

Review Articles

Some Hope in Rugby Writing, But the Blokes are Still in Control

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Joseph Romanos, *Black*. Hodder Moa Beckett, Auckland, 1997. pp. 185. \$NZ 24.95.

Graham Hutchins, *A Score to Settle: A Celebration of All Black-Springbok Rugby 1921-1996*. Grantham House, Wellington, 1997. Bibliog., illus. pp. 152. \$NZ 24.95.

Spiro Zavos, *Winters of Revenge: The Bitter Rivalry Between the All Blacks and the Springboks*. Viking Penguin, Auckland, 1997. pp. 264. \$NZ 29.95.

It would be fair to say that the recent popularising literary trend in sports writing has by-passed rugby. Not that literary engagements with sport are all that new — bull-fighting and game fishing had Ernest Hemingway, boxing has Norman Mailer and more especially Joyce Carol Oates, angling had Izaak Walton. This is without even considering Homer's Olympics, Verne's ballooning, Conan Doyle's archery or the chivalric sport of Sir Walter Scott's jousting knights.

The new turn in literary sports commentary has centred on soccer as the English intelligentsia and middle class rediscovered their laddish passion for the round ball code. Nick Hornby is probably most to blame with *his Fever Pitch* and the edited collection *My Favourite Year*.¹ Since then, football magazines such as *When Saturday Comes* and *Four Four Two* seem to have become about as common as *The Face* in the 1980s, though neither of them have yet had the temerity of claim to be the 'Magazine of the Decade'. They prefer the more subdued 'Half decent Football Magazine' or the 'Football Magazine with Style'. Good laddish humility. The laddishness even admits women's soccer (see Pete Davies's fabulous *I Lost My Heart to the Belles* about champion women's team the Doncaster Belles).²

Boxing draws a fair share of literary aficionados with one of the more

recent forays being Davis Miller's engaging *Tao of Mohammad Ali*.³ Then there is the Oscar-winning film festival hit, 'When We Were Kings' about Ali-Foreman in 1974.⁴ The rumble in the jungle has found fans from among all sorts partly because it is such a good piece of film-making, partly because it is Ali, and partly because it has become kind of chic.

All this without even touching on cricket — *In the Covers*, *The Rain Men*, *War Minus the Shooting* or *Anyone But England*,⁵ and all this without mentioning the greatest, *Beyond a Boundary*.⁶ There is fiction as well, such as John King's *The Football Factory* or Manuel Vazquez Montalban's *Off Side*.⁷

These emerging trends have largely missed both rugby and New Zealand. There are some exceptions. In rugby, Stuart Barnes and Mike Seabrook's *Nice Tries: An Anthology of New Rugby Writing* contains some excellent essays, fiction, musings and meanderings.⁸ I am particularly fond of Damian Hopley's 'Ten Commandments of Touring' and Stuart Barnes's 'Bath—From a Rear View Mirror': they contain passion, humour and point to many of the delights and reasons for playing. They are also very good writing.

The case of New Zealand is a little sadder. Other than the Lloyd Jones's edited collection *Into the Field of Play*,⁹ there is little in New Zealand writing to suggest that there is any great connection between sport and letters, except for the ironically-titled literary magazine *Sport*.¹⁰ Despite this, it is often held that the biggest selling genre of New Zealand books is the sports biography. To be sure, there are an awful lot of them (although I have to wonder about the biography of a 23-year-old rugby player — there is only so much that can be said but the June release Lomu¹¹ seems to have been quite popular. It did contain a huge number of large glossy photos so should be seen as in the pop-star pictography genre). Zavos, who makes considerable use of some of the better books about rugby players, calls these volumes 'rugbiographies' as if he cannot quite admit them to genre of biography proper. His is the only one of these three books that makes any dent in the rather hum-drum image of New Zealand rugby writing — and then it is only a dent.

There is little that is more sacred to New Zealand blokedom than All Black-Springbok football matches. The passion and intensity with which games are debated, replayed (and defended against anti-apartheid protesters) would put the Footscray Football Club to shame. And this from men for whom emotion is a pause in the lift of a glass to acknowledge

success. New Zealand-South Africa rugby competitions have always been the 'unofficial' world championships. Only in 1995, amid allegations of food poisoning and other despicable acts, was it the real thing.

Opposition to sporting contact with South Africa has never been far from the surface. The exclusion, in 1928, of the big-kicking star fullback George Nepia, in particular when the New Zealand Rugby Football Union bowed to the desires of the South African Rugby Board that Maori be excluded, was a major blow and caused some comment. From individual complaints in 1949 public opposition grew to the 'No Maoris No Tour' position in 1960 to become the active campaign to isolate apartheid. For many, the demand that Maori be excluded from early teams meant that it was not a real world championship. In response to the all white All Black tour in 1960, touring American satirist Tom Lehrer sang:

No it doesn't really matter what New Zealand may have lost
As long as Kiwi rugby players are supreme.
And just think how glad they'd make us if they came back
with the title
Of the world's greatest non-pigmented team.¹²

The point seemed lost on the NZRFU and the government of the day.

Yet, the telling thing about rugby writing is that the political context of the sport is usually ignored. At best, there is usually the merest doffing of the cap to a controversy. Graeme Barrow, in his *All Blacks Versus Springboks*,¹³ at least dedicates a chapter to the question of sporting contact with apartheid but in his chapter on the 1981 Springbok tour of New Zealand simply notes that when the game against Waikato was cancelled, the tourists had only five games left to settle on a Test line-up.¹⁴ He fails to mention that the cancellation was because several hundred protesters occupied Rugby Park until the game was called off, but he does note that the anti-tour movement used illegal methods while 'law-abiding citizens' were denied their rugby.¹⁵

But then, 1981 was something special. The issue was so profound, so thoroughly in the face of the rugby community, that it could not be ignored. Even Graham Hutchins's rugby celebratory has to pay attention to the anti-apartheid 'issue', but then only to point to problems of the 'extremism' that the tour brought about.

For Hutchins, 1981 was an aberrant time in the otherwise glorious history of rugby relations between the two countries. Politics and apartheid

are almost totally ignored elsewhere: there is no mention of the 'No Maoris No Tour' campaign in 1960 and neither is there comment on the turmoil of the 1976 All Black tour of South Africa coinciding with the Soweto rising. This was the tour that brought New Zealand pictures of its heroes sheltering in the back of police vans to escape tear gas. The only hint of concern is the comment that 'Ken Gray, the best prop in world rugby, announced his unavailability [for the 1970s tour] because of the political situation'.¹⁶ This is all put in the context of doubts over the ability of the All Blacks to beat the Springboks that year. Surprisingly, there is also no mention that this was the first touring team to include non-Pakeha players: three Maori and a Samoan.

John Nauright has criticised New Zealand rugby writing for its strong nostalgic content.¹⁷ *A Score to Settle* is an almost classic example of this nostalgic voice. It is what can only be called blokey sports writing consisting of almost equal amounts of match reports and chaps and their adventures, trials and tribulations attempting to watch and support games. As such, it is in a voice where there is a powerful discursive reinforcement of an almost hyper-masculine space in rugby allowing the individualisation of engagements with the code. It is not an authentic code, but almost Baudrillardian hyper-reality. The rugby is mediated: only until 1956 do men seem to go to the games, since then they have engaged with the unreal, almost nonexistent, mediated form of the game through radio or television.

Hutchins celebrates the masculinist bonding session of father and son struggling out of bed at 2 am to listen to the game (or watch it in speckled black and white on the neighbour's television set). Not only does he stress the camaraderie and solidarity, the induction of the boy into the adult male world that these rituals encapsulate, but his writing style validates and valorises this male gaze. There is an excessive focus on individual players or stars — the star winger (Brian Williams in 1970, John Kirwan in the 1990s), the heroic captain (all of them). In doing so, he places himself very firmly in the hyper-masculinist world where the male gaze of equivalence and incorporation facilitates an identification with the game's participants.

This identification, this gaze encouraging equivalence, coincides with and reinforces a security derived from nationality that facilitates and permits other identities without threatening to disrupt the accepted social fabric. The identification of the All Blacks as nationally representative

and as the embodiment of masculine New Zealand when combined with rugby watching as a scopophilic activity serves to fetishise both the nation and the characteristics with which rugby is imbued.¹⁸ The All Blacks, in this way, become both totemic and fetishistic. This is fetishism in both Freudian and Marxist senses. In the former, the All Blacks come to stand in for the whole, while in the latter the characteristics produced within or attributed to rugby by the hegemonic masculinised national imagery are granted independent existence and thus naturalised. Both these fetishistic processes conflate to grant rugby in general and the All Blacks in particular a sacrosanct position in the iconography of New Zealand. This masculinising gaze, a notion that gained its most sophisticated development in the feminist psychoanalytic film theory associated with the British film journal, *Screen*, is a useful body of analysis to bring to discussion of New Zealand rugby writing.¹⁹

Whereas Hutchins is shamelessly and explicitly celebratory, Joseph Romanos seems to have simply set out to tell a strapping yam. *Black* is very definitely aimed at the mass market end of sports fiction. There is plenty of sex, drinking, vomiting, fighting, larrikinism and yahooing to make the reader certain that this is based on detailed knowledge of rugby tours over the years. To be fair, it is a more accurate description of the end of the season trip to the Gold Coast by the suburban team than it is of the modern international tour. The story remains the ultimate male rugby fantasy. These All Black tourists are as temperamental and quintessentially Pakeha New Zealand masculine as the lads on the end of season trip. This simple move facilitates the creation of equivalence so the characters become blokes we know. To top it off, the central character is a woman in the All Black camp. This move unsettles the masculine voice, but then Claire Wallace is not really an outsider: she is the great grand-daughter of All Black great Billy Wallace and possessor of enormous rugby knowledge.

Although Billy Wallace really did play for the All Blacks, Romanos is at pains in the disclaimer (on p. 5) to point out that Claire is fictitious and unrelated to any of Billy's great-grand-daughters. Despite the generality of this disclaimer, there is an enormous temptation to play 'spot-the-All-Black'. The characters are equally understandable in terms of either Weberian or psychoanalytic types. As such, and as befits the genre, they are flat characters: the surly rugby administrator, the beneficent patriarch, the hostile coach with the deep-seated grudge, the hero who throws away the promising academic (!) career (in my old department) for a shot at All

Black glory. Now there is the great anti-intellectual fantasy explicitly enacted: Chris Chalmers is saved from Effete Academe by rugby and All Black Glory. Oh, and of course, the array of wives, lovers, girlfriends, assorted partners and team followers.

Romanos seems to have it in for his journalist colleagues. He sees them as sycophantic, unintelligent, dull. I have to admit to a soft spot for the Greek chorus of the 'twins', a pair of particularly stupid and fawning reporters who effectively become the mouthpieces of the NZRFU hierarchy. One question, is the mistaken naming of Chris Chalmers Chris Carter a subconscious hint at Romanos's knowledge of the popular or just a simple proofing error?

Zavos's *Winters of Revenge* is in quite a different league. Zavos is an experienced and talented sports journalist (with a Master's degree in History and Education). In this case he has produced a solid engagement with a wide range of sources (academic, journalistic, rugbyography as well as drawing on his own extensive knowledge and experience). In doing so, he has produced a far better and more critically engaging work than his previous book about Bledisloe Cup rugby: the regular New Zealand-Australia competition. Generically, this is somewhere between good journalism and solid and accessible popular history.

Despite his good grasp of the range of New Zealand rugby writing as well as a more general consideration of sports history, he persists with the problematic argument that rugby is inclusive.²⁰ Elsewhere he makes a biographical argument for sports as inclusive, drawing on his sense of inclusion as a result of his cricketing success as a young man.²¹ This parallel is not convincing. Cricket may be the great colonial game, but rugby is the site of iconic New Zealand masculinity. It does not admit outsiders that easily. In this sense, Zavos has not shown any real grasp of hegemonic analyses of sport and nationhood.

The argument that rugby is inclusive, that those outside the power structures of New Zealand are admitted to full citizenship through rugby prowess is less than convincing. Maori have been able to gain success and credibility through rugby competence, but this has not translated into membership of the national social elite. It is more likely that Maori rugby success is precisely because they are not part of and unlikely to become full members of a post-colonial New Zealand. Maori rugby players are valid and acceptable because they do not challenge the dominant ideological view of Maori derived from the nineteenth century image of

the noble savage. If anything, the image of Maori rugby players footing it with the cream of Pakeha masculinity is a potent weapon in the struggle against moves to a new post-colonial political order.

Maori have played a crucial role in the depiction of New Zealand identity. New Zealand was held to have the best race relations in the world, and the notion of one nation held strong — at least for Pakeha. The reality is more that Pakeha and Maori lived apart with a clear urban/rural divide. Contact between Maori and Pakeha communities was almost non-existent. The answer to Sinclair's 1971 question about New Zealand's race relations is simply that they appeared so good because Maori and Pakeha stayed apart.²² This belief in the excellence of New Zealand's race relations and social equality has been undermined since the mid-1970s with the resurgence of Maori social protest movement. Despite this weakening, it remains a tenet of common sense political culture.

The notion of good, or even ideal, race relations was invoked in a range of contexts of New Zealand-South Africa relations. Former Prime Minister Sir John Marshall was a great advocate of 'building bridges' to show South Africa that things could be different. This was not a new idea. Zavos cites a letter to the *Christchurch Press* in 1902 arguing in favour of a Maori contingent to the South African war which claimed that 'it would be a shame to talk about the colour line in connection with the Maoris (*sic*). They certainly are not, and we do not look upon them as, an inferior race . . . Moreover, they would be a splendid object lesson to the Boers — a conquered people living in perfect harmony and contentment with their conquerors.'²³ In the era of the post-apartheid political regime (but not the post-apartheid state — that will take much longer), New Zealanders still have a tendency to see themselves as offering a model for a new order.

This ideology provides the basis of argument Zavos advances regarding the inclusiveness of rugby. He takes the case further to argue that rugby has traditionally been more inclusive than the anti-apartheid movement.²⁴ He quite properly points to the exclusion of Maori from the hierarchies of the state, from leadership positions in the church (failing to note that the Anglicans have had a Maori Bishop of Aotearoa for many years) and argues that neither the major anti-apartheid organisations (HART — Halt All Racist Tours, and CARE — the Citizens Association for Racial Equality) 'never had Maori in leadership positions'. In making this argument, Zavos assumes that HART and CARE equalled the anti-apartheid movement. This was not the case. These organisations certainly

provided the structural core, but every major protest action since the 1970 All Black tour of South Africa saw the development of broad oppositional coalitions where Maori played key leadership roles, including Tom Poata and Barney Pikare in 1970; Donna Awatere, Ripeka Evans, Ted Nia, various members of the Harawia family, Ray Ahipene-Mercer, Penny Poutu, Paul Barcham and countless others in 1981. Zavos would be on firmer ground here if he had pointed to the tensions between those with an anti-apartheid focus and others who sought to build an organisation focusing almost exclusively on racism in New Zealand in the wake of the 1981 tour campaign.

Granted, there have been some great Maori rugby players. The first captain of a New Zealand representative side was Maori — Dave Gage — as Zavos points out.²⁵ But Maori were also used in an exploitative manner. The promoters of the 1888-89 New Zealand Natives tour hoped to use the image of the ‘savage’ Maori as a selling point to promote the games and increase their profits.²⁶ This success, this profile and the fact that there have been several Maori captains of the All Blacks does little to show the game’s inclusiveness and has had little effect on the shortcomings in regard to Maori social profile elsewhere. There is little political reformism in Maori rugby and certainly nothing revolutionary — in the same way that Margaret Thatcher’s Prime Ministership was hardly a resounding blow for feminism.

Zavos makes grand claims for rugby. Despite these, and the broad-ranging engagement with a plethora of sources, ideas and arguments, there is little in the book that signals a significant change in popular sports journalism or other writing in new Zealand. That said, if other writers took the time to make a case, to engage with the range of literature that Zavos has, and to make an argument we would be much better off. It is the best rugby book about New Zealand-South Africa rugby contact so far and for that reason alone it is worth reading. I disagree with many aspects of the book, but Zavos writes in such a way that I feel compelled to argue my case against him rather than just hrumph that he is a celebratory apologist as I do with Hutchins.

The book is not, however, a fundamental break with the game. As with the other rugby writing, and in line with much of the contemporary popular sports writing, there is a tendency to individualise the story thus promoting identification and a sense of equivalence. In this case, the medium is Colin Meads, whose rugby greatness and on-going involvement

is used as a framing device. The book opens with Meads as team manager of the 1995 Rugby World Cup All Blacks team pondering the question, 'What is the final all about, Colin?', and Zavos putting thoughts into his head to review his career and the years of rugby with South Africa to answer, 'Revenge. It's about revenge'. It ends a year later with Meads sitting up to listen to the live radio broadcast (his farm is too isolated for the pay channel Sky TV and the free-to-air TVNZ broadcast is not for another twelve hours) as we did in the cross-generational rite of passage in the years before 1970 to hear the final match and secure revenge. Identification comes easily. There are not many New Zealand men over the age of 40 who have not been there with the radio, and not many under 40 who have not done the same with the TV. In focusing on Meads, we are drawn into the inner sanctum and the All Black hero is one of us. It is the literary equivalent of populism and neo-liberal democracy: we are all equal in the end.

There are other problems. Zavos repeats Jock Phillips's error that there were 50 000 players in 300 teams in 1882.²⁷ Early New Zealand rugby must have been a game to put the folk competitions between medieval and early modern English villages to shame: 50 000 players in 300 teams equals 166 players per team. Surely the figure would be nearer 5000. On top of this, there are other niggling and frustrating inconsistencies: Zavos continually refers to the NZRU instead of the NZRFU. He also tells us on page 259 that the last Test of the 1996 series was won by South Africa 32-16, that New Zealand made up fourteen points of the difference in five minutes and says in the summary of Test scores on page 8 that this game was won by South African 32-22. Not only does he have different scores, but the fourteen points in five minutes claim does not compute. For the record, the final score was 32-22. These are frustrating, but far from terminal. The book is fluid and engaging and worth a considered look.

New Zealand rugby writing specifically and sports writing in general still has a long way to go. Zavos has given us a fine piece of popular rugby writing, but this still leaves an enormous gap in sports writing. The only significant academic rugby books published in New Zealand to date are an imprint of Dunning and Sheard's general sociology of rugby, Greg Ryan's account of the 1888-89 Native tour and Jock Phillips's investigation of Pakeha masculinity.²⁸ There is some hope. There is a growing body of sports scholarship from within New Zealand universities, particularly

from graduate students in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin with good individual projects underway elsewhere including in the History Department at Auckland University. The best options are those working with Douglas Booth at the University of Otago and with Charlotte Macdonald at Victoria University in Wellington. There is a growing need for critical history of New Zealand sport in the mould of work by John Hargreaves and others. This is still some way off.

NOTES:

- 1 Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch*, Victor Gollancz, 1994; Nick Hornby, ed., *My Favourite Year: A Collection of New Football Writing*, Gollancz/Mlitherby, London, 1993.
- 2 Pete Davies, *I Lost my Heart to the Belles*, Mandarin, London, 1996.
- 3 David Miller, *The Tao of Muhammad Ali*, Vintage, London, 1997.
- 4 'When We Were Kings', Producer, Leon Gast, Taylor Hackforth, USA, 1996.
- 5 David Rayvern Allan, *In the Covers: The Best Cricket Writing of the Year*, Headline, London, 1997; Marcus Berkman, *The Rain Men*, Abacus, 1997; Mike Marquesse, *War Minus the Shooting*, Mandarin, London, 1997; Mike Marquesse, *Anyone But England: Cricket and the National Malaise*, Verso, London, 1995.
- 6 C L R James, *Beyond a Boundary*, Stanley Paul and Co, 1963, recently republished by Serpents Tail in the UK (1994) and Duke University Press in the USA (1995).
- 7 John King, *The Football Factory*, Vintage, London, 1997; Manuel Vazquez Montalban, *Off Side*, Serpents Tail, London, 1996.
- 8 Stuart Barnes and Mike Seabrook, ed., *Nice Tries: An Anthology of New Rugby Writing*, Gollancz, London, 1993.
- 9 Lloyd Jones, ed., *Into the Field of Play*, Tandem, Auckland, 1992.
- 10 Published in Wellington by Fergus Barrowman and others associated with Victoria University Press. PO Box 11-806 Manners St Wellington.
- 11 *Jonah Lomu*, Hodder Moa Beckett, Auckland, 1997.
- 12 Zavos, *Winters of Revenge*, p. 147.
- 13 Graeme Barrow, *All Blacks Versus Spingboks: A Century of Rugby Rivalry*, Reed, Auckland, 1992.
- 14 Barrow, *All Blacks Versus Spingboks*, p. 114.
- 15 Barrow, *All Blacks Versus Spingboks*, p. 176.
- 16 Hutchins, *A Score to Settle*, p. 54.
- 17 John Nauright, 'Reclaiming Old and Forgotten Heroes: Nostalgia, Rugby and Identity in New Zealand', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1994, pp. 131-9.
- 18 Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, identities and Cultural Politics*, Garamond Press, Toronto, 1993; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989.
- 19 A useful anthology of this approach can be found in Screen, ed., *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, Routledge, London, 1992, with application in Williams, *Hard Core*.
- 20 This is more explicitly argued in Spiro Zavos 'Kea Kaha', *Metro*, 127, Jan. 1992, pp.74-80.
- 21 Zavos, 'Kea Kaha', p. 77.
- 22 Keith Sinclair, 'Why are Race Relations in New Zealand better than in South Africa, South Australia or South Dakota?', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1971, pp.121-7.
- 23 Zavos, *Winters of Revenge*, p. 37.

- 24 Zavos, *Winters of Revenge*, p. 192-3.
- 25 Zavos, *Winters of Revenge*, p. 193.
- 26 See Greg Ryan, *Forerunners of the All Blacks: The 1888-89 New Zealand Native Football Team in Britain, Australia and New Zealand*, University of Canterbury Press, Christchurch, 1993, esp. pp. 51-5; Eirwen Harris, 'Race Used to Exploit First Rugby Tourists', *Dominion Sunday Times*, 27 July 1990, p. 37.
- 27 Zavos, *Winters of Revenge*, p. 32.
- 28 Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*, Price Milburn, Wellington, 1979, (an imprint of the Martin Robertson and Co edition, and published in Australia by ANU Press); Ryan, *Forerunners of the All Blacks*; Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country: The Image of the Pakeha Male. A History*, Penguin Books, Auckland, 1987.