

**David Headon and Lex Marinos, eds, *League of a Nation*. ABC Books, Sydney, 1994. Illus. pp. 244. \$18.95.**

The editors of this work claim that they began with the intention of rectifying the 'impoverished' written tradition of rugby league. In comparison to other Australian sports, particularly cricket and Australian Rules football, rugby league has been a poor relation in the literary field, with a dearth of both quality and scope. The editors have succeeded in their aim, bringing together forty-nine contributors, most of whom have produced new writing on the code. The authors themselves are an incredibly diverse bunch, including academics, some of Australia's leading writers, broadcasters, comics, and football players. Given the scope of its contributors, it is not surprising that the articles are fairly eclectic. It is clear that the editors have targeted a very broad audience, combining both scholarly and more general material within the one volume.

Reading through this book one cannot fail to link it with the current turmoil within the sport, as it rips itself apart while rival media organisations battle to control its future. Not surprisingly, a number of the articles are nostalgic for the 'good old days' when the game seemed much simpler, but even within them the seeds of the current crisis are visible. What began as a sport pitting Sydney's working class suburbs against each other slowly transformed into big business. Reading through these accounts one can see how factors such as the introduction of television coverage of the game and increasing consumerism began to split the sport away from its traditional base. This led to the expansion of the games support both geographically and demographically. The manner in which these changes occurred, often grudgingly and without a clear plan for the future, contributed to the current malaise.

There are a number of new pieces of research that will be of interest to the academic audience. Among these is Max Howell's piece on the defection of the Wallaby rugby union team to league in 1909. Of particular interest is his investigation of James Joynton Smith, and his

motives for bank-rolling the defection. Howell shows that Smith acted independently of, and with little regard to, the rugby league authorities with the sole motivation of using the game to promote his media activities. What is particularly interesting is how similar Joynton Smith's actions were to those of Rupert Murdoch in the recent upheaval. Murray Phillips's piece on player loyalty to clubs paints an interesting picture of how the number of player transfers have risen over time and the changes in the game, especially NSWRL labour restrictions, that have influenced this.

A number of other contributions are of interest to historians of the code. A brief outline by Tim Sheens of his career gives some fascinating insights into the difficulties Penrith had in recruiting players to play in Sydney's west, and the internal culture of the club at that time. Former Australian captain George Peponis writes of how playing rugby league helped him gain acceptance into Anglo-Saxon Australian society. He also comments on one of the often forgotten legacies of the game on those who play it, a life time of often severe physical injuries. That rugby league has not always been an inclusive code is well illustrated by the essay of Jacquelin Magney on the traditional exclusion of women from many aspects of the game.

As with any work of this nature the quality of the contributions varies, with some pieces being of lesser merit. However, the bulk of the material is of high quality, and there are a few gems to be found. Of particular note are the two pieces, by Murray Hedgcock and Andrew Moore, comparing the game in Australia with that in Great Britain, which in themselves justify purchasing the book. Hedgcock looks at how the game in Australia has managed to expand beyond its roots and attract a wider audience, while it remains a regional sport in Britain, surviving on its traditional working-class supporters. Moore reflects on his tour following the 1994 Kangaroo tour of Britain, and of his impressions of British society in general, particularly the growing social divisions. Despite this, and the problems the code is facing, Moore was encouraged by the buoyancy of supporters in Britain, and was particularly impressed with their strong notions of tradition and historical reference, something he sees as being a significant deficiency of the game in Australia. Such comparative analysis of the code offers great insights into our understanding of the game in Australia, and it is regrettable that the technique is not used more often. The experiences of an Australian

player in the English competition, or of a 'Brit' playing in the Sydney premiership, should provide fascinating insights into a number of facets of the game.

If there is one major criticism of this collection it is that it is extremely Sydney-centric, and focuses almost exclusively on the game at the elite level. The only times the book moves beyond its Sydney base, apart from the two chapters on the game in England and a brief look at the origins of State of Origin football, is when it considers expansion of the NSWRL (now ARL) premiership competition. A truly 'national' overview of the game really deserves more on the code in Queensland, and on the place in the game in the country. The role of the game in the country is a strong part of rugby league mythology that deserves more thorough investigation. Another vital issue is to consider why the game has not been able to attract truly national support and the factors lying behind this. These are all areas that deserve attention, but this criticism should not detract from the value of the book, as it does provide much appreciated new material on a number of issues that have been almost completely overlooked.

All in all, *League of a Nation* is a welcome contribution to Australia's sporting literature, and is a worthwhile investment for both fans of the code, and those who want a deeper understanding of it.

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