

John Nauright and Timothy Chandler, eds, *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*. Frank Cass, London, 1995. Index. pp. 256.

This book is concerned with sport and the social construction of manliness in Britain and its former settler societies South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. The editors chose rugby football (for the most part Rugby Union) as the focus of their analysis, although, as they rightly point out, comparative studies could be made with other football codes and cricket. There are, however, good reasons for making rugby a special subject of inquiry into sport and masculinity. In order to appreciate this the editors stress that we need to understand the unique historical development of rugby and how it was taken up differently both within Britain and among the settler societies.

Team sports such as rowing, cricket and rugby were promoted in English public schools during the second half of the nineteenth century and were disseminated to the settler societies as part of the imperial curriculum. These games were made the preserve of young boys, to whom sport was considered an essential component of 'character development'. Central to this training was the amateur ideal in sport. Cricket was deemed suitable for schoolboys because it had been largely purged of its association with gambling and professionalism, while rugby was the quintessentially 'pure' football code—unlike association football which allowed player payment and club shareholders. According to their public school, middle-class promoters, amateur team sports 'defined' Englishness: they were corner stones of a 'respectable' games ethic that promoted loyalty to empire, pride in the white race and respect for the conventions of social hierarchy. They were also celebrations of manhood.

Of the amateur team sports, rugby was considered widely to be the supreme 'test' of manly courage and team commitment for young boys in public schools. This is partly because, as chapters by Nauright and Mangan show, rugby was most closely associated with physical and mental preparation for war. Jingoistic rhetoric was common to schoolboy rugby, with patriotic educators instilling ideas about the 'glory' of military sacrifice for one's country and the importance of young men 'proving' themselves as a team on both sporting fields and battle fields. This was also true of cricket, of course, but what made rugby special was its aggressive body contact, with a real risk of pain and injury through

participation. What was more, playing rugby was compulsory in English public schools and in many leading educational institutions throughout the settler empire. The sport therefore promised to 'make' men of young boys, whether they liked it or not. Indeed, rugby was a ritual of heterosexual masculinity, with rigorous physical exercise intended to instil 'toughness' among boys. This was expected to deter them from overly sensitive and 'effeminate' behaviour, including so-called 'unnatural' sexual curiosity in each other. The male body was to be tackled and hit—an object of disciplined aggression—and certainly not touched in a homoerotic manner.

What also makes rugby special is that while the sport was being used as a way of instilling patriotism and war fervour, the game was itself undergoing a civil war in the 1890s and early 1900s, most noticeably in the north of England and later in the heartland of Australian rugby, New South Wales. As is well known disputes over the legitimacy of broken-time payments to injured players precipitated these conflicts. Many competitors—particularly wage labourers in the industrial north of England—could not afford to continue playing rugby unless they were compensated. Importantly, the chapter by Martens shows that this conflict related to a wider contest for control among the game's 'educated' southern, and 'business-like' northern, administrators. Rugby was popular in the industrial north because the sport's physical aggression suited traditional conceptions of masculine, working class social status. The game was promoted there by an entrepreneurial middle class who, in addition for a passion about rugby, saw it as a means of instilling workplace loyalty among labourers. What was more, northern rugby prized on-field performance, not simply playing the game. Men competed for personal rewards, as they did at work, with Rugby League promoting loyalty to factory and community, and pride in individual performance. Although Rugby Union also demanded masculine aggression, the amateur ethos instilled by public school 'old boys' stressed service to the club and disdain towards individualism. The rewards were said to be intrinsic to participation in the sport itself.

The chapter by Murray Phillips on the two rugby codes in wartime Australia (1914-18) is a superb example of how 'playing the game' was invested with very different meanings. Amateurs had long associated rugby with preparation for wartime service. 'Being a man' on the rugby field during a war was, according to them, no substitute for the 'game of

life' on the battlefield. This sacrificial imagery held little substance in Rugby League where, although the sport's administrators supported the war effort, they steadfastly refused to put a stop to their competition. This decision made Rugby League players a target for so-called 'loyalists' in Rugby Union circles who, in addition to querying the patriotism of Rugby League players, questioned whether they were really 'man enough' to serve their country.

By adopting a comparative and historical approach *Making Men* reveals how rugby had different purposes in the settler societies of empire. For example, in South Africa rugby was the preserve of a middle class white minority which used the game to reinforce their sense of 'superiority' over blacks, who increasingly took up the working class game of soccer. The chapters by Robert Morrell and Albert Grundlingh demonstrate just how closely rugby became tied with white identity in a country where blacks were always the overwhelming majority. In New Zealand and Australia, however, the boundaries of racial separatism were not so clearly drawn, with the game providing some opportunities for black involvement. Significantly, sports boycotts against South Africa have since played an important role in pressure to oust the apartheid regime, and rugby, more than any other sport, was crucial to this process as Nauright and Black demonstrate in their chapter. However, while *Making Men* traces the relative breakdown of class and racial barriers in rugby, it also emphasises the persistence of discourses promoting male dominance. As Nauright shows so convincingly, rugby nostalgia has been used widely in both New Zealand and South Africa to promote traditional conceptions of masculinity. In particular, manliness has been associated with frontier imagery in these countries (as Jock Phillips and Morrell clearly demonstrate in their chapters), harking back to a time when men worked with their hands rather than with their brains, and gender divisions were more pronounced than they are today.

Indeed, what is fundamental to *Making Men* is how nation and empire have long been conceived of in essentially masculine terms. As David Andrews explains superbly in his chapter on Welsh rugby, women played very little part in the invention of national symbols, anthems and cultural icons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among these was the sport of rugby which was often claimed to be a national (albeit male-only) sport—especially in New Zealand, Wales, England

and among white South Africans—this helping to enshrine the ‘naturalness’ of male leadership in these societies. Andrews’ chapter provides the best explanation to date of the process of gendering the nation through sport and other masculinist symbols. There were no comparable national female sports teams (until netball went more fully international in the 1960s) and, although many women were enthusiastic supporters of rugby, they did so as supporters and domestic helpers—not as players. Only recently have women taken to playing rugby in a systematic way, and as the editors have suggested, the time is ripe for their historians to come forward. But we are left wondering why there is no female contributor to *Making Men* (though one was initially planned)—particularly in discussions of New Zealand—where Nauright and Black emphasise the importance of the 1981 Springbok tour in generating female hostility to masculine dominance in New Zealand society as expressed through the rugby culture. Indeed, Nauright goes on to emphasise the ‘excellent work’ of Shona Thompson in this area. Why wasn’t she part of the All Black team?

The timing of this book and its contemporary relevance, however, could scarcely have been better. Rugby League is undergoing a process of ‘enforced’ modernisation under the influence of media magnate Rupert Murdoch, and Rugby Union is destined to embrace professionalism—even in England where fifty-seven ‘old farts’ still hold the reigns of power. In the light of *Making Men* it will be interesting to see how the historical link between rugby, nation, community and masculinity will be repackaged for popular consumption during the late 1990s. Finally, this book is also topical because the third Rugby World Cup has just been staged in South Africa—a development that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. It is also significant that the final was won by the host nation against their great rivals the All Blacks, with both teams sporting at least one player of colour. This poses interesting questions for Nauright, who has pioneered discussions of Springbok rugby and nostalgia in South Africa. Will the victory help to popularise and democratise rugby in South Africa in any meaningful way, or will it embolden the white minority, reminding them of their own past sporting glories and their once autocratic hold on power? If the former holds truer than the latter, it seems likely that the World Cup will thus help South Africans to look forward rather than back, and to see the Springbok victory of 1995 as a symbol for a ‘new’ nation. We

might therefore imagine (or at least hope for) a time of reconciliation and shared aspirations in a non-racial South Africa. If that were the case, liberal-minded South Africans might look back—dare I say it with nostalgia—at the 1995 Springbok victory.

We will have to wait and see, of course, but in contemplating an uncertain future, it is important to be aware of a complicated past. *Making Men* performs this dual task by way of a well coordinated collection of chapters that are accessible to both academic and general readers alike. This book is a ‘must’ read for students of rugby, as well as those with interests in gender and the politics of identity, and it will lead the way in future discussions of sport and invented traditions. Given the quality of this volume, we can look forward to a flurry of studies into sport and masculinity.

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