

William Webb Ellis and the Origins of Rugby Football: The Life and Death of a Victorian Myth

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According to the “official” version of the origin of Rugby football as emblazoned on a plaque at Rugby School, in 1823 William Webb Ellis “first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive features of the Rugby game.” This attractively simple version was based on heresay and resulted from some shoddy historical reasoning of an old rugbeian committee of inquirers. Yet, it was a most popular and useful myth in late Victorian England when rugby enthusiasts feared losing their elite amateur game to professionalism and the masses. Moreover, the myth served the purposes of rugby traditionalists who abhorred the new passing game which seemed to be swamping rugby’s “distinctive feature” — running with the ball. A larger audience accepted the myth because it accorded with the Carlylean tendency to view history in terms of outstanding individuals rather than as a complex evolutionary process.

Unfortunately the myth has taken on the aura of fact, and to the present day it mars innumerable histories of American football, as well as the rugby game. Finally exposed by historians such as Walvin and Dunning, the myth is dead and should be buried. It reveals much about those late nineteenth century sportsmen who artfully and successfully defended rugby football as an amateur, schoolboy game, but it sheds little light on the origins of the game.



Bennett’s “Bunch” never quits attending NASSH meetings.