

# THE CURSE OF THE KALAHARI: THE NORTH SYDNEY BEARS AND THE GHOSTS OF 1921-1922

ANDREW MOORE

MACARTHUR INSTITUTE

## I

With the publication of two important books, *Power play* edited by Geoff Lawrence and David Rowe, and Brian Stoddart's *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, it can no longer be said that Australian historians and sociologists are ignoring issues associated with the relationship between sport and capitalism or the social construction of sport.' This article also eschews the antiquarianism that hitherto has passed for the history of rugby league<sup>2</sup> and by examining particular issues associated with the story of the Rugby League Football Club (RLFC) of North Sydney attempts to link class analysis with sport history. A related goal is a preliminary rescuing of significant aspects of working class culture. With their traditional emphasis on institutionalised trade union history and on what has happened to workers in the bosses' time, Australian labour historians, even with their recent commitment to 'social history', have paid scant attention to the proletariat at play.<sup>3</sup>

The article is divided into three major sections. The first outlines the highlights of the North Sydney RLFC's long but frequently unmeritorious career and looks at issues connected with sporting performance that might explain why these highlights have been so few and far between. The second examines the class basis of rugby league. The third surveys the social history of North Sydney from the 1920s to the present and postulates that the downfall of the North Sydney RLFC can be related to three related social forces - the progressive geographical dismantlement of North Sydney, its diminished sense of community identity, and the changing balance of class forces in the district.

## II

The years 1921 and 1922 contained many golden moments for patrons at North Sydney Oval. The local rugby league team was in fine form. With a combination of sparkling attack and vigorous forward play North Sydney swept to two well deserved premierships. They could do no wrong. On 21 May 1921 North Sydney played in the first football match to draw a crowd of more than 40,000 in the Sydney rugby league competition - 44,813 against Eastern Suburbs at the Sydney Cricket Ground. The entire three-quarters line, stylish Herman Peters, sturdy Frank Rule, Cecil Blinkhorn, best remembered for his ferocious 'don't argues' and the fabulous Harold Horder, as well as half-back Duncan Thompson and forward J.C. Ives were chosen for a Kangaroo touring team.<sup>4</sup>

This success has never been repeated. Not until 1943 did a North Sydney team again savour the electric atmosphere of a grand final. On this occasion they were expected to beat their opponents, Newtown. Their backs, however, kicked the ball too much. Their forwards lacked their usual dash. After losing their brilliant lock forward, H. Taylor, to the Second AIF before the match and captain Frank Hyde, later Sydney's most revered football commentator, during it from concussion, Norths were overwhelmed 34-7.<sup>54</sup>

Since then the pickings have been even more meagre. In September 1965 Norths confronted an awesome South Sydney side in a final, just two steps removed from the J.J. Giltinan shield and the victory march around the perimeter of the cricket ground. Under the captaincy of fiery veteran prop, Billy Wilson, the Bears, as they were now known,<sup>6</sup> took the initiative in a series of bitter exchanges. For much of the match it seemed that the Rabbitohs would buckle before the sustained aggression of the giant North Sydney pack. But then, a mere thirteen minutes from the end, Souths full-back, Kevin Longbottom, eluded the defence to score. Souths won 14-9. It took another 17 years (1982) before the Bears even made the semi-finals. They lost again, handsomely to Manly, narrowly to Easts. Since 1982 even the task of reaching the semi-finals has eluded North Sydney though in 1986 an injury-depleted team was not disgraced in losing a playoff for the final five to Balmain.

For a club that was a foundation member of the New South Wales Rugby League in 1908 this is hardly an auspicious record of achievement. Unsurprisingly the Bears have become the butt of widespread popular derision and mirth. Graffiti at North Sydney station has proclaimed: 'Support the Bears in the Year of the Disabled'. The satirist and playwright Alex Buzo, an ardent Norths' supporter, cites the remark 'Norths played badly' as an example of tautological excellence.<sup>7</sup> Journalists in search of quick copy and eye-catching hyperbole have often found inspiration in the Bears' misfortunes: the number of references to the 'Teddy Bears', 'Bad News Bears', 'Easybeat Bears' and the like in the media are legion, bordering on the infinite. North Sydney's frequently disappointed, but nevertheless faithful, supporters have become expert in ignoring these taunts, savouring the various modes of defeat - the total 80 minute collapse, the ten minute concentration lapse, the second half flop or the last minute acquiescence as a wine connoisseur might enjoy a fine red. The principal consolation is not just the warm rays of a winter sun beating across North Sydney Oval or the camaraderie of the eternally damned, but the recognition that on their day the erratic Bears can make any of the other more fancied Sydney football teams look like wimpish school boys.

This article attempts to explain the mystery of the North Sydney RLFC's lack of success. As a starting point it should be recognised that while little has been written on this rather specialised subject, over the years many theories have been canvassed among the club's supporters. These range from the bizarre to the unlikely.

Among the former is the so-called 'Curse of the Kalahari' theory. Broadly this refers to the British invasion and dispossession of land belonging to the Kamaraigal Aboriginal tribe on the northern side of Sydney harbour. The land presently occupied by North Sydney Oval, according to this theory, was an important sacred site for the war-like Kamaraigals. In retaliation for the trespass the North Shore Kooris placed a curse on the oval, the Kalahari - so named by television commentator Rex Mossop in recognition of its desert-like playing surface - and by inference selectively on the local rugby league team which uses it at its home ground. Of course the theory is entirely apocryphal and not a

little racist in some of its genuflections but that has not hindered its propagation. If any academic authority is needed to dismiss it the Australian expert on the Aboriginal tribes of the Sydney area, the anthropologist Dr. F.D. McCarthy, has recently assured the present author that while the Kamaraigals were composed of the strongest and most robust of individuals, possessing -medicine men or sorcerers who were indeed considered by other bands to be the most deadly and expert in the region, the theory that North Sydney Oval is cursed is not to be taken seriously.<sup>8</sup>

A rather more credible explanation also relates to North Sydney Oval. Again it is the playing surface which features. So hard and unyielding is the turf, this theory proceeds, that not only has the injury rate been disproportionately high but also a peculiar form of high tackling style has taken hold in the North Sydney club over the years. Steadily North Sydney players have developed a marked reluctance for making contact with terra firma. Consequently the most effective form of rugby tackling - around the ankles - has been banished from the North Sydney repertoire and as a result Norths' defenders have been readily brushed off by attacking players.<sup>9</sup> This theory has its attractions but in the final resort it too is unsatisfying. For the 1987 season a massive amount of money (\$4.5m) was spent in transforming the oval such that the playing surface is luxuriant and well-padded but there was no corresponding improvement in defensive performance.

If the oval is not to blame, the customary official explanations proffered over the years in numerous presidential reports do not emerge as any more convincing. It is no doubt the case that the North Sydney RLFC has suffered from its fair share of 'bad luck' but of course 'injuries', 'injuries to key players', 'suspensions' and 'crucial refereeing errors'<sup>10</sup> are hardly confined to North Sydney. While these individually may explain why the Bears failed to 'thrive in '85', let alone 'blitz in '86', nearly eighty years of under-achievement surely demand a more structural explanation. Perhaps the most convincing issue surfacing from club reports is the persistent problem of building up and sustaining a viable junior competition to act as a nursery for future first grade talent. Compared to the junior competitions of the more successful clubs like Parramatta, North Sydney's juniors competition has

always been diminutive and, until recently, half-heartedly promoted.<sup>11</sup> The club generally may have failed to exploit local resources and its tendency to engage 'imported coaches' and other 'foreigners' is part of this shortcoming.<sup>12</sup>

The number of variables associated with sporting performance is considerable. But in terms of most of them - players of strength and skill, coaches of commitment and sagacity, administrators of acumen, the North Sydney club has hardly been deficient, or rather no more so than any other club in the Sydney premiership. As Buzo notes Rugby League is a game of some schizophrenia, and the Bears have possessed their fair share of this split personality.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand there have been a cavalcade of hard and tough forwards, but the Bears have also had their fair share of elusive and lightning fast backs. Indeed to reflect briefly upon the galaxy of talent that has at some stage donned the North Sydney red and black guernsey, to think about the likes of Weier, Carlson, 'Crash' Harris, Horder or Blinkhorn, let alone Eric Pitt, George Ambrum, Tim Pickup, Mark Harris, Rex Harrison, Frank Cottle, Merv Hicks, Norm Strong or Ross Warner to name just a few, is to deepen the mystery surrounding the Bears' lack of success.

Nor does the solution to this quandary seem to lie in other variables associated with football. The alleged absence of 'club spirit' or the 'will to win' for instance, is difficult to substantiate. Many footballers reflecting upon their careers often remark upon the especially strong club loyalties they have felt and observed at North Sydney - and through family dynasties like the McKinnons, the McCafferys, the Blinkhorns, the Bennetts, the Sullivans, the McGraths, the Davorens, the Carrolls, the Scullys and the Gormans, there are strong generational links that bind the club together. Nor, apart from its foundation years, has the North Sydney RLFC generally suffered from a shortage of funds. The licensed club established in Merlin Street North Sydney in 1954 and ten years later in more palatial circumstances at Cammeray, has proved to be a large money spinner and a generous donor to the football club.<sup>14</sup> Coupled with significant (albeit recently suspended) funds in recent years from the large finance firm, Avco Enterprises and other business and individual donors like the wealthy bookmaker, Bruce McHugh,<sup>15</sup> the Bears have rarely been short of the necessary capital to purchase quality players.

The task of locating the cause of nearly eighty bleak North Sydney winters should acknowledge but not dwell upon the minutiae of sport and human performance. Arguably the problem lies elsewhere. The dismal premiership tally of the North Sydney RLFC is more likely inextricably linked with the social history of North Sydney between 1922 and 1987. Before this issue can be explored, however, it is important to situate the game of rugby league in its social context, though the relationship between rugby league and the broader social forces, imperatives and institutions of the world outside the football field and an economic universe and material life determined by capitalist property and social relations is far beyond the scope of this short article. Only the broad brush strokes of this relationship can be painted here and that merely entails underscoring points that have already been proffered by Kris Corcoran, Chris Cunneen, Phil Mosely and George Parsons.<sup>16</sup>

Essentially rugby league cannot be divorced from its working-class base. In common with the game's British origins, class conflict drove the movement to break away from their Sydney Rugby Union in 1908 and form the New South Wales Rugby League. The parent game - rugby union - had been introduced in the 1860s and 1870s and to paraphrase a modern advertising jingle it would always be the game the bourgeoisie would play in heaven. Rugby Union was largely propagated through the elite GPS Schools, sons of wealthy graziers returning from rugby playing boarding schools in Britain and Sydney established rugby union clubs in their home districts. The game's administrators were strongly representative of the bourgeoisie. While the game did attract a wide popular following in the 1890s - when, striving to emulate Sydney Grammar, Kings and Shore, the New South Wales Public Schools Amateur Athletics Association introduced the game to state schools after 1888 - rugby union was well on its way to being a ruffian's game played by gentlemen.

Particular class-specific issues underpinned the breakaway movement. The ethos of professionalism and match payments may have been morally reprehensible to the comfortably-situated bourgeois but arguably less so to the working-class sportsman for whom they

were a small supplement to life as a wage slave. Also while injuries affect both classes equally at the point of impact they have disparate economic ramifications. The young businessman working in the family firm may find a leg injury sustained in the weekend's football inconvenient and painful but less financially crippling than a proletarian working in a factory dependent upon wages to pay the rent and support a family. Thus an injured players' fund was introduced in rugby league to provide a social security buffer. Similarly the spectacularly dangerous ruck or maul which the rugby union code employs after a tackle has been effected was dispensed with in favour of a simple play-the-ball.

As a cultural phenomenon Sydney rugby league emerged from a period when the working class was recovering from the defeats of the 1890s and reasserting itself industrially and politically. The game emerged as an expression of the growing maturity of the working-class movement after 1905.<sup>17</sup> A close relationship developed with the structures of working-class organisation in Sydney, with the Labor Party and the trade union movement, and was propagated through the predominantly working-class Catholic school system. Christian Brothers Schools were affiliated with the New South Wales Rugby League in 1918, Marist Brothers in 1926 for as one official league annual asserted, 'It is entirely natural that the Catholic schools, founded on a policy that provides especially for the nurturing of the young, and in which the spirit of democracy has been ever fostered, should be an early and fertile field for the germination and development of the game'. As a result the same source enthused: 'Rugby League is the people's game?' Nor were such issues lost on Communist Party organisers like Tom Brislan and Norm Jeffery. Brislan played hooker for the Longreach rugby league team in the 1930s in order to maintain links with the bush proletariat and to show that communists were not 'bad blokes'.<sup>19</sup> Jeffery made sure he was always well-informed about the fortunes of his local (Balmain) rugby league team so that he could temper his proselytising among the wharfies at his local, the Sir William Wallace hotel, with intelligent commentary on the football.<sup>20</sup> Until relatively recent times the ring of inner city housing which clustered around the port and maritime facilities, from Balmain to Woolloomooloo and in the inner west to Redfern, Newtown and Alexandria was where the

working class congregated. Significantly it was in these suburbs and around working-class rural districts like Lithgow where rugby league thrived and where the local rugby league teams were most successful.<sup>21</sup>

The fortunes enjoyed by the South Sydney club, for instance, are the direct antithesis of North Sydney and illustrate how a strong working-class community, motivated by a fierce sense of local pride, could achieve success on the football field. The South Sydney "Rabbitohs" (even this appellation emphasises their proletarian character for it refers to the cry of street vendors selling rabbits and thus to the centrality of rabbit in workers' diets rather than to any special capacity for speed and agility enjoyed by small, long-eared, burrowing lagomorphs) have been the Sydney competition's most successful rugby league team. Over the years, supporting the 'red and green' in the streets of downtrodden Redfern has assumed the proportion of a secular religion. Between 1923 and 1932 the South Sydney club won the Sydney premiership seven times and were runners-up twice. Their total premiership tally stands at twenty. North Sydney officials have recognised the special advantages of a football team emanating from a community of South Sydney's socio-economic character. As club president Harry McKinnon philosophised in 1973: 'It is a fact that the suburb of Redfern produced more Rugby League players than Vaucluse and the Bronx and Harlem, New York, produces more fighters than Long Island'.<sup>22</sup> More recently as land prices and factory locations have chain marched Sydney's working people to the west and south west, clubs like Parramatta and Canterbury-Bankstown have proved to be dominant. Despite the reservations many in the contemporary Left feel for rugby league<sup>23</sup> and oft-expressed sentiments by merchant bankers of the ilk of Nicholas Whitlam who proclaim 'Rugby League is now the sport of the middle class',<sup>24</sup> not to mention the admonitions of contemporary administrators who frequently refer to improving the game's (proletarian) image,<sup>25</sup> the relationship between rugby league and the working class remains basically intact as does the class divide between constituency of players and supporters of rugby league and rugby union.

Indeed this remains a factor affecting the North Sydney Bears. The North Sydney RLFC occasionally defines its drawing area rather

narrowly in terms of the district surrounding North Sydney Oval - Crows Nest, Cammeray, Northbridge and Neutral Bay, but at other times far more grandiose proportions, extending as far north as Hornsby and Asquith are cited. Clearly Asquith RLFC has provided North Sydney with a valuable pool of players over the years. But between Cammeray and working-class Asquith lie the affluent suburbs along the North Shore railway line. This is the heartland of rugby union in general and the Gordon Rugby Union Club in particular. In this district a strong social stigma remains against rugby league. On this subject no discussion of the importance of class politics towards understanding rugby league would be complete without reference to the infamous Roy Masters 'silvertail' versus 'fibro' controversy of the late 1970s.

As a successful coach of the rugby league team in Sydney's predominantly working-class western suburbs Masters customarily fired up his charges with angry rhetoric against the 'silvertails', principally Manly-Warringah. It is misleading to characterise Masters' 'coaching strategies as a 'former economics school teacher adapt(ing) the Marxist concept of class struggle to Rugby League'.<sup>26</sup> Masters' view of the world was populist, occasionally counter-revolutionary, never Marxist and it would seem from his recent reminiscences, entirely duplicitous.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, apart from creating an agenda whereby an (admittedly limited) critique of class conflict and the inequalities of life under capitalism was briefly taken out of the Marxist ghetto and widely disseminated in the mass media, Masters' rhetoric and the response it engendered underlined both the working-class character of rugby league and the concern this causes some of the game's Phillip Street administrators. One official warned Masters: '...this Silvertail business . . . there are no clubs in the game more privileged than others. We don't want any of this class warfare to continue. People who live in the northern suburbs are no different to your mob in the western suburbs'.<sup>28</sup> These were sentiments that entrepreneurs like J.J. Giltinan in 1908 and Kerry Packer in 1987 would share and indeed rugby league has always embraced capitalists whose involvement with the game was largely determined by profit. The notion that people in the north of Sydney are no different to people in the west also serves as a useful starting point for considering the relevance of

class analysis and social history to the plight of the North Sydney RLFC. It is also important to bear firmly in mind Stoddart's observation that, 'football clubs have been an integral part of the class and status changes within the communities that both form and are formed by them. A sports club is no simple reflection of a community; it is itself caught up in the process of social formation and change. The club is based in class and status considerations produced by its context'.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

On 4 February 1908 the North Sydney RLFC was formed at a meeting in the North Sydney School of Arts. Despite the best efforts of two North Sydney men, the brothers Arnold of Kirribilli, Rugby Union had failed to take a strong hold in North Sydney.<sup>30</sup> At the outset the North Sydney RLFC - with assets totalling seven pounds and six pence, including a donation of one pound ten shillings from the then licensee of the Union Hotel - was also rather shaky. After only fifty-two days one of its two trainers had to be dismissed in order to make ends meet. Nevertheless, the situation began to improve. The club was successful in securing North Sydney Oval as its headquarters at a cost of one shilling per month per player - Dinny Lutge, a leading rugby union player, was persuaded to change codes, elected as the club's first delegate to the New South Wales Rugby League and subsequently became Australia's first Kangaroo captain at the conclusion of the 1908 season. Through its initial patron, Labor MLA, Edward Clark, a familiar connection with the labour movement was established. The Labor Party was not at all out of place in the North Sydney district at this time though propaganda for the 1910 elections against the 'soulless monopoly' exercised by the Sydney Ferries Ltd. suggests that Labor was wisely concerned with local as well as class issues.<sup>31</sup>

Topography and terrain, had slowed the development of the northern side of Sydney harbour but in the boom of the 1880s created by British capital a large number of working-class terraces was built and the original land grants largely broken up.<sup>32</sup> Local industry concentrated around a smelting works at Neutral Bay and the quarrying of ballast from the headlands at Kurraba Point and Balls Head.

In 1891 the majority of the population of the St Leonards electorate clustered around the water at North Sydney and the job opportunities relating to the maritime industry. Other workers were engaged in building new suburbs, providing water supply, gas, and sewerage. Still others were employed by tanners and glue makers, particularly in Willoughby where the necessary water supply existed to accommodate these industries. Importantly, while the area began to attract some of the city's wealthy and professional people who built expansive mansions on one acre allotments, North Sydney proper was a strong working-class enclave. In 1890 the state conferred appropriate recognition of North Sydney's proletarian character when it completed an imposing and intimidatory James Barnet courthouse, similar to that which awed the workers of Newtown and Balmain.<sup>33</sup>

The 1890s Depression curtailed the expansion and growth of the district but in 1908 when the founding fathers of the North Sydney RLFC deliberated, the economy and job opportunities had improved and suburbs like Waverton were opening up, offering accommodation for both working people and the bourgeoisie. Immediately after the First World War a minor boom of building activity took place. New buildings began to fill Wollstonecraft and Cammeray, the latter being dominated by small wooden but free-standing workers' cottages. At this time about 70 per cent of North Sydney's residents lived in rented accommodation and a substantial number of people lived in the district's 400 to 500 boarding houses.<sup>34</sup> It was from this strongly working-class base as well as the judicious purchase of the entire South Sydney back line (Harold Horder was enticed across the harbour with the offer of a free suit) that the two premiership victories were launched.

At this distance it is difficult to reconstruct working-class life and popular culture of North Sydney during the inter-war period; nevertheless the district's strong sense of community is frequently attested to. Shopkeepers were attentive and interested in the day-to-day affairs of customers. Neighbourhoods were hard in one respect, tough perhaps, but supportive and closeknit in others, in much the same way as parallel working-class communities on the other side of the harbour. One long term resident Bertha Jago, has recalled that North Sydney possessed 'all the exuberance and vigour of a country town'.<sup>35</sup> Mount Street on Friday and Friday night was a colourful,

exciting place, where neighbours and friends met and socialised. Discussion groups congregated on street corners. The Salvation Army band dispensed strident music and fear of the almighty. There were many local characters like 'Old Blind Billy' who held court with his mouth organ on the ferry wharf at Milson's Point. Between 1909 and the 1920s a particular tent picture show, 'Mac's', named after its proprietor, Hercules Christian Macintyre, was extremely popular. So too were the simple pleasures of Lavender Bay baths. There were several gymnasiums and regular boxing tournaments held in the Manresa Hall in Carlow Street. Hard men were not unknown in North Sydney and the street larrikins of the stamp which frequented the suburb most directly connected by ferry - Miller's Point - were occasionally a problem for the forces of 'law and order'. As recently as the 1950s Little Walker Street, McMahon's Point had a reputation for lawlessness. The area, and Milson's Point in particular, was well served by community-orientated hotels and more than one sly grog shop where working men could gather to forget about the problems of work.

It can be safely assumed that watching the 'Shoremen', as they were then known, demolish the opposition in 1921 and 1922 was part of the broader experience of working-class culture, particularly among the single males residing in the boarding houses and the voices which implored, 'Give it to Harold', belonged, in the main, to the wharfies, timber workers and other labourers in the district, for whom a win for North Sydney was an important victory for community and class. The solid burghers who settled in the leafy environment of Killara, Pymble, Turramurra, Wahroonga were fifteen miles away but a world apart socially and almost certainly had no part in these plebeian pastimes for until 1932 they had little reason to travel through or to North Sydney, their preferred automotive route to the city being via Gladesville and Drummoyne, across the bridges traversing the Parramatta River.<sup>36</sup>

In the same month that North Sydney won their last premiership, the Secretary for Public Works, R.T. Ball, re-introduced legislation to facilitate the construction of the Sydney Harbour bridge. In 1923 land resumptions and demolitions were mooted. Throughout the rest of the 1920s the Dorman Long Construction Company and the Public Works Department mounted an 'all-out assault on North Sydney

in order to complete the northern approaches of what was then widely styled the 'North Shore Bridge'. Arguably this was the first of the social factors which affected the fortunes of the North Sydney RLFC - the geographical dismemberment of the North Sydney district and a consequent diminution of its sense of community identity was set in train. Over 500 homes were demolished? Moreover the houses that were destroyed were not the grand mansions of the district in suburbs like 'Nootral Bay', but North Sydney's working-class cottages and terraces, humble residences like 16 Hill Street, a tiny tumbledown structure right on the street proudly and defiantly named 'Pozieres', no doubt by an old Digger who survived the horrors of France in 1917 only to have his house demolished ten years later. <sup>38</sup>

North Sydney's workers were not entirely quiescent and resisted this attack on their community. In 1926 a delegation of waterside workers called upon the minister for justice, William McKell, to request that alternative accommodation be made available to some 240 workers, mostly employed on North Sydney's wharves and docks, who would be losing their homes at Milson's Point due to land resumptions needed for the bridge.<sup>39</sup> Their complaints were dutifully noted but the deputation was unsuccessful.

The construction of the bridge wrought massive social change not to mention trauma on North Sydney and the effect this had in changing the district's social character is another factor influencing the local rugby league team. In the short term the proletarian character of the area was marginally strengthened through the presence of a large number of workers in the bridge's massive steel fabrication workshops at Milson's Point. Moreover the Labor Party had envisaged that the bridge would democratise land ownership in Sydney and open up healthy residential suburbs for workers who lived in the grimy inner city areas. This never happened. Instead land sharks like Sir Arthur Rickard moved in and developed 'garden suburbs' like Roseville with its 'invigorating air' and 'glorious views' for their class brethren. In this way the bridge effectively altered the balance of class forces in North Sydney. <sup>40</sup> It meant that the car-owning bourgeoisie of the upper north shore now travelled through North Sydney more frequently on their way to the central business district. North Sydney's parochialness was

finally ended. Its residents breathed the fumes of 'development'. The bridge's most enthusiastic ideologue, the Rev. Frank Cash, characterised the transition as: 'the windowless terrace is representative of old north shore; the arch of beautiful symmetry is representative of a vigorous, growing city, on the north side of the harbour'.<sup>41</sup>

While this was happening the North Sydney RFLC retreated to obscurity. It was not until 1937 that a North Sydney team of any grade won a premiership. This was in 1937 when a team of triers led up the middle by Stan ('Chunky') Broomham won the third grade grand final.

The next major landmark in the social history of North Sydney was another disaster - the construction of the Warringah Expressway between 1965 and 1968. As a recent local council report informed the Department of Environment and Planning the Warringah Expressway 'led to the final destruction of the old township and irrevocably divided the Municipality physically and socially'.<sup>42</sup> So just as big Lloyd Weier and Billy ('Captain Blood') Wilson were paving the way for the most significant event in recent North Sydney RFLC history, the community, whose hopes they represented, was being further dismantled. In all 440 houses were razed to the ground. Again the mansions of the wealthy were not the victims of the NRMA's and the Department of Main Roads' vision splendid. It was the less architecturally significant, rented terraces of North Sydney's workers that were obliterated. This did more than alter the physical relationship between North Sydney's business district and its adjoining neighbourhoods though the swathe of bitumen remains visually dramatic. It further decreased the working-class component of North Sydney. And it refined North Sydney's place in the future social geography of Sydney's increasingly widespread and populous North Shore. North Sydney is now a place to drive through, or more accurately crawl through at peak hour and to pollute with motor vehicle exhaust gases.

A parallel trend since the Second World War has seen the growth of North Sydney as a separate commercial centre, a 'twin city' to Sydney's central business district. This idea was first mooted in the 1850s but took shape a century later with the construction of the first northside office blocks by the AMP and MLC insurance

companies. These were significant architectural statements - the MLC Building remained the largest office block in Australia until the early 1970s - but the subsequent proliferation of high rise concrete skyscrapers has been little short of awe-inspiring. Space for residential accommodation has been further diminished to make way for the obelisks of big monopoly capital. The neon signs above the canyon-like streets proclaim who now owns North Sydney: Sperry-Univac, Krupp, NEC, Phillips, Honeywell, AGL, ICL Computers, Montrose, Occidental, Plessey, B.P., M.A.N. and Clyde. Two industries in particular - the computer and advertising industries have adopted North Sydney and depending upon the geographical parameters employed, have transformed the district into the third largest commercial centre in Australia.<sup>43</sup>

This has entailed profound social and demographic implications for the relationship between community, class and popular culture that saw North Sydney RLFC so dominant in the early 1920s. While a large number of people work in North Sydney - 52,000 office workers commute every day from as far afield as Campbelltown and Springwood<sup>44</sup> - the number of people who actually live in the area has been steadily declining since the Second World War. In 1947 there were 60,300 people living in the district but in 1976 this had fallen to 48,500.<sup>45</sup> Moreover a third of the population - principally living in the alienating tower blocks which contribute to North Sydney's disproportionately high rate of admissions to psychiatric hospitals - turns over every year.<sup>46</sup> Football allegiances are built upon years of identification with the minutiae of the game and the quirks of individual players. North Sydney's transitory pattern of residence precludes this. Despite the strong conservationist stand taken since 1980 by North Sydney's mayor, Ted Mack, large transnational corporations have turned North Sydney into an urban wasteland. There is a sense of alienation and unhappiness in the district that has nothing whatsoever to do with the pathetic displays of the big, black Bears.

Working-class culture has become increasingly marginalised in the North Sydney of the 1970s and 1980s. When Alex Buzo grew up in that 'Peninsula of Gentility', Cremorne in the 1950s, there was little contact between the values and ideas in his family home to those manifested at North Sydney Oval at the weekend, except that

the coarse language he picked up at the latter was reproached at the former.<sup>47</sup> Even the spatial distance between the football team and its community has increased. In 1985 a privately commissioned survey found that North Sydney's supporters emerged from the far flung north western suburbs, Pennant Hills, North Ryde and Asquith. The club's officials were surprised at the lack of support shown by residents of the areas adjoining the oval - Crows Nest, Neutral Bay and Northbridge.<sup>48</sup> They should not have been. Rising property values on the lower North Shore have long since made it obligatory for people who grew up in the area to buy elsewhere or pay exorbitant rents.

The cultural values of that fraction of capital which dominates North Sydney - in the advertising and computer sectors - has transformed the remnants of the residential districts surrounding North Sydney Oval. Gentrification and the young urban professional phenomenon have penetrated throughout the area, even to the diminutive workers' cottages of Cammeray which have now been renovated according to the delicate sensibilities of *Home Beautiful* and *Vogue Living*, a BMW, Mercedes or Honda Prelude bedecked with skirts and spoilers parked outside many homes, invariably braving the weather for when these homes were built there was never any suggestion that their occupants would own a motor car and therefore garage space was not planned.

The values and priorities of bourgeois culture in its 1980s lower North Shore manifestations are vividly portrayed in the pages of an in-house journal published by the Billy Blue Advertising Group. *Billy Blue* is a curious mishmash of short stories and articles coupled with 'lifestyle' advertisements which collectively promote hedonism and consumerism. Ironically in 1987 the Billy Blue Group moved its headquarters to fashionable office space in the colonnade attached to a refurbished North Sydney Oval. The advertising firm's physical proximity to the site of so many proletarian struggles implies neither sympathy or interest. When rugby league appears in the pages of *Billy Blue* it is only to disparage and sneer at the 'Big thickers bruising it away'.<sup>49</sup>

The leisure activities of Sydney's lower North Shore yuppies and their disdain for 'Ockers', exclude the Bears. More common are skiing, sailing, parachuting, scuba diving, hot air ballooning,

tennis and squash.<sup>50</sup> Ironically the general level of fitness is very high on the lower North Shore and certainly higher than in many working-class districts.<sup>51</sup> But the body fetishism practised at venues like the fashionable Mosman Gymnasium is purely narcissistic and never translated into anything useful for the community like scoring a try under the posts for North Sydney. For the yuppies revel in their cosmopolitanism and sophistication and disdain anything as parochial as the local community and its institutions.

V

Conventional wisdom would have it that rugby league supporters are unsophisticated and that any argument which locates North Sydney's dismal record of achievement in the social forces that have transformed a community might be given short shift by the league cognoscenti. This has not been my experience. Among the many arm chair experts I have consulted over the years in the Sportman's Bar at the North Sydney Leagues Club there is an emerging consensus that the reason for the Bears' continued defeats must lie elsewhere than with the club's predilection for selecting the largest, most cumbersome and most butter-fingered prop forwards who spill the ball, rugby union style, at the first hint of a tackle. After listening to one of my convoluted explanations as to how Gramsci's conception of hegemony could be applied to explain the infrequent successes of the North Sydney RLFC, Mike Gibson, sports commentator and Bears' aficionado, displayed an admirable talent for compression. 'What you mean is... all the hard men have moved out' he retorted.<sup>52</sup>

The social processes this article refers to have also been lent academic credibility by Brian Stoddart. In a tantalisingly brief Section of *Saturday Afternoon Fever* Brian Stoddart cites the examples of the Collingwood and Carlton VFL teams. The former club, Stoddart suggests had failed to be receptive to changes in the community it represents, the latter less so, and this shows in their performances.

The strongest argument for a social history explanation of the North Sydney RLFC's stunted career are the chronological links between the Bears splashes of success and the traumatic events which

followed them. In 1921 and 1922, under the gutsy captaincy of Duncan Thompson, the ex-AIF sergeant who played still with a bullet in his rib cage, the 'Shoremen' swept to their two solitary premiership victories. In 1921 the decimation of the community began, courtesy of the Dorman Long Construction Company and the Public Works Department. In 1965 the Bears reached the final but despite giving and taking a battering, failed to reach the grand final. In 1966 the construction of the Warringah Expressway completed the trauma that began in 1923.

There is little suggestion that the Bears will be able to regain their 'past glories'. Indeed with the impact of the forthcoming harbour tunnel and the extension of the Warringah Expressway through Naremburn, the area's last vestige of a working-class community known locally as 'pension town',<sup>54</sup> the social forces that have contributed to North Sydney's lack of premiership victories will be replicated. Even the international economy conspires against the Bears. With Japanese investment increasing in Australia, wealthy Japanese businessmen and their families are migrating to the lower North Shore in droves. A few kilometres from North Sydney Oval, Northbridge's major shopping complex houses Sydney's only Japanese book shop and supermarket. Unlike other migrant groups, the Greeks, Maltese and Yugoslavs, who have adorned other rugby league teams, it is difficult to conceive of Japanese capitalists or their children developing any enthusiasm for the fortunes of the North Sydney RLFC and this is an issue of both racial physiogomy and class. Furthermore the support the club derives from the Hills District in Sydney's north west is steadily being eroded by the mounting popularity of Australian Rules in that area. Greek tragedies abound. Even if the club's administrators attempt to resolve the hiatus between community and football club by promoting a 'silvertail' image - and at the conclusion of the 1987 season there were some suggestions that this was being contemplated,<sup>55</sup> this is unlikely to achieve anything other than making the Bears even less grizzly.

Yet a premiership victory is clearly long overdue, even if only in terms of statistical probability. North Sydney supporters, like socialists, are incorrigible optimists. As Mike Gibson commented in 1986:

To follow Norths, you have to be a dreamer. To follow Norths you have to believe in miracles. To follow Norths you have to believe that some day, somewhere from out of the footballing wilderness of that genteel municipality, a Charlton Heston wearing a red and black jersey will suddenly appear and lead the children of North Sydney to the promised land of premiership success.<sup>56</sup>

Charlton Heston in football apparel is an unlikely and ideologically unsound image. The present author prefers the thought of a Pemulwuy, the Koori warrior, leading the North Sydney charge, a footballer who combines the bulk and ball skills of an Arthur Beetson with the swerve and pace of George Ambrum. With the original trespass and invasion of the Kamarraigals 200 years old, the 1988 season would be an appropriate time for the curse of the Kalahari to be exorcised.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. Geoffrey Lawrence and David Rowe, *Power Play: The Commercialisation of Australian Sport*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1986; Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1986. For their comments on an earlier draft of this paper I am grateful to Drew Cottle, John Lacey, Robert Lee and John O'Hara.
2. See review of Keith Macklin, *The Story of Rugby League*, Stanley Paul, London, 1984 by T.G. Parsons in *Sporting Traditions*, Vol.2, No.1, November 1985, pp.89-91. A classic example of this antiquarian genre in the Australian context is Dally R. Messenger, *The Master: The Story of H.H. "Dally" Messenger and the Beginning of Australian Rugby League*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1982. Articles referred to in note 16 are, of course, exempted from this criticism.
3. On the momentum behind the 'social history' objective of the journal *Labour History* see Eric Fry 'The Writing of Labour History in Australia' in Eric Fry (ed.), *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, pp.154-155; Susan Magarey, 'Labour History's New Sub-

Title: Social History in Australia in 1981' *Social History*, 8, 2, May 1983, pp.211-228.

4. Sources for this article can be roughly divided between those related to North Sydney RLFC history and those pertaining to the more general history of North Sydney. Unless otherwise specified material relating to the former is drawn from Harry McKinnon and George Crawford. 'The Norths Story', serialised in *North Sydney Leagues Club Journal* throughout 1980. In this instance a particularly instructive account of the early 1920s triumphs is provided by Tom Goodman in *ibid.*, May/June 1982, p. 12.
5. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1943.
6. Until the 1950s, the North Sydney RLFC had been known as 'The Shoremen'. In the 1950s, however, their coach was friendly with the manager of the local 'Big Bear' supermarket at Neutral Bay who supplied the team with lumber jackets sporting a 'Bears' insignia. The appellation stuck. (Gary Lester (ed.), *The Sun Book of Rugby League*, John Fairfax and Sons, Sydney, 1983, p.60).
7. Alexander BUZO, *Tautology Too*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, p.29.
8. Communication from Dr. F.D. McCarthy, 4 October 1987.
9. *Sun Herald*, 21 December 1986; president's foreword *North Sydney RLFC Annual Report*, 1973, p.4.
10. For access to an incomplete set of North Sydney RLFC annual reports I am grateful to Mr. Ken McCaffery and Mr. Bob Saunders, successive club secretaries.
11. President's foreword *North Sydney RLFC Annual Report*, 1973, p.4; *North Sydney RLFC Newsletter*, 3, September 1986.
12. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 1985.
13. A. BUZO, 'Rugby League, the Schizophrenic Sport', *Sun Herald*, 27 June 1982.
14. Income in 1986 for the North Sydney RLFC was as follows. Gate receipts: \$232,341; grant North Sydney Leagues Club: \$735,000; sponsorship from Avco Financial Services: \$65,000; minor sponsorships: \$52,613; television 'fees: \$50,000; share of profit

- from NSW Rugby League: \$104,400; National Panasonic Cup: \$5,000; membership fees: \$2,105. Coupled with further sundry incomes of \$125,855 total income was \$1,372,314. Nevertheless the club incurred a net loss of \$26,642 (North Sydney RLFC *Annual Report*, 1986).
15. McHugh's involvement with the club is documented in North Sydney RLFC *Newsletter*, July 1987.
  16. Kris Corcoran, 'Rugby League-some social and economic aspects in the Sydney metropolitan area 1936-1952' paper presented to Sydney Seminar on Sports History, November 1985; 'Rugby League in the Sydney metropolitan area: Depression, war and other social and economic aspects' paper presented to Sydney Seminar on Sports History, April 1987; 'The socio-economic impact of Rugby League in Sydney 1935-1952' paper presented at Sporting Traditions VI conference, May 1987; T.G. Parsons, 'Labour, rugby League and the working class - the St. George District Rugby League Football Club in the 1920s', *Teaching History*, 12, 2, August 1978, pp.22-35; P.A. Mosely, 'A Social History of Soccer in New South Wales 1880-1957, Ph.D thesis, University of Sydney, 1987; Chris Cunneen, 'The Rugby War: The Early History of Rugby League in New South Wales 1907-15' in Richard Cashman and Michael McKernan (eds.), *Sport in History* University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1979, pp.293-306. On this split see also Tom Hickie *The Game for the Game Itself! The Development of Sub-district Rugby in Sydney*, Sydney Sub-District Rugby Union, Sydney, 1983, ch.4.
  17. See Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia, Vol.4: The Succeeding Age 1901-1942*, OUP, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 113-121. Associate Professor Ken Turner, 'The early history of the extra-metropolitan Labor Party' paper read to the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Sydney Branch, 26 October 1987 documented the maturation of labour politics, 1905-1908.
  18. *The New South Wales Rugby Football League Annual and Souvenir*, 1928, pp.130-132.
  19. Tom Brislan, 'A Maverick among Marxists', unpublished MSS, pp.106-109. (ANU Archives of Business and Labour, M67).
  20. Personal interview, Mrs. N. Jeffrey, Balmain, 17 May 1985.

21. Eric Fry, 'Growth of an Australian Metropolis', in R.S. Parker and P.N. Troy (eds.), *The Politics of Urban Growth*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1972, pp.1-23; Roger Millis, *Serpent's Tooth*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1984, p.35.
22. North Sydney RLFC, *Annual Report and Financial Statement*, 1973, p.4; for a general history of South Sydney RLFC see Ian Heads, *The History of Souths 1908-1985*, Hoffman-Smith Enterprises, Crows Nest, 1985. See also Ross MacKay, 'Hard Times, High Stakes: The Political Culture of South Sydney Rugby League 1928-1935', research paper, Macquarie University, 1982.
23. See, in particular, David Burchell, 'Rugby League ', *Australian Left Review*, 100, July/August 1987, pp.42-43; a rather more sensible critique of sport and the working class by Phil Shannon, suggesting playing football for the Parramatta Eels should be seen 'as a source of working class identity and pride' appears in *Tribune*, 9 November 1983. Burchell's article is depressing evidence of the gulf between working people and the Left intelligentsia.
24. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1987.
25. See *ibid.*, 9 September 1987.
26. *Ibid.*, 19 September 1985.
27. See, in particular, R. Masters, 'War Games', *Sun*, 28 August 1987 and 'Fibro Mania', *ibid.*, 27 August 1987.
- 28.
29. Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, p.50.
30. Isadore Brodsky, *North Sydney 1788-1962*, North Sydney Council, North Sydney, 1963, p.61.
31. See pamphlets in George Waite papers, uncatalogued MSS Mitchell Library (ML) set 208 item 1.
32. Sources on North Sydney local history are fragmentary and likely to be supplemented by the North Sydney Council's forthcoming contribution to the Bi-Centennial wordfest. Those consulted include Brodsky, *op.cit.*, Catherine Warne *Pictorial Memories: Lower North Shore*, Atrand, Sydney, 1984; far and away the best source on North Sydney's history, upon which the following

summary is derived, is *North Sydney in Profile 1981*, North Sydney Municipal Council, 1981 (report prepared for the Director of the Department of Environment and Planning); a useful overview of North Sydney's place in 'the wider development of Sydney is provided by Shirley Fitzgerald's excellent book, *Rising Damp Sydney 1870-1890*, OUP, Melbourne, 1987.

33. Peter Bridges, *Historic Court Houses of New South Wales*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1986, documents the relationship between courthouse architecture and the social character of the suburb in which courthouses were sited. In middle-class suburbs courthouses tended to blend in with the streetscape. In working-class suburbs they dominated it.
34. Peter Spearritt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge: A Life*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1982, p.80; Peter Spearritt, 'Class and Suburban Change: Sydney 1933 and 1976', paper read to ANZAAS Congress, Macquarie University, 9 May 1982.
35. B. Jago, 'Lawson's home and his "stamping ground"', *North Shore Historical Society Journal*, 12, 2, June 1972, pp.3-4.
36. This is an observation based on the reminiscences of a particular Turramurra resident of some notoriety, the leader of the New Guard, Eric Campbell. (See his book, *The Rallying Point*, MUP, Melbourne 1965, p. 148). See also a poem written by Sir George Mason Allard, a Wahroonga resident, during the 1917 strike, which also refers to this route to Sydney via Drummoyne. (Cited in Barbara Page, 'The Mason Allard inquiry into the administration of the New South Wales public service 1917-18', M. Ec thesis, University of Sydney, 1980, pp.229-230). See also L.A. Clark, *North of the Harbour. A Brief History of Transport to and on the North Shore*, Australian Railway Historical Society, Sydney, 1976.
37. Spearritt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge*, p.33.
38. See photograph(s) in North Sydney local history collection, Stanton Library, North Sydney.
39. Spearritt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge*, pp.29-31.
40. *Ibid.*, p.25, 35.
41. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 36.

42. *North Sydney in Profile in 1981*, p. 10.
43. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1987; *Northern Herald*, 6 August 1987, 19 November 1987.
44. *Ibid.*, 27 August 1987.
45. *North Sydney in Profile in 1981*, p.15.
46. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1987.
47. Alexander Buzo, 'Cremorne: Peninsula of Gentility'. *Overland*, 107, June 1987, pp.28-30.
48. *North Shore Advocate*, 5 June 1985.
49. *Billy Blue*, 3, June 1977.
50. Ian Cockerill, 'Welcome to the Land of the Yuppies' , *Northern Herald*, 8 October 1987.
51. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 December 1986 for details of a Bureau of Statistics report, *Life Style: Health Risk Factors*.
52. Telephone conversation, Mike Gibson, 28 July 1983. In his subsequent reflections I have been pleased to observe that Mr. Gibson has not totally discarded class analysis. (See, Jason Dacey, 'Union vs. League: A Matter of Class', *Northern Herald*, 15 May 1986).
53. Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, pp.49-50.
54. Warne, *Pictorial Memories*, p. 101. On the differing socio-economic makeup of Sydney's 'North Shore' region see reports of research conducted by Dr. Jim Forrest (Macquarie University) in *Northern Herald*, 11 April 1985.
55. The services of the North Sydney mascot, a large black 'bear' were dispensed with by the chairman of Norths' marketing division. It was announced that a new 'silvertail bear...re-designed with top hat, tails and spats' would be commissioned in 1988.
56. *Australian*, 19 February 1986.

## POSTSCRIPT

Predictably 1988 proved to be a disappointing season for the North Sydney Club. Despite a brief moment of glory midway through the season, jostling for position amidst the top five and a memorable thrashing of the eventual premiers, Canterbury Bankstown, the Bears fell in a heap. The year proved to be more remarkable for the publication of a local history of North Sydney which managed to ignore the football club and a history of the football club which pretended that the North Sydney district and its peculiarities did not exist. What with uninspired buying of players in the off season, retirements and evidence of serious internal divisions within the club, 1989 could well prove to be a disaster. But then again...