

Geoffrey Moorhouse, *At the George: And other essays on Rugby League*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), Index, notes, pp. 175, £10.95.

This is an outstanding book which is right at the cutting edge of the intersection between sport and social history. Consisting of twelve interconnected essays on rugby league in Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand (as well as a brief observation on New Guinea), *At the George* is a constant source of delight. Its approach should serve as a model for those interested in the study of working-class culture. Sport, in particular, is far too serious a matter to be left to the antiquarians or the social control theorists.

This is high praise and needs to be justified. After all, in empirical terms the book is hardly path breaking. Some of its 'facts' may be disputed. The Queensland branch of the ALP, for instance, would not agree with the author's claim that the Australian Labor Party's origins relate to a meeting in a Balmain pub (p. 112). Undoubtedly some of Moorhouse's assessments about Australian rugby league crowds, coaches and players are amusingly partisan. (My own recollection of the use of swinging arm tackles during the 1988 test series differs markedly from the account presented at p. 150 by Mr Moorhouse). Nevertheless, I am struck by the accuracy of many of his observations. Of Wally Lewis, Moorhouse comments that he has a 'deep psychological need to see himself as a victim, even when he's winning'? (p. 136). The King's recent claim, after failing a medical, that the Australian Rugby League hierarchy had conspired against him in selecting the 1990 Kangaroo touring team lends weight to this view.

It may be a curious observation to make about a non-fiction book but perhaps the outstanding feature of *At the George* is its tone. This imparts a sense of wistfulness and regret which, in the hands of a lesser writer might have degenerated into myopic nostalgia and endless complaints about the Americanisation of sport. *At the George*, however, manages to impart a very positive impression of the dignity and raw, creative energy of the great British working-class movement which created a culture and sense of community within which, after that fateful meeting at the George Hotel in Huddersfield

on 29 August 1885, the Northern thirteen a side game was prominently located.

For the present reviewer *At the George* inspires parallel thoughts about the habits of mind to which the British labour movement adhered at the turn of the century. Labourist, highly conservative, the British working class preferred the humanistic compassion of the likes of Keir Haride to the hard-minded scheming of a V I Lenin.¹ Moorhouse's league players are essentially honourable proletarians, miners and labourers who may give and take a belting, but whose behaviour is regulated by their sense of belonging to a community.

I agree with Moorhouse's view of the rugby league player. Watching the 'golden oldies' touch football staged at intervals during the first and reserve grade fixtures at North Sydney Oval I am repeatedly struck by the decency of the old and fat men who parade their wares. Stripped of their speed and side steps, they retain a sense of fair play which is surprising given the extraordinary hardness they needed to play this most remarkable of games. (On the other hand it must be said that in order to sustain this impression of decency it is necessary to omit all mention of the likes of Jim Mills, the British test prop, who was simply a psychopath. I once witnessed big Jim, employed as a bouncer in a Neutral Bay hotel while playing a few spiteful games for North Sydney, nearly murder a patron and I was not at all surprised years later when the New Zealand rugby league banned him for life for stomping on an opponent's head).

Moorhouse's approach is more whimsical than systematically historical, yet *At the George* provides several vivid examples of the labour history context within which rugby league can best be understood. As a sports historian Moorhouse feels obliged to comment on the relative absence of crowd violence among spectators at British rugby league matches. He does not pontificate excessively but notes the curious fact that in 1985 the well-behaved supporters of clubs like Castleford, Featherstone and Wakefield were invariably striking miners whose week-day activities involved manning the picket lines where they displayed conspicuously more aggression and less respect for the constabulary. Like Moorhouse I'm not sure what

this means but I imagine that some flash sociologist will shortly tell us all about it in unintelligible jargon.

On the subject of language it must be said that *At the George* is beautifully written. One can almost hear the flat vowels of the author's Northern England accent guiding the reader through the book's pages such that as an Australian I feel obliged to say that this is a fair dinkum sort of book. For *At the George* derives a great deal of its authenticity and warmth from Moorhouse's status as an insider. His allegiance to rugby league is 'because it is an expression of who I am and where I come from, the history of my people and our ancestral lands. It is the culture from which I spring, to a degree that some may never even recognise' (p. 10). Many - perhaps hundreds - of characters (principally footballers) make cameo appearances in the text of *At the George* but my favourite is Moorhouse's grandmother. While she was totally ignorant of the specifics of rugby league whenever she wanted to praise some person or thing she would sometimes say that this was "'t" best in "'t" Northern Union', unconsciously retrieving the words of our collective folk-memory' (p. 10).

Finally, an added attraction to New South Wales readers is *At the George's* observations of the Manhattan of the South Pacific, Sydney, and its somewhat brash and self-confident rugby league competition. Moorhouse proffers some very astute comments about what the rugby league press is now calling 'demographics' when describing the ungodly rush of top coaches to desert the inner-city clubs for the working-class west and south-west. For instance Balmain's gentrification has certainly meant declining attendance at Leichhardt Oval (which has worsened since 1989) and pubs like that grand old bloodhouse, The London, are crawling with well-heeled yuppies who don't especially care about the exploits of Pearce, Roach, Sironen and company. Yet Sydney's rugby league competition is apparently an extraordinary magnet for people from the north of England who will happily spend half of their life savings to embark upon a pilgrimage down under. I wonder if someone in the Australian tourist industry has worked this out.

At the George concludes with a rather too detailed account of the third test of the 1988 tour which the British Lions won 26-12.

Moorhouse wants to see this victory as the rebirth of British rugby league at an international level. The 1990 Kangaroo tour confirms that this is no idle threat. The Sydney competition is over ripe and consumed by a sense of its own importance; yet it is very clear that at a test level players of the calibre of Lewis, Price, Pearce, Cronin, Sterling and Beetson are not forthcoming even though there are a plethora of footballers who operate proficiently enough for their clubs. So we can expect test Football to be restored to its rightful place at the pinnacle of the game, Even though the 1992 Australian team will be bolstered by the inclusion of the North Sydney Bear cubs Fairleigh, Martin and Moore, the contest promises to be an absorbing one.

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1. See Douglas Newton, *British labour, European socialism and the struggle for peace 1889-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), ch. 1.