

Terry Williams, *Out of the Blue: The History of Newtown RLFC*. Newtown RLFC, Sydney, 1993. pp. 170.

Newtown's story is typical in many ways, unique in others, and certainly relevant to the present turmoil in the game of Rugby League. Terry Williams has approached his task in a fairly traditional manner in that he details much of the material pertinent to the Club such as its successes—which have included three premierships—along with long-serving administrators and coaches, and the most prominent players who have represented New South Wales and Australia. While *Out of the Blue* celebrates Newtown's achievements, there is also some good interplay at times relating the Club to its social background. There are numerous examples of early working class links including the practice of issuing free tickets to the employees of local woollen mills and the provision of playing facilities by the Metters Stove Company. Similarly, the relationship between members of the Australian Labor Party and the Club is explicit and is exemplified by the detailed contribution of Federal Labor parliamentarian and Newtown stalwart, Fred Daly. Sectarianism is also mentioned in relation to the non-selection of Catholic Len Smith on the 1948 Kangaroo tour. Williams makes some startling claims:

All three of the selectors were Freemasons, but Smith was a Catholic. Whilst this did not prevent him being selected earlier in the season it did not help him later in the year when political machinations behind the scenes were planning the tour. There had been no Catholic captain of a Kangaroo touring team prior to Smith (Clive Churchill was the first) and one of the unofficial duties of the captain was to liaise with the Freemasons in England (p. 50).

Religious conflict is one fruitful area which remains largely untapped in League and other sporting research. Williams also accurately portrays, mainly through extensive biographical features, the social dimension of League which is more often attributed to its middle class rival, Rugby Union.

There are two reasons why this book is important to League historiography. Firstly, the Club has been central to the debate over the pioneer institution to register with the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL). Controversy has centred around when the inaugural Newtown meeting was held. The Club has minute books which are dated 8 January

1908. If correct, Newtown would be the oldest club. Most League historians agree—and Williams provides little convincing evidence to the contrary—that the date on the document is inaccurate and the honour should go the defunct Glebe Club. Secondly, Newtown is the only club in the past fifty years to be excluded from the premier competition by the NSWRL administration. The reasons given for the axing of the Newtown Club were the industrialisation of the suburb, changing demographics and competition from other leisure pursuits all resulting in declining crowds. Other Sydney clubs have had similar experiences in the 1980s and 1990s and their respective futures are far from certain. The downfall of the Newtown Club, at the end of the 1983 season, resulted in bitterness for some, division within the football ranks, trauma for many individual players, coaches and trainers, and it is not surprising that the relevant chapter is entitled ‘Stabbed in the back’. For many Club supporters, football was central to their identity. The Newtown case is pertinent because in an age of mergers, threatened demise of clubs, and the divisiveness caused by the Rupert Murdoch-inspired ‘Super League’. What happens to supporters, officials and players when their futures seem threatened? After Newtown was excluded the Club did not fold, but went into hibernation while several stalwarts successfully solved financial problems. Newtown entered the second tier competition, the Metropolitan Cup, in 1991. In the following year, Newtown won the competition, and a sizeable crowd of 7000 attended Parramatta Stadium for the occasion. The Newtown situation indicates that a Club is able to survive despite adverse conditions but what is less clear, and unanswered, is the short and long term effects on supporters when a club is disbanded, merged, relocated or even revived in a lesser competition. Do followers cope easily, shift their allegiances or lose interest in the code? It is quite possible that many other clubs will face similar fates to Newtown in the near future. They may provide further examples which will help understand the relationship between football supporters, identity and revamped sporting structures and traditions.

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