

BOOK REVIEWS

Philip Dine, *French Rugby Football. A Cultural History*, Berg, Oxford, 2001: 288pp, illus, bibliog, index. Cloth: 1 85972 322 0 £42.00 Paper: 1 85973 327 1 £14.99

Despite the work of Eugen Weber and Richard Holt, among others, and irrespective of recent successes in Association football and motor rallying, the French are rarely noted for their overriding interest in sport. The national stereotype, by definition flawed and limited, embraces cultural and intellectual life more than it recognises a French preoccupation with sport. Writing in *The Spectator* on 15 June 2002 Frank Johnson argues that the French are good at so many things that they can easily tolerate minor disappointments such as a dismal World Cup performance.

A few years ago, however, I spent a short period of time at the University de La Rochelle, France's newest university in that drop-dead beautiful coastal city. At La Rochelle it was evidently a problem to keep the good male students focussed on their studies and away from the clutches of the university or club rugby union team. News reports on local television paid scant attention to international or domestic politics before averting their gaze to what apparently mattered most- the groin strain of a local rugby player and his chances of playing in the next game. Even Australia's commercial channels would have paid more attention to the world beyond a large second rower's inner leg.

Determinedly monolingual it was unclear to me whether this reflected rugby union's 1995 professionalism or something more deeply embedded in French society and culture. Dr Philip Dine's excellent new book answers my night time reverie. La Rochelle is in the Cherente on the northern tip of *l'Ovalie*, the land of the Oval Ball and the heartland of rugby union in south-west France. The obsessive media attention might well be new- as Dine says part of rugby union's 'own crisis of post-modernization' (p.3)- but the fifteen a side game has deep local roots in the predominantly rural south-west. Originating as a game among the Parisian elite in the late nineteenth century, it soon spread to the provinces. The villages of the south-west adopted the game as their own. As it democratised, the game developed an overlay of great regional significance and became part of anti-Parisian sentiment, the traditional North-South divide of French identity. It tapped into local patterns of sociability- highly appropriate given that the area is the centre of one of France's great wine growing areas surrounding Bordeaux.

There is much to praise in *French Rugby Football. A Cultural History*. No sporting antiquarian, Philip Dine draws on the big names of French

historiography and social science to illuminate points. The balance of sporting and social history is struck well, and right from the outset. Chapter 1 begins:

In the winter of 1892, against a backdrop of anarchist bomb outrages, social strife, insurrection in the colonies, and increasingly strained relations between the French state and the Roman Catholic Church, Edmund Renoir, a correspondent for the popular journal *L'Illustration*, chose to focus his readers' attention on 'Un match de foot-ball'. The football in question was of the rugby union variety...

Nor is Dr Dine too busy impressing his readers with his effortless command of the writings of Braudel and Bakhtin, or his knowledge of the complex themes of French political history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to ignore telling a good story. Illuminating the peculiarly violent character of French rugby, it seems that the infamous John Hopoate had his Gallic antecedents seventy years ago in the form of M. Raymond Sancey who performed a digital insertion in a game between Lourdes and Toulon, leading to a pitch invasion and later a riot outside the local railway station. (pp. 9-10). Another anecdote about an awesome player and trainer, Jean 'Le Sultan' Sebedio, is especially well told. Evidently M. Sebedio delighted in hanging a human skeleton in the referee's changing rooms, a whistle stuck between its jaws, as a reminder of what had happened to the last referee who gave a penalty against his team (p.83).

Many antipodean readers of a *treiziste* persuasion would be familiar with the story of the war-time collaboration between the hierarchy of the French rugby union and the Vichy regime that led to the banning of *le rugby a treize* (rugby league). In one of the book's highlights Dine devotes a chapter to revisiting the organisational and ideological linkages between rugby union and the fascist regime. Skillfully interweaving the cultural and political history of France during World War Two, Dine shows the machinations of officials like Lieutenant-Colonel 'Jep' Pascot and Dr Paul Voivenel, the latter an especially odious Petainist. For students of right-wing politics the parallels between the French fascist project—specifically its advocacy of an agrarian ideal and a return to the soil—with the 'countrymindness' advocated by comparable groups in Australia and later by B.A. Santamaria is striking. The chapter is an outstanding piece of sport history, evincing Dr Dine's ability to blend the minutiae of sport with the broad brush strokes of French history. In a similar vein the history of decolonisation forms the backdrop to an intelligent discussion of French rugby union's post-war champagne years. The Fifth Republic's demand for sporting excellence following a poor performance at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome coincided with 'rugby's rise to a position of totemic significance' (p. 135).

Despite globalisation and the events of 1995 Dine concludes on an up beat note suggesting that the distinctiveness of French rugby union 'seems destined

to survive for the foreseeable future'. (p.188) According to Dine sporting nostalgia- in this case a hankering for *le rugby des villages* is not necessarily politically reactionary but 'part of a broader cultural investment in the politics of memory that is typical of modern Western societies' (p.195). It seems that rugby union aficionados in France are as mortified by the depredations of Australian (sic) entrepreneurs like Rupert Murdoch on their game as their rugby league counterparts in this country. The complaint of a French journalist cited by Dine who laments 'rugby "made in Australia" by Murdoch, Packer, [and company] stealing our childhoods just to make... a buck out of our beloved game' (p.195) applies equally to the churned league fans in Australia, and in particular the denizens of North Sydney Oval, those lost souls who no longer have a football team to follow. Given the history of French interventions in the South Pacific since the Baudin expedition of 1804, is it significant that one of the principal assassins of *le rugby a treize* in Australia, John Ribot de Brezac, was of French ancestry?

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