

Graham Croker, *Memories of Scrum and Ruck: A History of the Walcha Rugby Union Football Club, 1894-1994*. Walcha RUFC, K L & N A Murphy, Walcha 1995. \$20 (available from Walcha RUFC).

Graham Croker's centenary history of the Walcha Rugby Union club is a gem. He takes his title from words penned by the club's first Wallaby Bill Laycock:

And here's the luck old chap, the golden luck
to garner on the greensward with your peers
Memories as rich as mine from scrum and ruck
To bear you gallant down the years.

The passion for the game so evident in Laycock's words is obviously shared by the author and shines through in a tome which will delight every Rugby fan and which will be of more than passing interest to the social historian.

Walcha is a small country town located in the North-east of New South Wales on the great dividing range near the Apsley River. Croker, editor of the University of New South Wales publication *Uniken*, grew up in Walcha and played for the club at one time. While the first mention of the Walcha Club is found in an August edition of the *Armidale Express* of 1894, it is almost certain that rugby was played in the district at an earlier date. By 1894 however all the ingredients of a formal club existed: 'a committee, a ground and a guernsey'.

Croker does more than chronicle the achievements of the Walcha club. The early chapters trace the development of rugby in Australia and its spread to rural districts highlighting some of Walcha's distinctiveness. One criticism relates to Croker's claim that Sydney University Rugby Union Club (founded in 1863) is the oldest club 'outside of Britain' because Crocker defines Dublin University as a 'British club'. Trinity College Dublin, this pedantic Irishman would like to suggest, is the home of the oldest rugby club (founded in 1845) outside of Britain and the second oldest in the world!

The book was commissioned by the club and includes a blow-by-blow account of each season to appeal to the local supporters. However, reports of early seasons also provide useful insights into the media coverage of sport. Accounts frequently include mention of travel between towns, match reports, details of accommodations and after-match social activities, including speeches by local dignitaries. Clubs in the pre-World War I era had to travel long distances on bad roads or by train—the train station was located twelve miles from Walcha. The twenty-five mile trip to Uralla took four-and-a-half hours. Of interest to social historians is discussion of the division of work and leisure: mid-week half holiday matches were often played on Wednesdays.

The development of the town and surrounding district forms a backdrop to the football narrative. Croker acknowledges a close link between economic prosperity and the success of the football club. Rugby was played at Walcha from 1894 until 1930 with a break during the great war of 1914-18. Having survived the incursions of rugby league into the district (with some members often playing both codes), it was the great depression which saw the demise of the club in 1930.

With the growing economic prosperity of the post-World War II era the club re-formed in 1950. An expanding population (partly due to federal government resettlement of returned servicemen), booming wool prices, and the use of superphosphate, brought Walcha a new prosperity. Many of those who reformed the club had family ties with the great players and officials of the clubs earlier era. Walcha achieved instant success on and off the field being to the fore in the politics of rugby union in the region, as had been the case earlier in the century.

Croker conveys successfully the mythology which built up within the club during the 1950s—a mythology which drew on the deeds of past Walcha teams. Football clubs of all codes often rely on unrecorded

anecdotes to maintain their mythology and identity. A chapter is devoted to the printable Walcha rugby union tales which make amusing reading even to an outsider. Chapters devoted to overseas tours which began in 1977, junior rugby, the role of the women's auxiliary and the club's Wallabies provide an insight into the importance of rugby in the district. The Wallaby chapter is a great read and leaves one wondering over the vagaries of the selection process in Australian sport.

The author drew on club and media records for the post-1950 era along with his own recollections. Because two fires in 1928 and 1932 had destroyed most of the files of the *Walcha News* and the *Walcha Witness* and because no minute books exist, the earlier history of the club was more difficult to research. Crocker relied on the fading memories of old timers and scattered newspaper reports. He was fortunate to gain access to NSWRU yearbooks held in NSWRU president Peter Crittle's private collection.

Memories from Scrum and Ruck is a fine exploration of sport in a rural community which blends social history with an abundance of 'great yarns'. Crocker has overcome the problem of limited sources in some periods to provide a well-rounded club history which will serve as a useful model for others contemplating a similar work. The book was produced locally by the club (consistent with their buy locally philosophy) and is a limited edition of one thousand. It is a beautifully-presented hardback volume replete with photographs and containing few errors.

NOTE:

- 1 T West, *The Bold Collegians: The Development of Sport in Trinity College Dublin*, Lilliput Press, Dublin 1991.

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