

# **‘BOYS WILL BE BOYS’: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEN OF LEAGUE**

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One night we had gone to a pub on the outskirts of Leeds and as we walked out to go back ‘home’ someone bet Tommy he couldn’t put a keg through his own window. Tom picked up and smashed it right through the windscreen of his car . . . Boys will be boys.<sup>1</sup>

The late 1980s and early 1990s have witnessed the publication in Australia of numerous Rugby League biographies. Those listed in the notes are but a selection. There are also three works on Wally Lewis, as well as books about Steve Mortimer, Peter Sterling and Wayne Pearce to name but a few.

The appearance of a League biography is not a new event. There are earlier studies such as *They Called Me the Little Master*, the story of the South Sydney fullback Clive Churchill. What is remarkable about the more recent biographies is their relative abundance. The retirement, or closing stages, of a career of a ‘big name’ in League over the past decade has often been accompanied by publication of the player’s story, as well as other testimonial activities. Such activities are not confined to Rugby League in Australia. Cricket, another extensively marketed sport, produces similar phenomena.

These recently published League biographies may be understood in the context of the expansion and increased marketing of the Rugby League code in Australia and New Zealand. Professional in its origins Rugby League is now multi-faceted ‘big business’. League is popular: hence,

Prime Minister Keating's presence at a recent testimonial function for Canterbury's Terry Lamb. The business of League is expanding. The major competition in Australia has grown from an intra-Sydney competition in the late 1960s to that currently involving interstate teams. The 1995 competition will include new entrants from Auckland, Perth, North Queensland and a second Brisbane-based team. Accompanying this expansion has been the growth of the media, particularly the electronic media. League and this section of the media have a symbiotic relationship. A prime example of this relationship is evident in the programming of Queensland versus New South Wales State of Origin games. These telecasts secure top television ratings in New Zealand as well as those in their home states. Such games are precisely scheduled by the League and the television networks to take full advantage of this drawing power.

League's expansion also means an extended potential market for players' biographies.<sup>2</sup>What then, is offered in these texts, and what else may one find in them?

The books are usually written by a professional or semi-professional writer. Bret Harris, Michael O'Connor's scribe, is a sports journalist who writes on a variety of sports. He has authored several books on sport including *Ella, Ella, Ella* on Rugby Union's brother wizards of the 1980s. Invariably the player in question co-operates closely with his writer. Reluctant League stars are rare. (Was Parramatta's Michael Cronin an exception, or was the shy country-boy image a useful marketing ploy, or both?) Football being their main, and often only, form of income, players appear conscious of the need to accumulate financially and to profit from their name. In this aspect League still differs substantially from that other rugby code, Union, which features far less full-time players with many having well-paid primary careers.

The League biography is customarily about two hundred pages. Published in paperback it will have a coloured cover and one or two sets of photographs placed within the book. It generally retails at around the

\$20 mark, aiming at the popular, bulk market. Their marketers are keenly aware of the books' gift potential. Titles are launched to coincide with Father's Day and Christmas shopping. The biographies will also include one or two forewords or prefaces including one by a well-known person, often, though not necessarily, another footballer. The subject's career statistics are usually listed at the conclusion of the book. League biographies do not divide into hagiographic or 'warts and all' mode. Rather they are both. So confidently hagiographic is the mode, that 'warts' are included. Player's escapades, both on and off the field, are viewed as harmless and good fun, giving the player a human touch but not seriously detracting from the proffered heroic image.

Whiticker's *Terry Land Story* is a standard Rugby League biography. The foreword, by fellow footballer Royce Simmons, paints Lamb as an all-round good guy. Readers learn that Lamb is a fair dinkum bloke who puts his best into every game he plays. There are not many players who could be said to do their best, regardless of whether they win or lose, every time they run out on the football field, but Terry Lamb is one.<sup>3</sup>

The text then moves quickly through Lamb's childhood and his burgeoning footballing activities to his arrival in grade football. Lamb's football career provides the basic narrative for the story. Numerous games and other League happenings are recalled in great detail. Other events, including Lamb's marriage, are interspersed between stages. The book's narrative is leavened by several 'Lamb is a fun guy' anecdotes. Typical of these is an incident recalled by Royce Simmons:

The guide said we had to be very quiet as it was very holy. We started hearing a knock from inside the large coffin-like box. It scared the guide quite a bit and we didn't know what it was. She moved over to open the lid and Terry jumped out like a jack in the box. She almost fainted.<sup>4</sup>

The story closes with a characteristically complimentary chapter in which other League luminaries offer their accolades to Lamb. Roy Masters, sometime League coach and *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist, is quoted: 'Lamb chose the hard way and succeeded'.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning and in the end Lamb is a 'good guy'. End of story.

The forewords and conclusions are the most blatantly hagiographic sections. Typical are those found in *Doing My Block*. There is a foreword by Keith Barnes, himself a former League and Balmain 'great' and a preface by Alan Jones, sometime Union and League coach and a popular, or well-rating, radio personality on New South Wales morning radio.

Barnes describes Steve Roach using his nickname 'Blocker':

Blocker has been a courageous, dedicated and enormously talented player who has played loyally for Balmain for a decade, sticking with the club through good times and bad. At Balmain Steve is a revered, respected and popular player whose contribution to the club exceeds his performance on the field.<sup>6</sup>

The piece by Jones is similar, yet even more effusive. He draws on themes of nationalism, individualism, merit and class to praise his subject. The reader learns that 'like many successful Australians, 'Blocker's' was a humble beginning. It was often difficult'.<sup>7</sup> Jones adds that:

He [Roach] knew somehow instinctively that in life you don't really need more strength or more ability or greater opportunity. You have to make of life what you can with what you've got, knowing that opportunity rarely knocks on your door. You have to knock on *opportunity's* door if you really want to enter.<sup>8</sup>

Roach's text then follows the pattern of briefly describing his youth, including his football experiences, and then moving on to his professional league career. This narrative is interwoven with Roach's recollections of notable events such as a clash with South Sydney forward Peter Tunks. Roach remembers the scene after he and Tunks were sent off for fighting:

I was so pissed off with him I wanted to fight him at the back of the grandstand, over in the nearby park, anywhere. 'We can settle this right now,' I told him as we grappled in the tunnel, 'or after the game is over. It's up to you!'<sup>9</sup>

One of the final chapters offers Roach's opinions on his footballing contemporaries, most of his reflections, but not all, are of a positive nature. That chapter concludes with another feature of the League player's story, the selection of a best team. The book finishes as it began, with another hagiographic essay, this time by the subject's loyal and devoted wife, Cathy Roach.

*Perpetual Motion*, subject Ray Price, is from a similar mould. The foreword, by the then federal minister John Brown, incorporates Price into familiar Australian mythology: 'Hard working, tough, courageous, talented, warm, humorous and unpretentious. Those are the qualities I admire in Australians and Ray Price, Mr Perpetual Motion, demonstrated them all in abundance during his long career.'<sup>10</sup>

*Perpetual Motion* employs Price's own voice to tell his tale. The chapter 'Valley Boy' briefly takes the reader through Price's childhood and adolescence. Most of this and the other chapters centre on Price's sporting career. Occasionally Price slips in other incidents such as the following:

I wrote off my first car at Umina ... I was speeding trying to catch up on a mate's car in front. I swerved to miss the wall and ended up hitting one on the other side of the road ... That was the end of that car, which was a beauty.<sup>11</sup>

Price calls on the ethics of hard work and individualism to explain his success in League. His readers are told:

I learned quickly through my life ... that there was a difference between wanting something and really wanting something. You had to draw a line. You had to make sacrifices. If you

weren't prepared to do that, you really didn't want to achieve it deep down.<sup>12</sup>

The technique of presenting the player as a bit of a larrikin is also featured throughout this text, although not to the same extent as in the works on Roach and Lamb. Price more often recalls the escapades of team mates than his own, although the reader does learn that upon meeting Queen Elizabeth Price says 'g' day'. What emerges most strongly from this text is Price's intensely serious and competitive attitude to sport. This is evident in the following paragraph: 'Second best doesn't count. There are winners and the rest. When you look in the record books later only the premiers get their names listed.'<sup>13</sup>

Bret Harris captures a similar earnestness in his depiction of the dual rugby international Michael O'Connor.<sup>14</sup>The approach of Harris differs substantially from the other biographies considered. Rather than the transcribing the footballer's own story Harris provides the reader with a more rounded portrait of O'Connor. The text is both more detailed and nuanced. Sentences have some length and actually contain the odd adjectival clause. Harris employs an expansive, for a League book, vocabulary. The reader learns more of O'Connor's life off the field, although clearly football and private lives are closely and inextricably linked throughout the player's career. Yet despite these differences the nature of this text is inherently the same as those previously discussed. The laudatory forewords are immediately followed by the customary chapter devoted to O'Connor's childhood; the same larrikin-style episodes are dotted throughout providing a background to O'Connor's footballing career, presented in overwhelming and minute detail. Harris also includes several of O'Connor's sexual escapades. This adds another dimension to the construct of the 'bit of a lad' image. Indeed, the young O'Connor's involvements with women are presented in nearly as much detail as his sporting achievements. The portrait of O'Connor by Harris is more layered

and more finely sketched than the other, biographical subjects. However, it is still firmly shaped and constrained by its subject. O'Connor appears, for all the biographer's efforts, just as his counterparts do. They are, to use computer jargon, WYSIWYG, 'what you see is what you get'. *The Best of Both Worlds* offers more than the one view of O'Connor, featuring additional detail from a greater number of interviewees. Yet these efforts do not lead to any greater depth in the portrayal of O'Connor. He appears remarkably similar to Price *et al.*

O'Connor's serious attitude to his football is established early on in the text, and in his career. O'Connor, who played representative Union for Australia, before his switch to League, demonstrates his intensity when he describes his reaction to being left on the bench for the Australian Schoolboys' Rugby test team:

I thought I would make the Test team and I geared myself for it. I was devastated when they dropped me. Without being disrespectful to Tony Melrose, I thought I deserved the position ... I felt I was hard done by on that tour.<sup>15</sup>

Such lack of acceptance is also strongly present in the recollections of Ray Price. It would seem that top footballers have difficulty in accepting defeat even in hindsight, be it on the playing field or at the selection table. Price is unequivocal in his feelings toward defeat: 'I've never been able to accept losing, nor gain much satisfaction from it.'<sup>16</sup>

O'Connor and Price are also easily able to distance themselves from any responsibility for defeat or other situations not to their liking. Thus when Price describes his Parramatta Union side's lost to Randwick in a 1974 Grand Final he argues that they should never have lost—only but for the lateness of the game, as this put the team 'off' in their preparation.<sup>17</sup> Similarly a draw in a Rugby test is also a travesty, according to Price:

As far as I was concerned we were robbed – by our ‘own’ referee. Bob Burnett gave us a caning all match, then to top it off he ruled double-movement when Geoff Shaw scored what we claimed was a dead-set try.<sup>18</sup>

Even the concluding page of Price’s book recalls an incident where he claims he was incorrectly sent from the field. This decision, according to Price, was the reason he didn’t win a particular award that season. He declares: ‘That referee’s decision, which I will debate till the day I die, cost me the award and a few thousand dollars.’<sup>19</sup> One certainly does not learn to accept a referee’s decision with good grace from the pages of a League biography.

This consistency in not accepting defeat and other situations not to one’s liking and avoiding responsibility for one’s actions is strongly evident throughout these texts. ‘Palming it off’, thus defusing, negating and changing the perception of an unsatisfactory situation, may be seen as one facet of a larger theme that emerges strongly from the four texts – that of masculinity.

A male’s sex is biologically determined, but masculinity may be seen as the cultural expression of this birthright. A particular style of masculinity emerges, indeed radiates, from these four texts. And in this radiation the argument posed by Raymond Barthes that has become known as the ‘Death of the Author’ is crystalline.<sup>20</sup> These particular texts were not constructed as paradigms of masculinity yet, for this reader, this is their overwhelming impact.

The masculinity displayed on the pages of these texts is conservative, pernicious and rapacious. It is particularly evident in the players’ attitudes towards violence, women and sport. The collective authors also display an easy acceptance of this masculinity. Throughout the texts it is ever present but totally unquestioned. Indeed, it is accepted, expected and featured behaviour. Even the texts may be seen as masculine in themselves, privileging the public sphere, downplaying or discarding the private.<sup>21</sup>

The conservative aspect of this masculinity is evident in the following throwaway lines on the second marriage of Terry Lamb's mother:

Terry's mother Joyce had remarried the previous year. In traditional style, Keith Hazel, an affable local cabbie and another war veteran, asked Peter and Terry's permission to marry their mother as a sign of respect to 'the men' in the family. 'Mum was still a young woman,' Terry says, 'and if she was happy, we were happy. Keith's a great bloke.'<sup>22</sup>

This 'traditional' action, coinciding with a view of women as male possessions, is not unrelated to Michael O'Connor's behaviour in a Queensland bar. The inclusion of the following incident by Harris carries an implicit approval and amusement at O'Connor's actions. This attitude permeates through the book:

Already merry, Michael was leaning against the bar ... Through bloodshot eyes, Michael could still tell the girls were attractive and pinched one of Susan's friends on the bottom as she passed by. The girls tried to ignore him but when he repeated the offence Susan's friend grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.<sup>23</sup>

Women in the League player's value scheme are judged on youth and appearance. Women are also expected to perform domestic duties, leaving males unencumbered by these tasks. Terry Lamb's sister recalled: 'I use [*sic*] to try to get Terry to wash up or to clean his bedroom but the answer was always a flat "no".'<sup>24</sup> Cathy Roach, musing on Roach's retirement from the playing field, infers the extent of his domestic contribution: 'And maybe, just maybe, Stephen might become acquainted with the dishwasher'<sup>25</sup>

The easy acceptance of the violence of the Rugby game runs throughout all the texts. Indeed, at times it crosses into life away from the sporting field. League, being a body contact sport, accepts a degree of

'legitimate' violence. Commentators vividly and profusely praise bruising, jarring tackles. League advertisements feature these 'hits' while characterising interstate games as war. Illegitimate violence, such as the head-high tackle, is voyeurishly pored over, replayed and analysed from every possible angle. Violence is more strongly present in the books by Price and Roach, perhaps because they were forwards. These two see certain forms of violence as totally acceptable on the playing field. It is, like a neat side step, a device to help one win. Price's relaxed attitude is apparent in his description of an encounter with Ken Catchpole: 'I thought I'd see how good this legend Catchpole was. To put it bluntly, I thought I'd belt him every chance I got ... I lined up and clouted him.'<sup>26</sup>

Roach is similarly casual about the use of his body as a weapon both on, and off, the field. For Roach a type of violence is an expected part of a frontrower's game. He makes this very clear: 'I've traded blows and big hits with just about every rugby league hard man worth his salt—that's the way I think good front rowers should play the game.'<sup>27</sup> Yet Roach does not consider himself a dirty player, he is proud of his record, as his voice shows in the following sentence: 'There are no offences in my log book that could be classed as foul play. No biting, kicking, gouging or cowardly attacks in back play.'<sup>28</sup> The loyal wife echoes her husband's thoughts: 'But one thing Blocker is not, and that's a dirty player. He never uses his knees, elbows, never bites and would never hit anybody from behind.'<sup>29</sup>

This belief in an acceptable form of violence underlies much of Roach's writing. He notes the headbutting of a cameraman and knocking cold of fellow frontrowers without the slightest qualm. He details fights in pubs along with fights in games. For Roach the violence is more than a tactic for winning a game, it is a major part of League's allure. He explains:

'You give it, you take it. As far as I'm concerned rugby league is about the only gladiator sport left. Man on man, blood on blood, bone on bone. And that's the way I like it.'<sup>30</sup>

These biographies are recommended reading for anyone who wishes to know or further understand League 'culture'. They are representative of this discourse. Listen to the commentary on a Friday night game or read a post-match report to confirm this. The business and marketing of League is dominated by ex-players as is much of the associated media. O'Connor and Roach have already assumed significant places within that media. By and large this media purveys the style of masculinity found in these texts. It explains the media's complicity in keeping quiet on Ben Alexander's blood alcohol reading in his fatal car crash. In fact Ben took the larrikin image a little too far. But the League media buried him as a hero and was mostly happy to leave the truth untold. This masculinity also explains why girls in short skirts and tight shirts are paid to 'cheer' groups of men on to a sporting field, although even the suggestion of a League player's penis exposed calls for court action and massive payouts for damages.

Within the League literature and discussion, the issues of sexual assault and homosexuality are noticeably absent, even though anyone associated with the game will freely admit their presence. What are readers to make of the nuances in Roach's comment on Ian Roberts?

Ian's a top player and a top bloke, too ... Roberts cops a lot on the field but is too professional to respond to sledging. He answers blokes with some of the hugest hits you've ever seen. Away from League he's a really nice bloke, a shy withdrawn sort of guy. He's not your average extroverted footballer.<sup>31</sup>

This is in sharp contrast to John MacDonald's strident denial and outrage at the questioning of Mal Meninga's heterosexuality when, from 1983, Meninga had to deal with the 'insult' that he was a 'poofter'.<sup>32</sup> Homosexuality and sexual assault do not fit the larrikin-heroic masculine mould proffered by the League writers and heavily marketed by the League. Thus they are withheld from its discourse. Homophobia is acceptable, so it's easy to spot and clear in its message.

Why question, analyse, or even note the masculinity in League? Of what import is it? Surely essays on masculinity should be confined to the reading lists of feminist histories. Well, like the sea, League is all around us. Its massive media coverage and participation throughout Eastern Australia make it virtually impossible, and definitely foolhardy, to ignore. Sport is a major part of late twentieth century popular culture and League is a major part of this culture in Australia and New Zealand. League players are heroes, albeit marketed heroes; for children, both boys and girls, and for some older folk. It is possible that their fans might just pick up more from their behaviour and actions than how to throw a deft pass or nimbly sidestep an opponent. Boys might imbibe demarcations of domestic duties, or model their notions of violence on those offered by Steve Roach. To those interested in the position of the sexes in our society and how these are set, acted, and reinforced a few League biographies may prove very interesting reading. They're also handy if you want to know the score in the Lakemba versus Chester Hill B Grade Grand Final the day Terry Lamb played half back for 'Cheso' (13-10 in favour of Lakemba).

## NOTES

1. Ray Price with Neil Cadigan, *Perpetual Motion*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1987, p. 83.
2. The term biography is used to include the form of text which is co-authored by the League player.
3. Alan Whitticker, *The Terry Lamb Story*, Gary Allen, Sydney, 1992, Foreword.
4. Whitticker, *Terry Lamb Story*, p. 102.
5. Whitticker, *Terry Lamb Story*, p. 154.
6. Steve Roach with Ray Chesterton, *Doing My Block*, Ironbark Press, Sydney, 1992, Foreword.
7. Roach, *Doing My Block*, Preface.
8. Roach, *Doing My Block*, Preface.
9. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 25.
10. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. vii.
11. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 15.
12. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 16.
13. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 29.
14. Bret Harris, *The Best of Both Worlds: the Michael O'Connor Story*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1991.

15. Harris, *The Best of Both Worlds*, p. 28.
16. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 29.
17. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 29.
18. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 26.
19. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 192.
20. Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author' in Roland Barthes *Image Music Text* Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1984, pp. 143-8.
21. This feature is not confined to League biographies; see Fred Hollows with Peter Corris, *An Autobiography*, Kerr Publishing, Sydney, 1992.
22. Whiticker, *Terry Lamb Story*, p. 39.
23. Harris, *The Best of Both Worlds*, p. 91.
24. Whiticker, *Terry Lamb Story*, p. 15.
25. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 180.
26. Price, *Perpetual Motion*, p. 20.
27. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 13.
28. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 15.
29. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 178.
30. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 15.
31. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 168.
32. John MacDonald, *Big Mal: The Inspiring Story of Mal Meninga* Lester-Townsend, Sydney, 1990, pp. 64-5.