ The Welsh industrial middle class had successfully piloted the re-articulation of rugby and, as Gareth Williams pointed out, “rugby football, along with coal, hymns and Lloyd George, signalled the full-blown arrival of Wales into the modern world.”⁴⁷

By aligning the game with the multifarious constituents of Imperial Wales an illusionary historical lineage was manufactured for both the new Welsh nation, and its new national pastime. The manner and events surrounding the pyrrhic Welsh rugby triumph in 1905 provided a high profile platform for the advertisement of the Imperial nation’s numerous achievements, and the confirmation of

46. Smith and Williams, *Fields of Praise*, 172.

47. Gareth Williams, *Grand Slam*, 339.

its popular acceptance. In effect the rebirth of Wales—heralded by the ascent of the Imperial nation—was “signed” by Lloyd George’s appointment to the Liberal cabinet, “sealed” by Edward VI’s granting of city status to Cardiff, and “delivered” by Gwyn Nicholls and company.⁴⁸

By the eve of the Great War rugby *was* Welsh. Thomas Jones, the “unofficial Prime Minister of Wales,”⁴⁹ spoke for the majority of the industrial Welsh populace in affirming the connections that had been cemented between Wales and rugby by 1914:

In the sense that nationality is a community of memories so is Rugby Football the national game. The names of the giants are on the lips of the people; there are the traditions in Rugby that will rouse a crusading fire; there is merit of past achievements that sustains as nations are upheld by victories.⁵⁰

The considerable popularity of rugby meant it was in a unique position to marry the diverse interests of a divergent Welsh social formation, into a superficially homogeneous nationalist ideology.

Rugby was fully immersed into the fragmented bourgeois discourse which was to unearth the Imperial nation. In doing so the game became aligned with the diverse strands of contemporary Welsh consciousness, including its Welsh and British aspects. This contextually specific bourgeois hybrid of Welsh cultural nationalism was preoccupied with developing a distinct Welsh nation within the confines of a predatory British Imperial structure. As David Smith noted, the Welsh rejoiced in their dual identity:

They were as profoundly pro-British in their rugby guise as they had been pro-Imperialist during the Boer War. Neither of these public sentiments was contradicted by the emphasis on Welshness, for it was, in those heady days, seen as the passport to complete equality within the British Empire.⁵¹

Rugby was ascribed both Welsh and British personas as part of the successful rearticulation of Welsh popular existence by the empowered industrial middle class.

Connections made between rugby and the diverse strands of contemporary Welsh consciousness played a major part in redefining the popular image and understanding of Wales. Rugby proved to be the most conspicuous terrain upon which the transformations of Wales and Welsh experience were worked. Consequently, the game played a vital role in the realization and popular acceptance of Imperial Wales, a constitutive capacity which in turn established rugby’s distinctly Welsh identity.

48. *Ibid.*, 338.

49. Smith, *Wales Through the Looking Glass*, 228.

50. Thomas Jones, *Welsh Outlook* 2 (February 1914), quoted in David Smith, *Wales Through the Looking Glass*, 228.

51. David Smith, *People’s Theatre*, 320.