

DINE, PHILIP. *French Rugby Football: A Cultural History*. Berg, U.K.: Oxford International Publishers Ltd., 2001. Pp. 229. No illustrations, no bibliography. \$19.50.

It was the early 1980s and I had just finished filming a piece with Jean-Pierre Rives to preview the Five Nations Championship for ITV. He politely declined dinner but agreed to join us later at Chez Castell, the famous old Paris nightclub in St. Germain that the Parisian rugby set used as a clubhouse. There, he apologised for being late but explained he had been summoned to dine with President Mitterand. Who else was there? "Nobody, it was private," he replied with a slightly embarrassed smile.

It was confirmation that Rives had become a superstar whose circle of admirers reached far beyond the normal rugby circles but it was also further evidence of something I had been aware of ever since I first played against France in 1967. Rugby has enormous clout on the other side of the channel. When we (Wales) won the Grand Slam in Paris in 1971 President Pompidou made the speech at the banquet, high-ranking ministers abound at rugby occasions and a number of prominent rugby men were elected as mayors in last year's local elections.

Although its heartland is confined to an area in the southwest which covers no more than one third of the country it rivals soccer as the national sport and the great, the good and the glamorous all want a part of it. A bit like Wales but with a rather more powerful cast!

Now, thanks to Philip Dine's fascinating study of the cultural history of French rugby, the bigger picture comes into focus. The author is an unashamed Francophile from Devon who also has a passion for rugby. Having learned French at his grandfather's knee, he appears to have read every book in the language that relates to rugby and has lovingly distilled the cultural essence from them to put his thesis together.

Rugby was introduced to France at the end of the nineteenth century by British expats and was soon taken up by the universities and Anglophiles in Paris, but it was the ways it became a popular rather than elite sport and that it flourished in the cities, towns and especially villages of the rural southwest rather than the industrial cities of the north and east, as did most sports imports, that forms one of the main strands of this book.

Because the game is characterised by a ban on passing the ball forward and being in front of the ball when it is played there is a front-line which is peculiar to rugby. Sebastien Darbon expands upon this notion of territory to be defended, which is heightened by the violence that results from the physical contact of the sport. It struck a special chord with the French, especially in "The Midi," where ancient rivalries, going back to the Cathars and the Huguenots and involving the Basques and the Catalans in the far southwest, were still festering not far from the surface.

The story of how Rugby Union was adopted by the collaborationist Vichy regime in the Second World War (in 1941 Marshall Petain personally signed the decree to close down Rugby League which was becoming worryingly popular) yet survived the post-war purge of everything associated with Vichy to become a vital symbol of President de Gaulle's

"La France qui gagne" ("successful France") in the post-war boom period is riveting. So too is the constant battle between the French protagonists of "rugby-panache" or "rugby champagne" as opposed to "rugby dur" (the hard game) or at its worst "le rugby de muerte" when the game was so violent players were actually killed.

French domestic rugby is still more violent than in any other major nation, but Dine obviously believes this is exaggerated. He accuses the press on both sides of the channel of "demonising" the Beziers second-row, Alain Esteve, who became the centerpiece of the French pack in the early seventies, for example. From bitter experience I can assure him Esteve's nicknames, "the beast" and "the assassin," were hard earned.

In 1971 my club, London Welsh, was nominated to play Beziers, the unbeaten French champions, in an exhibition game to celebrate the opening of a new stadium in St. Denis, Paris. Some exhibition! Esteve led the assault as they systematically attempted to beat us up. When I protested to the referee in my best French he claimed he was helpless because it was a "celebration" and Esteve, grinning demonically, cuffed me around the head in front of him. I can only tell the tale because we won 12-8 with a truly beautiful try, clinching the victory.

Ask anybody who has played against France at the top level and they will confirm that an evil, garlic-chewing, rough house, pack of forwards is far more important to their success than a set of pretty, piano-playing backs.

I have a cartoon on my study wall by the brilliant Roger Blachon (now president of Racing Club, that bastion of "rugby-panache") commemorating the Grand Chelem of 1977. Gerard Cholley, the boxer turned prop, is depicted as a battering ram, Rives is there with his shovel digging out the ball and Michel Palmie is a bandaged monster about to demolish the cowering English while Jean-Pierre Romeu, the kicker, is having a quiet smoke whilst a lackey polishes his boots. "Rugby pratique" perhaps?

That said the attacking flair of French rugby at its best, epitomised by their second-half performance against The All Blacks in the semi-final of the 1999 World Cup, is something few other countries can equal.

The other constant source of friction with the rest of the rugby world for almost a century was shamateurism or "chestnut" amateurism as the French like to call it. They simply did not understand this essentially English middle class concept and so they ignored it and when the French were banned from the Five Nations Championship in the thirties nobody was quite sure whether violence or professionalism was the greater sin.

I was offered a villa in the Pyrenees by the mayor of a small town which boasted a second division club if I would travel to France on Sundays to play for them, and I have to confess I would have been there like a shot if they could have got me back in time for work on a Monday. Sadly, it proved impossible, but a fair number of British players managed two games a weekend in the sixties and seventies.

Dine chronicles everything superbly until 1995 when the game went professional, but is then a little disappointing, perhaps because there is not enough French writing on the new era, and the final section of the book "Towards a Global Game" is the least convincing. Ironically, real professionalism has caught out the French. They have continued much as before, clubs and players have failed to adapt to the new world and, until this season, had fallen badly behind in fitness and coaching.

I would also quarrel with Dine's conclusion about the role played by the French and Dr. Danie Craven in ending sporting apartheid in South Africa—most of those involved in the struggle still believe it was the boycott which forced Craven into talks with the African National Congress—and his assessment of Rives. To put the record straight—yes, he was a good friend of Antoine Blondin ("I am a drinker who writes not a writer who drinks") but never a boozing companion. He is the only Frenchman I know who does not like wine and has always been virtually tee-total. His love affair with sculpture is real, but he is anything but a "semi-recluse." Not only is he the perfect host at his own restaurants in Paris, but he is a leading light with the French Barbarians, a very influential group. I believe he is biding his time and would bet on him becoming president of the French Rugby Federation when he is ready.

Those quibbles apart, it is a must for rugby historians. Some of the folklore from the early years is wonderful. Ignore the notes (they are a terrible distraction and completely unnecessary except to credit sources), and it is a compelling read.

—JOHN TAYLOR
London