

Review Article

Reclaiming Old and Forgotten Heroes: Nostalgia, Rugby and Identity in New Zealand

John Nauright

Department of Human Movement Studies
University of Queensland

Graeme Barrow, *All Blacks Versus Springboks: A Century of Rugby Rivalry*, Reed Books, Auckland, 1992. Appendices, illus. pp. 216.

Warwick Roger, *Old Heroes: The 1956 Springbok Tour and the Lives Beyond*. Hodder & Stoughton, Auckland, 1991. Illus., bibliog. pp. 223.

Greg Ryan, *Forerunners of the All Blacks: The 1888-89 New Zealand Native Team in Britain, Australia and New Zealand*. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 1993. Appendices, illus., index. pp. 152.

A few years ago I wrote in this journal about the role of myth and reality in the historiography of New Zealand rugby.¹ Since then, several books and articles by historians, sociologists and journalists have added to the literature on the role of rugby in New Zealand society. Some of this work seeks to deconstruct rugby's place and power in society. Others serve a more nostalgic purpose in the project of reclaiming rugby's central role in New Zealand's national identity. In this latter project, sports history often plays an important role. One only has to examine the number of papers, articles and books written on baseball in the USA to see that sports history and sports historians often assist in nostalgic reconstructions of identities for a variety of purposes.

In New Zealand, nostalgic representations of rugby attempt to take people back to the days before the violence of the 1981 tour and to a time when New Zealanders seemed more united, as they appeared to be during the 1956 Springbok tour. Nostalgia for the New Zealand of the 1950s, when the country led the world in standard of living, has emerged

alongside a rationalist economic discourse that threatens to divide New Zealanders further as it also promotes economic growth and free trade as the new path to national prosperity. While the government pursues new policies, it and the media also promote a New Zealand national identity that clings to past glories in sports (particularly rugby) and war. Advertisers increasingly use rugby to promote their products now that the sport appears to have been de-politicised with the end of South African isolation. The best example of this has been the Bank of New Zealand's 1992 and 1993 television advertising campaign: 'Who are you? You're a New Zealander, and who are we? We're your bank.' Their commercial shows the Hokianga Rugby Ground with its arch of remembrance for the fallen soldiers of the world wars, thus closely and symbolically linking the two most powerful cultural symbols of New Zealand masculinist national identity.²

New Zealand sporting history has often been little more than rugby history. These three books add to the vast New Zealand rugby literature. Ryan and Roger discuss rugby tours, one nearly forgotten and one probably never to be forgotten. Both tours, the 1888-89 'Native' tour and the 1956 Springbok tour of New Zealand marked significant phases in the history of New Zealand society. The 1888-89 team, while not an 'official' New Zealand national side (the New Zealand Rugby Football Union was not formed until 1892), was the first New Zealand rugby team to venture to the British Isles. Many New Zealanders of the day followed the tour in the local newspapers to see how the young colony would measure up to the mother country. The 1956 tour came at a time before television, mass protests against apartheid and when, even in the largest city of Auckland, most New Zealanders felt they belonged to small communities. Graeme Barrow's book updates his earlier (1981) history of the rugby rivalry between New Zealand and South Africa with material on the 1986 'Cavaliers' and the 1992 All Black tours of South Africa.

Greg Ryan, a PhD candidate at Canterbury University, has provided us with the first history of the 1888-89 New Zealand Native Team that was the subject of his MA thesis.. The media originally called the team the 'New Zealand Maoris', but with the addition of four pakeha (whites), they changed the name to the 'New Zealand Native Team'. As with many tours of the late nineteenth century, the Native tour developed out of entrepreneurial concerns. The high costs of the tour forced the Native team to play a remarkable 107 matches over just fourteen months in New Zealand, the British Isles and Australia so that the organisers could recover their expenses and make a small profit.

Ryan provides a detailed and well-written account of a significant sporting tour of the late nineteenth century, although he removed some of the detailed analysis in aiming at the popular market. He also provides biographies of the players and statistics of the matches in appendices demonstrating the thoroughness of his research. Furthermore, Ryan claims a significance for the tour by comparing its achievements with those of later All Black tours of the British Isles by the 1905 'Originals' and the 1924 'Invincibles'. While Ryan may take his comparisons too far, he makes some very valid points in his argument that the Natives faced stronger opposition than the later tours as they played many of the Yorkshire teams that split from the Rugby Union in 1895.

As a result of Ryan's research, New Zealanders can read of yet another of their rugby teams that achieved considerable international success. Yet, despite the celebratory tone in *Forerunners of the All Blacks*, Ryan ventures below the surface and shows that the tour was riddled with financial problems, accusations of professionalism and gambling. These aspects are anathema to the amateur nature of rugby, but are not such a concern to many fans in the commercialised days of the 1990s. Readers of Ryan's account are exposed to all the elements involved in staging early rugby tours, but also to a feeling of the players' heroic achievements in the face of injuries and a demanding tour schedule.

Sixty-eight years after the nearly forgotten Native tour, New Zealand braced for the onslaught of a mighty South African Springbok team. New Zealand had been beaten in all the Test matches during their 1949 tour of South Africa and it seemed as if the whole country was willing the All Blacks to victory. In *Old Heroes*, Auckland-based journalist Warwick Roger traces the events in and around the tour and then traces the South African players thirty-five years on to see what had become of his 'old heroes'. Roger's account is unashamedly nostalgic as he seeks security in retracing his, and New Zealand's, past through his childhood rugby heroes.

Roger argues that the 1956 Test match series marked a turning point in the history of New Zealand society. He suggests that the tour was at the end of a period when people still knew their neighbours and before television brought home issues like apartheid and made heroes just a bit smaller rather than larger than life. The 1956 series was the last between the two countries that did not involve significant political protest. Because of this, Roger sees the tour as a key last event before New Zealand's and his own 'end of innocence'. For Roger, this loss of innocence seems a sad occurrence for New Zealand society, which has all too rapidly embraced the modern world and international culture and lost its old community and pioneer values.

This account is a very personal one and Roger's anecdotes add to the book. In particular, he was hassled entering South Africa in 1991 until it was discovered that he was 'a welcome guest come to write positive things about the New South Africa' (p. 176). Roger's account of South Africa in 1991, however, was not as positive as the South African customs' official may have thought. Roger tracked down his heroes who were not all police interrogators or other primary enforcers of apartheid as he had suspected. Still, Roger had difficulty in coming to terms with South Africa, a country perhaps full of more ironies than any other.

The significance of *Old Heroes* lies in its attempt to relive boyhood times and revisit boyhood heroes and then to discover the adult reality of heroes lives – to ‘demythologise’ them – and finally to come to terms with all that has past in New Zealand since 1956. In the end Roger remarks on the loss of innocence and identity that characterised 1950s New Zealand. Roger concludes with a nostalgic lament for 1956, for rugby, for New Zealand and for himself:

my family, my friends, my heroes– are with me still. If I close my eyes I can hear the crowd chanting down the years, ‘Black, Black, Black’, I can see the two teams fanning out across the field, green and black, and Jeremy Nel coming forward to kick off; and a feeling of great sadness comes over me for all of us (p. 222).

As Roger states, New Zealand has grown up as a nation since 1956. Like Roger, there are many New Zealanders (most of whom are white and male) who fondly hearken back to a ‘simpler’ time. These New Zealanders and many of their children are also looking forward with delight to the visit of the South African rugby team later this year. While New Zealand may not be as united as it was in 1956, it certainly will not be as divided as it was when the Springboks visited in 1981. *Old Heroes* and, to an extent, *Forerunners of the All Blacks* form part of a nostalgic project where rugby has moved back to the centre of attempts to reinvent a New Zealand national identity in the wake of political divisions that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, Barrow’s book, released just after the abbreviated All Black tour of South Africa in 1992, examines the history of the most significant rugby rivalry in the world. Barrow is a little overzealous in his subtitle as New Zealand and South Africa first played in 1921 and not a century ago. *All Blacks Versus Springboks* is both interesting and frustrating. Barrow provides a thorough account of the history of All Black-Springbok rugby and includes details of other international tours by the two sides that

demonstrated their respective form leading into their test series. In addition, Barrow devotes twenty-six pages of his text to a chapter entitled 'Politics, Protest and Sport'. This is to be welcomed in a book aimed at the popular market. However, Barrow's approach to politics is inconsistent and somewhat confusing.

Barrow reinforces the widely held view in New Zealand that it has been a very successful country in its dealing with racial issues. He makes a clear distinction between the inclusion of Maoris in New Zealand sport and the exclusion of blacks in South African sport. Barrow has little sympathy for those who protested against rugby contacts with South Africa, resorting to the defence of sports people to play against whomever they pleased. His backing of rugby players goes as far as to openly support the 1986 rebels, the 'Cavaliers', who went as individuals at the invitation of Louis Luyt's Transvaal Rugby Football Union after the 1985 All Black tour was stopped in the courts.

Barrow defends the 'shocked, angry and frustrated' players denied the chance to go to South Africa in 1985. His approach attempts to legitimate the actions of the 1986 rebels who only wanted their right to play a series against South Africa. On other political issues, Barrow tries to make a fine distinction between actions of New Zealanders and the obstinacy of South African politicians and conservative whites, especially Afrikaners. He also comments briefly that international pressure, at least in part, led Prime Minister Vorster to allow Maoris to tour in 1970. This analysis is not taken any further, however.³ Barrow also complains about the way that other countries attacked small and insignificant 'little' New Zealand for its sporting contacts with South Africa, arguing that the British and the French maintained at least as much contact as New Zealand. Such a complaint contradicts the whole point of Barrow's book, which is to demonstrate the significance of the links between South Africa and New Zealand in rugby. Pressure on New Zealand was because of the central place of rugby in white South African culture and the acknowledgment of how important Test matches against New Zealand were to South African whites.

All Blacks Versus Springboks also well-serves the rugby nostalgia industry in New Zealand. Now that apartheid is fading (but certainly not its legacy), Barrow asserts that ‘hopefully, from 1992 onwards, the only things which would excite-the passions of New Zealanders about rugby contact with South Africa would take place on the field of play’. In Barrow’s world, the protests against playing South Africa in rugby were merely a short-term aberration and an inconvenience caused by a few well-organised radicals. The danger is that such a view is already dominant in New Zealand where rugby and the rugby culture, with tremendous help from the New Zealand media and big business, have regained their positions that suffered so much in the aftermath of 1981. Rather than seeking to draw on the diversity of opinions in New Zealand, the old white male cultural hegemony has been maintained and repackaged for popular consumption.

Prospects for future political and cultural challenges to white male and middle-class hegemony may even be more difficult than in the past. It is not likely that a social issue dealing with international cultural contacts will emerge soon to so divide the soul of New Zealand society. With the support of big business and television, a repackaged rugby may also be harder to attack. Despite its media portrayal as a game embodying the essence of New Zealandness, rugby remains as a cultural form that promotes violence, the denigration of women and homosexuals and is built on the backs of women’s domestic service.⁴ During the 1970s and 1980s, many New Zealanders protested against social and cultural injustices in their society and other societies. In 1981 rugby was attacked not just over the Springbok tour, but over issues of racism and sexism in New Zealand. Rugby reinforced white male power in the country as it continues to do in the 1990s.

These three books all attest to the power of rugby in New Zealand popular culture. They also suggest the ways in which nostalgia and sports history, be it academic or journalistic, reinforce male (largely white and

middle class) hegemony and can serve to create new forms of cultural conservatism that hearken back to the glory days of old. This view of nostalgia differs somewhat from that proposed by Bryan Turner and others. Turner sees nostalgia as a symptom of backward-looking academics who fail to embrace modernism and look backwards towards some type of mythical idyllic community.⁵ While sport historians and journalists have certainly been nostalgic in Turner's definition, the New Zealand case shows how hegemonic cultural values can be used to underpin economic changes and to marginalise protests by feminist, ecologists and other groups.

Nostalgia can be used by dominant power groups to legitimate their position through promoting a sense of cultural security through cultural practices common to many members of society. People also use nostalgia to resist rapid changes in society and to challenge new ways of thinking promoted by political and cultural elites. If we see nostalgia as a contested cultural terrain and try to understand its uses in specific historical moments, we will be better equipped to understand how people make sense of their world in cultural terms. In Australia and New Zealand, nostalgia is playing a powerful role in the face of Americanisation of culture, Australian debates over creating a republic and in both countries moves towards closer ties with Asia. Sport, in particular, links with the imperial old boys' network of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the British Isles, may even develop more nostalgic power as old economic, political and cultural ties appear threatened. Current representations of cricket and rugby contacts with South Africa in Australia and New Zealand point this out very clearly.

NOTES

1. John Nauright, 'Myth and Reality: Reflections on Rugby and New Zealand Historiography', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 6, no. 2, May 1990, pp. 219-30.
2. For a discussion of war and rugby in New Zealand society, see Jock Phillips, 'Rugby, War and the Mythology of the New Zealand Male', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 18, no. 2, Oct. 1984, pp. 83-103.
3. For more on this, see John Nauright, "'Like Fleas on a Dog': Emerging National and International Conflict over New Zealand Rugby Ties with South Africa, 1965-1974", *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 10, no. 1, Nov. 1993; Douglas Booth, 'The South African Way of Life', unpub. PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1993.
4. See Shona Thompson's excellent work on the relationship of women to rugby in her 'Challenging the Hegemony: New Zealand Women's Opposition to Rugby and the Reproduction of a Capitalist Patriarchy', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 23, 1988, pp.205-12; and "'Thank the Ladies for the Plates": The Incorporation of Women into Sport', *Leisure studies*, vol. 9, 1990, pp. 135-43.
5. Bryan S. Turner, 'A Note on Nostalgia', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 4, 1987, pp. 147-56; George Stauth and Bryan S Tuner, 'Nostalgia, Postmodernism and the Critique of Mass Culture', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 5, 1988, pp. 509-26.