

SPORT IN THE GEOPOLITICAL ARENA

A Study in Cultural Diffusion: British Rugby in Victorian New Zealand

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Variations of rugby had been played in a number of the leading English Public Schools well before 1870. Rugby union officially began though, in 1871, when the British Rugby Football Union was established. One year earlier Charles Munro had returned to New Zealand after an English Public School education at Christ's College, Finchley. He persuaded the Nelson Football Club, which had previously played a combination of Association (soccer) and Victorian (Aussie) rules to adopt the rugby style of play. By 1875 there was enough rugby being played within New Zealand for an Auckland team to undertake an arduous tour of the colony. By 1905 the New Zealand players were virtually world champions at the end of their European tour. This paper, drawing on a Dunning and Sheard paradigm from *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (1979) explores the roots of nineteenth century New Zealand rugby. The New Zealand evolution of rugby reflected to a remarkable extent the folk game to modern sport model that occurred in Britain.

In accordance with the ground swell of the rational recreation movement team games were perceived as legitimate sports and New Zealand initially embraces this character building concept of "Muscular Christianity"*. Rugby was an ideal vehicle for cultural transmission and New Zealand school rugby mirrored the importance attached to the sport at English Public Schools. However, very quickly a traditional British value system that

extolled the character building aspects of rugby came to have a different meaning at the other end of the world and especially in the community of the agrarian township. Rugby became the ethical exemplar of New Zealand social and spiritual life. Rugby was appropriate for, and complementary to, a New Zealand community forged by a democratic press of “mateship” and familiarity. “Mateship” merits detailed future examination (see R.A. Barrett’s *Culture and Conduct*) and rugby becoming a national ethos by 1905 may not be the result of the game’s social characteristics as a form of readily understood indigenous popular culture. Richardson, “Rugby, Race and Empire: The 1905 All Blacks Tour” (1983) documents the very “Englishness” of early New Zealand rugby protagonists. Phillips’, “Rugby, War and the Mythology of the New Zealand Male” (1984) shows that the British press in their glowing reports on the successful New Zealand rugby tourists shaped and moulded an image of champion athletes that was readily embraced by a colony short on historical heroes, at the fringe of the British Empire. Ongoing studies are called for and it is significant that Richardson and Phillips, both New Zealand historians, are attached to the two New Zealand universities which have established special centres for “New Zealand Studies”.