



The Invention of the Welsh Rugby Tradition—1890–1914

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In the late nineteenth century, rugby is so firmly pasted onto the montage of Welsh cultural expressions—which constitute contemporary Welsh consciousness and identity—it appears incredible to think it has not always assumed a position of cultural importance. However, rugby in Wales has been ascribed the status and importance of a “traditional” form of popular culture, for less than 100 years. Moreover, the elevation of rugby to becoming a “Welsh obsession”, occurred very rapidly at the turn of the century. From being merely another example of an emergent cultural practice, within this rapidly industrializing nation, the “tradition” of Welsh rugby was “invented” at some point during the period, 1890–1914.

The object of this paper is to examine how and why the meaning and identity of rugby in a Welsh context changed so profoundly within this era. In doing so it is necessary to discuss two strands of analysis. First, a culturally focused, conjunctural approach to the understanding of Welsh historical development, will be explicated. This will highlight the pivotal importance of the cultural realm, to

contemporary definitions of Wales and Welshness, thus illustrating the transient nature of Welsh identity. Repeatedly in times of crisis for the national consciousness/identity, the Welsh have turned to “traditional” cultural manifestations, real or imaginary, to assuage their feelings of ambiguity and create a liveable future. As such, Wales is very open to the charge of being both an invented, and at times an imagined nation.

The second section of the paper, will concern itself with an approach to the comprehension of Welsh rugby, focused on it’s positioning on the contested terrain of popular culture. Within the period 1890-1914, the dominant industrial middle classes attempted to insert rugby into the discourse associated with their notion of Welsh cultural nationalism, which effectively constituted their vision of Wales. Through a process of conflict, negotiation, and compromise, with groups of differing power resources, motives, and interests, the “new” interpretive identity of Welsh rugby surfaced. In short, rugby became articulated with, and indeed a “traditional” component of, the middle class invention which was “Imperial” Wales.

Hopefully, a synthesis of these two strands of socio-cultural analysis, will render a more complete explanation for the elevation of rugby to the status and influence of a “traditional” Welsh pastime.