

## **RECENT WRITING ON RUGBY LEAGUE: TWO PERSPECTIVES**

### **TESTOSTERONE OVERDOSE: POPULAR CULTURE AND HISTORICAL MEMORY**

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As someone recently professionally interested in the social history of Rugby League I was intrigued by two news items about The Greatest Game of All. One concerns publishing, the other historical memory.

The first concerns two brothers, Brian and Michael Croke who, towards the end of 1992, were discussing their respective, recently published books. The former asked the latter how his book was selling. 'Maybe 10 000', said Michael, 'How about your's?' 'Eleven' was the reply. Michael sought further clarification. 'Eleven thousand?', he prodded. 'No , just eleven', Brian Croke was forced to admit.

Nor is this simply a tale of sibling rivalry. Michael's book was an edited version of former North Sydney footballer, Peter Jackson's bon mots, *Whatd' Ya Reckon!* published by Ironbark Press of Sydney. Brian's book, published by Oxford University Press, was *Christian Chronicles and Byzantine History*.<sup>1</sup>

I have no intention of addressing the question of why Dr Brian Croke's book sold in such limited numbers, though I have no doubt that in scholarly terms it is an excellent book. Instead I seek to explain the remarkable sales success of books like *Whatd' Ya Reckon!* Even though Ironbark Press has recently been taken over by the giant Pan Macmillan group, I choose to call this the Ironbark phenomenon.

The second news item concerns one Stephen Roach, a largish and somewhat temperamental Balmain prop forward. Approaching retirement in August 1992 and resplendent in an ‘elegant double breasted suit, blue shirt and paisley tie’, Mr Roach appeared in the unfamiliar circumstances of the Farm Cove Room at the Sydney Hilton Hotel. To an audience of ‘40 or 50 middle-aged marketing and management types’, Roach delivered a breezy talk about aspects of his sporting life.

Roach’s speech came to focus on the foibles of a rival, Mr Martin Bella. Some footballers (for example Lesley William Boyd) are disliked because being anywhere near them on a football field is (or was) a distinct health hazard. This is not the problem with Mr Bella. His taciturn personality no doubt does not help, and is referred to in a number of sources, one of them the aforementioned *Whad’ Ya Reckon!* His politics are definitely crook. That he should vote for the Liberal Party in the 1993 elections because of his disdain for Prime Minister Keating’s ‘attitude’,<sup>2</sup> clearly threatens his membership of the prop forward’s union. (Though I’m not sure whether Roach’s belief that Rugby League clubs should be privatised by attracting ‘visionaries like Kerry Packer’<sup>3</sup> establishes him either as a Lion [or Tiger] of the Left.)

The real problem, it seems, with Bella lies elsewhere. Initially hailed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as ‘The Thinking Man’s Prop’ after a most meritorious performance in the Queensland HSC, Bella’s unpopularity with some of his colleagues seemingly can be sheeted home to these self-same intellectual capacities. To put it in the vernacular: ‘Nobody likes a clever dick’.

This is certainly the point that Roach amplified in his Camp Cove Room address. Roach recalled that he and Bella were team mates during the 1986 Kangaroo Tour of Great Britain. While established in a hotel in Leeds, Roach took pity on Bella when he noticed that other members of the touring party were avoiding the bespectacled North Sydney prop. Roach recalled:

I thought I'd walk up and have lunch with him, and we walk out of the building and up the road. Marty's looking up at the buildings and he says to me: It's amazing the history here, some of these buildings have been here for thousands of years

Anyway, I ran then. I just ran off. I just couldn't handle all this gibbering.<sup>4</sup>

I find this a most sobering tale about historical memory and popular culture. Here we have an intelligent Australian expressing some of his enthusiasm for the architectural history of a northern industrial city, a response shared by generations of Australian tourists, and six years later a man dressed in a paisley tie makes fun of him. The same man who abruptly disappeared in Leeds in 1986. What can this mean? In particular, how does historical awareness impinge upon the world of Rugby League? If it does not how do we explain the Ironbark phenomenon?

### **An avalanche of League publications**

Until recently the literature about Rugby League was sparse, or rather, that drawn between two covers and called a book was. Retired players were inclined to write training manuals, sometimes about the game and its rules in general or about particular skills, goal kicking, for instance. The first player's memoir, Victor Hey's *A Man's Game* did not appear until 1950 and apparently related primarily to British Rugby League. Clive Churchill and Ian Walsh produced ghost-written reminiscences in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s there was a sudden avalanche of publications. These are players or ex-players' autobiographies, invariably ghost-written, club histories, accounts of Kangaroo tours or the State of Origin series. The most recent development are encyclopaedic tomes such as Malcolm Andrews' *ABC of Rugby League* and Ian Heads' officially commissioned history of the New South Wales Rugby League, *True Blue*.

Apart from *True Blue*, which is in a category of its own, it is difficult to know how to respond to some of these books. This applies to works of the autobiographical genre in particular. Are they simply trite and mindless? Or is this an elitist perspective?

There is not space here to embrace the complexities of the high culture-popular culture debate;<sup>6</sup> suffice it to say that whatever else they are, the ghost-written autobiographies, in particular, are certainly highly popular. Ironbark's *Local Hero*, an apt title for the autobiography of Wayne Pearce, the Balmain and Australian back row forward, has apparently sold 40 000 copies, Roach's *Doing My Block* 15000 copies.<sup>7</sup> The University of Queensland Press can be thankful it has both Peter Carey and Adrian McGregor on its books. McGregor's first biography of that charismatic Queenslander, Wally Lewis, reputedly sold in excess of 50 000 copies. Perhaps, however, most remarkable of all is the sales success of Paul Vautin's *Chewing the Fat*, which has reputedly sold 50000 copies. I need hardly remind academic colleagues that a scholarly monograph which sells 2000 copies in Australia is considered to be very healthy, and a runaway best seller such as Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore* is a *rara avis* indeed. How, then, can we explain these sales figures?

The post-1983 marketing emphasis of Rugby League may be part of the story. At that time, under new management following the revelations of the famous Four Corners 'Big League' program, Rugby League set out to shed both the malodour associated with the regime of Kevin Humphreys and its working-class image, while broadening its appeal among other social groups. Perhaps books and Ms Tina Turner go hand in hand? Certainly images of saintly and handsome Rugby League players have been marketed tirelessly. Wayne Pearce, a clean-living fitness fanatic, faithful to his club and district, a sportsman on and off the field, was a god-send. Clearly if he had not existed he would need to have been invented. Perhaps this is why *Local Hero* devotes so much attention to asserting that Wayne Pearce really was as represented in the media. Mrs Pearce even appends a character reference.

No doubt it is understandable that players approaching retirement should display an interest in gilding the lily. Rugby League footballers after all have a limited earning capacity and beyond thirty winters can be forgiven for concerning themselves with paying the mortgage<sup>8</sup> after the match payments peter out. It may be significant that many of the player's autobiographies that have been published, those of Pearce, Roach, Sterling and Vautin, have been in the process of moving into employment in the media. Perhaps *Doing My Block's* relentless promotion of Roach's tough larrikin image is intended to provide the necessary 'platform' (a term Mr Steve Martin, latterly of North Sydney, most recently of Featherstone would have used) to launch himself as a reincarnation of Rex Mossop.

Certainly the sales success of these books reflects the entrepreneurial acumen of the likes of Ian Heads and Deborah Wood, Ironbark's directors. Their titles extend beyond sporting subjects. Apart from the memoirs of 'Bondi' Bill Jenkins, the crime writer, Ironbark publishes crime books like *Garden of Evil*, the 'chilling story' of the North Shore Granny Killer and *Someone Else's Daughter*, on the short life and horrific death of Anita Cobby, which, it is claimed, also sold 50000 copies. Like *Doing My Block*, such books inspire divergent emotions.

Nonetheless sport, and Rugby League in particular, form the basis of Ironbark's offerings from the relatively inexpensive autobiographies to the limited edition *Days of Glory*, a photographic history of the Winfield Cup between 1982 and 1991, gold embossed and printed on art paper, retailing at \$450. Essentially escapist and untaxing reading, Ironbark's autobiographies are probably just the right pea for this recession pod. Well-distributed and promoted, their sales success is no doubt also assisted by the fact that as a journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* Heads is able to use the pages of that newspaper to both preview and then review his own books, a position which any author would envy.

Moreover, the books themselves have many points in their favour. As autobiographies go, they are not especially revelatory about the inner man. But then, as Roach recognises, ‘self-analysis has never been my strong suit [*sic*]. I just get on with it’.<sup>9</sup> Tabloid journalism they may be, but at least they are accessible and racily written. Even if *The Moose that Roared* does extinguish any slight doubt that ‘The Moose’ really is in fact a highly unpleasant, boorish man, I appreciate the crispness and economy of expression in his statement of personal philosophy:

Critics have attacked me all my life for holding simplistic, black and white views. But that’s the way it is. Chop a man’s head off or don’t chop it off; but never leave the poor bastard languishing in irons. I’ll give a subject plenty of thought before reaching an opinion on it, but once I’ve made up my mind, that’s it. I won’t vacillate. I won’t be swayed by contrary opinions. I don’t believe in compromise. I believe in what I consider is right. This is simple philosophy but it’s the Mossop way.<sup>10</sup>

For the historian interested in the social history of Rugby League there are many points that can be mined. By themselves such snippets and minutiae may be insignificant. Yet as Phil Mosely points out when unearthed and combined they do provide historians with ‘the savour of sport in the past’.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Roach’s description of demographic change on the Balmain peninsula and the effects of gentrification on attendances at Leichhardt Oval is telling:

Balmain is no longer a rugby league area ... Go into any Balmain pub on a Friday or Saturday night and you’ll see that the patrons are hardly types who have a passionate interest in football. I don’t know if they’re yuppies, macrame makers or up-front, environmentally-friendly, whale-saving, thong-wearing, macrobiotic-dieting, bearded left overs from the flower power era. I just know rugby league would not get a start in their top 50 recreational activities.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Wayne Pearce has an interesting anecdote about television's impact on the code. In the early 1980s a team mate, Mr Neil 'Bing' Pringle, advised the then raw recruit to save his most spectacular tackles for the Grandstand side of Leichhardt Oval where the television cameras were located. Not only would this attract a more generous round of applause, rolling over after effecting the tackle for the benefit of the television camera was especially photogenic. Pringle advised: 'That No. 8 just keeps flashing up over and over on the replay'.<sup>13</sup>

*Local Hero* also addresses a central motif in the social function of Rugby League, the point that for many working-class boys, the game is both an agent of discipline and social mobility. *Local Hero* is essentially an epic of transformation and a parable of a working-class boy whose athleticism took him from a childhood in pre-gentrified East Balmain to a large house on the North Shore. On the other hand some might argue that Pearce is excessively sanguine in generalising from the specific to the general. 'If your parents were poorly paid and you were raised in a working-class area', he argues, 'it doesn't mean that you can't aspire to a well-paid professional occupation' (p. 171). The crucial caveat, perhaps, is the word 'aspire'. We do not need a Marxist sociologist to tell us that aspiration and achievement of social mobility are not always the same thing.

In the final analysis, however, there is no avoiding the fact that the Ironbark phenomenon suggests that there *was* a large potential audience eager to read about Rugby League, wanting something more substantial than the annual year books, and more enduring than *Rugby League Week*.

This is supported by Lyons' and Taksa's survey of Australian reading habits. It seems that sport has long been a popular topic for male working-class readers. Ironbark and similar publishers' books have taken the place of scrap books, that is self-produced books.

It is difficult to be precise about when this happened, or why. My private research of who buys these books is very limited but it does tend to illuminate their role as gifts. Father's Day 1993 single-handedly induced no fewer than four new Rugby League biographies (on Kenny, Elias, Fenech and Hasler). There has also been an accompanying shift from magazines to books. Perhaps this has been encouraged by the distribution system employed by Ironbark Press. The large book super markets and some newsagents are used rather than specialist retailers like Gleebooks. Admittedly this 'quality' book shop only stocks works about popular culture written in 'cultural studies' gobbledegook that renders them unintelligible to consumers of popular culture. Thus, unfortunately, the modern scrapbooks have done little to break down the 'sport/reading dichotomy in popular mentalities' to which Lyons and Taksa refer. This is a process whereby sports enthusiasts down play their interest in books, falsely assuming 'sporting prowess and intellectual stimulation are mutually exclusive'.<sup>14</sup> Marty Bella would agree heartily.

Before leaving the issue of the reading habits of first grade Rugby League footballers I note that Wayne Pearce is interested in books about Egypt<sup>15</sup> while, in the interests of increasing his vocabulary, Rex Mossop 'read voraciously' biographies or books about World War II. He cites a strong interest in books on the German campaign to crush the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Given Mossop's well-known right-wing political sympathies I dread to think about whom he wishes had won the biff at Leningrad.

### **The low point of tabloid sports journalism**

It is inevitable that we make judgments about the quality of writing. For some the achievement of producing a well-crafted sentence is to be compared with the thrill of a well-executed flick pass, a cutting paragraph of critical analysis in a book review with the thud of a sweetly-timed shoulder charge. Rugby League is after all a metaphor for life and contains means of reprisal more intellectually legitimate and humane than academia.

This leads me to a generalisation about the standards of sporting journalism drawn from reading another very worthwhile Ironbark book, *The Greatest Game: A Celebration of Rugby League* compiled by Geoff Armstrong and ‘presented’ by the ubiquitous Wayne Pearce. It is simply this. The golden era of sporting journalism vis-a-vis rugby league has long since gone. To read J C Davis’s report of the famous North Sydney-Easts match of May 1921 (*The Greatest Game*, pp. 13-17), or Claude Corbett’s 1935 reminiscences of various Rugby League characters (*The Greatest Game*, pp. 200-201) is to be apprised of the fact that something has gone seriously awry with the scribes. No doubt there are many reasons for this deterioration. Before television and its endless scrutiny of the game, the printed word was the only available means for disseminating information. This meant that there was more pressure upon Corbett and Davis to analyse the football in greater detail; their erudition, however, is another matter. In 1971 North Sydney club president Harry McKinnon lamented the ‘strange metamorphosis in journalism’ which had brought the likes of Ron Casey, Sid Barnes and Burnie Purcell to the fore at the expense of ‘my old mates of the fourth estate – Claude Corbett, Bill Corbett, Tom Goodman, George Crawford, Jim Mathers and George Thatcher and others’.<sup>17</sup> Big Harry had a point. The 1970s were perhaps the low point of tabloid sports journalism.

Indubitably there has been some recent improvement. In numerous feature articles Roy Masters has shown that he is capable of sustained, intelligent writing on Rugby League, even if he is no Olga. George Crawford’s legacy lives on through a number of journalists he encouraged. One of these is the aforementioned Ian Heads. An excellent example of his journalistic work appears in *The Greatest Game* (pp. 127-9). The cupboard is by no means bare. Tim Prentice, for instance, of *the Telegraph-Mirror* is also a very creditable journalist.

But suffice it to say that the appearance of *Rugby League Week* on Sydney's newsstands is not one of the week's literary high points. Both *Rugby League Week* and the back pages of the metropolitan dailies are overwritten. Most everything is a 'tragedy', hopes are always being 'dashed'. Teams are inevitably 'crushed', rarely defeated. Glib analysis combines with overwrought language. Metaphors are crafted with the blunt end of a shovel. There is too much striving for effect, without any understanding of how understatement can best enhance meaning. Accuracy and technical skill have been sacrificed. In quoting an unattributed 1920s profile of Chris McKivatt, a Glebe half back who later became the most successful coach in North Sydney history, Heads provides an example of how much we are missing. Note the use of alliteration and sense of rhythm in the following description of McKivatt's vigorous captaincy:

On the field he was more persistent and more picturesque than a politician in eloquence. From start to finish he snapped out his staccato sentences, urging, ever urging, his forwards or his backs to some supreme effort.<sup>18</sup>

No doubt 'The Cynic's' deadlines were more relaxed and journalists had more time to devote to the craft of their trade. It may be, too, that the deterioration in the standard of writing about Rugby League is related to the Americanisation of the Australian language. Coaches now employ the terminology of gridiron, and journalists are naturally following them down a slippery road littered with 'completions', 'grid zones' and 'hit-ups'. It may be ignorance on my part, but I am unaware of a United States equivalent to Geoffrey Moorhouse, that urbane left-liberal journalist who has done for Rugby League what CLR James did for cricket. In Australia Tom Keneally has partly filled this void, though his writing on the subject can be self-conscious and contrived (see *The Greatest Game*, pp. 144-5). His recent biography of Des Hasler, *The Utility Player*, is a most satisfactory book, arguably the best of the Rugby League biographical

avalanche. Written with a twinkle in his eye and flair *The Utility Player* has some wonderful passages worthy of Keneally's old friend Geoffrey Moorhouse. For instance, after the Australians were defeated at Wembley in 1992, Keneally muses whether Hasler's disappointment also embraced missing his wife and the 'huge sky and the wide-sweep of the Pacific Ocean off Manly' (p. 12). Old Dessie Hasler may be one of the few Rugby League players you could describe as 'almost criminally equable' (p. 22); then again, Keneally is one of the few Rugby League authors who would have thought of that description.

In large measure the market for intelligent analysis of Rugby League has been filled by satire. The impact of the flamboyant social commentary of Mr Roy Slaven and Dr H G Nelson in broadening the social base of Rugby League's support to include the chattering classes has been profound, though as they would say, 'for mine' I remain unconvinced about the claims of the former St George front-row forward, John Wittenberg, to the title of 'historian'.<sup>19</sup>

### **Historical memory and public history**

Rugby League is a game of paradoxes. One of these concerns its attitude to the past. On the one hand there is that aggressively dismissive attitude to history of Roach, cited earlier, and repeated in *Doing My Block*.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the belief that the present is all that matters is best summed up in the well-known sporting maxim, 'Today's prize-winning rooster is tomorrow's feather duster'.

On the other hand there is a strong body of evidence which suggests that history, and historical memory, *do* matter to the League's hierarchy, its administrators, as well as its rank and file: spectators and barrackers. Parramatta club stalwart, Colonel Jack Argent's maxim which now adorns the foyer of the Parramatta Leagues Club: 'Let those who drink the water remember those who dug the well' sums up a strong body of opinion in Rugby League circles. Spectators harness memory all the time. Pub

conversations inevitably focus on comparisons between past and present players. George Crawford's penchant for picking composite teams is continued to the present era, including in *Whatd' Ya Reckon*.

A striking illustration of how important historical memory is to the hierarchy of the New South Wales Rugby League is the forthcoming Rugby League 'Expo'. Scheduled for opening in 1995, the 'Expo' is promoted as the 'ultimate rugby league experience'. Situated in the heart of Sydney's tourist district at 100 George Street, near the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Rugby League's literature promises 'a phenomenal experience, using Disney-type stimulation and audio-visual techniques'. This will embrace a strong historical component. A publicity brochure promises:

Supporting the futuristic will be a brilliant, evocation of the past. Three different historic recreations - from the 1900's, 1950's and 1990's will be designed and constructed to show different periods, players and aspects of the game in a walk-through experience full of sights, sounds, smells and sensations. The visitors will feel as if they are actually there in those dressing rooms before these matches, during high point [*sic*] of the League's history in Australia.

Clearly this is an ambitious project. A further highlight of the Expo's historical focus will be a 'Breakpoints' section. Here there will be trophies, posters, tour jumpers and other memorabilia, as well as 'interactive' displays featuring the likes of Mr Bob Fulton explaining how he scored two tries in the 1973 Grand Final.

The quality of the Expo's historical display as public history will be for others to assess. Perhaps it will merely comprise antiquarianism. My point is simply that it does (or will) exist. In fact the floor plan of the forthcoming Expo building, also to double as a venue for Rugby League prize-giving ceremonies, suggests that the major part of one of two floors will be given over to 'The History of the Game', while a quarter of the other

will feature the 'Breakpoints' section. By any yardstick this is a substantial recognition of the past and its importance in evoking traditions and mentalities that are important to Australian popular culture. On a smaller scale the North Sydney club has also recently established its own museum of memorabilia. Dedicated to its long-serving secretary, Harry 'Akker' Forbes, for Norths the past and a sense of tradition are vital actors.

In his foreword to Robert Smith's *The Sea Eagle has Landed: The Story of the Manly Warringah Rugby League Club*, Mr Ken Arthurson, executive chairman of the Australian Rugby League also emphasises the importance of historical reference points. Arthurson philosophises: 'It is important in the scheme of things for us all at one time to reflect on our past'. This raises the question of the purpose of reflection. What can a football club learn from its history?

In this regard *The Sea Eagle Has Landed* is an opportunity missed. Yet the book is not devoid of merit. Its early chapters on the genesis of Rugby League on the northern peninsula of Sydney, and the split with the North Sydney Club, are significant contributions to the literature. Unfortunately from that point on the book degenerates to the level of storytelling with nothing other than chronology of premiership contests holding the flow of words together. Missing is an evaluation of the football club's relationship with its community. Manly-Warringah began as a club integrally related with the surf clubs of the area, with excellent local players like Roy Bull. It became a millionaire's enclave whose latest incarnation as 'Maori-Warringah'—its club supporters' bulletin is marketed in New Zealand complete with GST—suggests that the club relates as much or more to Auckland than it does to Brookvale. The Manly-Warringah club long ago lost sight of its community and its local roots, and despite its 1993 revival of promoting 'local' juniors to first grade, the process is probably inexorable.

Robert Smith is also uninterested in pursuing the most fascinating question that relates to the Sea Eagles: how and why did the club become, by and large, so unpopular? Perhaps it has something to do with the club's chequebook approach to player recruitment. That it has so systematically denuded other clubs of the 'quality end of the players' market', launching 'audacious' (does Smith mean 'avaricious'?) raids upon other clubs leading players has not assisted its cause. The adage that football supporters have two teams whom they wish to win on any given weekend, their own and whoever is playing Manly-Warringah, predates the manufactured 'Fibros' versus 'Silvertails' class struggle ploy used as a motivational tool by the then Western Suburbs coach, Roy Masters, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Other than wondering about this issue, I hasten to add that I have no answer. In a sense Manly have fulfilled the role of Punch in popular theatre. Perhaps the men from the beach presented some mythic threat as the city of Sydney moved steadily westwards after World War II. Whatever the reason, they have their following and this includes poor tormented souls like Tom Keneally, but south of the Spit Bridge they are outsiders and unloved.

Alongside the forthcoming Expo, Ian Head's officially commissioned history of the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL), *True Blue*, is another tangible monument to the intersection between popular culture and historical memory. Indeed it is in a class of its own. Again Ken Arthurson's foreword waxes lyrical on the subject of tradition and the need for present administrators to come to terms with the past. Arthurson admits: 'I am both humbled and ennobled by my position as chairman of the NSWRL, acutely aware of the traditions laid down in the long years gone by'. He explains that 'The brief in the commissioning of the book *True Blue* was to present the story of rugby league in New South Wales objectively and honestly . . . The story needed to be told straight'. Being handed such a ball, has Mr Heads picked it up and run with it?

In large measure I think he has. Like David Marr's biography of Patrick White, this is a book of extravagant proportions (perhaps 250 000 words) and it is almost painful on the wrists to read in bed. Indeed overwhelming detail is one of the few problems of *True Blue*. The book is not short of analysis. The class and political resonances of Rugby League are adequately documented. Yet there are so many football games discussed, tries scored, goals kicked, punches thrown, brawls started and concluded, players dismissed, bones broken, disputes conducted, that the broad brush strokes of social history and the game's centrality to working-class culture in New South Wales and Queensland tends to be obscured. This is a pity because the book's opening chapter on leisure activities in Sydney in 1907 is very competent indeed. At other times the outside world enters the text rather artificially; Heads reminds his readers, for instance, that the period of the St George dominance in Rugby League began 'in the year the Hungarian uprising was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks' and was 'ending at a time young Australians were dying on the killing fields of Vietnam' (p. 283).

Similarly, *True Blue's* portraits of Rugby League identities can be rather one-dimensional. Dave Chadwick, credited by Heads with reestablishing Rugby League at Sydney University, and still involved with the game in Chatswood, was a prominent anti-apartheid activist during the 1970 Springbok Rugby Union tour. Dr Herbert Moran's reminiscences of the dispersal of working men to Rugby League and the subsequent social impoverishment of Rugby Union at the varsity (p. 51), might have been spiced with some reference to his subsequent career as a 1930s fascist and member of the Benito Mussolini fan club.<sup>21</sup>

In these respects Heads is constrained by the sources. Inevitably these tend to downplay anything other than the Rugby League side of an individual's life. Indeed the closer I get to these sources, the more I appreciate *True Blue*. The unearthing by Heads of the papers of J J Giltinan, which shed new light on the initial, traumatic Kangaroo Tour of 1908, is

the sort of rare find any historian can admire. In that great divide between journalists and academics it is sometimes said by the latter that the former simply rehash well-trodden territory; if this is so the criticism does not apply to Heads.

The major problem with *True Blue* is its absence of documentation. The scholarly practice of providing footnotes enables both interpretation and facts to be checked. Heads, therefore, asks his readers to accept a great deal on trust. And indeed there are infelicities in *True Blue* that are a nagging concern. For instance, St George's failure in 1986 to get a team into the semi-finals in any grade for the first time in fifty years is needlessly repeated (pp. 421,423). Nonetheless, a small number of errors are far more acceptable in such a massive volume than in a less ambitious project like Malcolm Andrews' *ABC of Rugby League*. When one brief entry, that on North Sydney, contains two glaring errors, one is left with the impression that this volume is less than valuable.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

In the final resort the Ironbark phenomenon is evidence of an ongoing dialogue with the past. This interaction is sometimes imperfect. Sometimes the past is telescoped, abbreviated and otherwise foreshortened, so that only the 1980s matter. Events of the very recent past are presented as distant history. Roach, for instance, writes that Balmain has been able to beat Brisbane for 'so long'; of course the Brisbane Broncos have only been part of the competition since 1988. Roach insinuates that only 'old-timers' would remember Balmain club president Keith Barnes' concluding game at Leichhardt Oval in 1968 (p. 142). This is preposterous, though beyond stating that the game was against Norths, Harry McKinnon subsequently describing the day and its tribute to 'Golden Boots' Barnes 'as the most beautiful and moving tribute to a sportsman that I have ever seen', I shall refrain from spelling out why people other than 'old-timers' might recall that emotional day.

Sometimes the past is conscripted, unwilling, kicking and screaming and there is contested terrain. In *Local Hero* Wayne Pearce relates ‘an intriguing tradition that lives on whenever Balmain play Souths’ (p. 77). This refers to a 1909 ‘wound that has never healed’. In brief, ostensibly both clubs had agreed to boycott the 1909 Final in protest at their game being used as a curtain raiser to a Wallabies versus Kangaroos fixture. The Balmain view is that Souths ignored this agreement, turned up and kicked off, therefore winning the premiership on forfeit. Pearce recalls that ‘some of the older guys’ used to encourage the modern players before games with South Sydney by recalling that act of deceit. Pearce was told: ‘Remember what they did to us back in 1909’! On the other, hand Frank Hyde has recalled that in his many years of playing and captaining Balmain he never once heard this story.<sup>23</sup>

I hasten to add that the conclusion I draw from this anecdote is not that one or other of these illustrious gentlemen is fibbing. I think it more likely that the past, and an historical grievance, has recently been incorporated into a football club’s historical memory as a motivational ploy. This reinforces my thesis about the recent growing awareness of the past in Rugby League circles.

Where will it all end? Ultimately historians might be engaged by football clubs to boost players’ performances on the paddock. At the moment I wonder if the North Sydney coach, Peter Louis, realises that the North Sydney Club has one precious commodity – immortality – that it perhaps alone can bestow on members of the first-grade players’ squad. Genuine ‘old-timers’ in North Sydney still remember the exploits of the star-studded back line of 1921-2. The names of Cec Blinkhom, Duncan Thompson and Harold Horder have not been forgotten. Many of South Sydney’s heroes would only be recalled by experts like Tom Brock. So it may well be that in the future the exploits of Mario Fenech, Gary Larson, Billy Moore, David Fairleigh and their comrades will be keenly remembered as the warriors who broke the seventy-two year drought.

What then may we conclude about the current revival of interest in the past in Rugby League circles? Is it simply that beautiful, poetic and dramatic moments are deservedly remembered?

Some of it, without doubt, is simple nostalgia and it may be of no more significance than the antiquarian value of old men recalling the vigour of their lost youths.

Another factor is a commercial imperative. The past is being marketed as a commodity. The outstanding case is that of the forthcoming Rugby League Expo, though there are many other instances of Phillip Street's marketing arm overdosing on the past as well as on testosterone. And none of this is without ambiguity and contradiction. In the interaction between marketing considerations and a grass-roots sense of tradition lies an ongoing source of tension. Rugby League depends heavily upon this sense of tradition and continuity. The participation of Rugby League fans, those who pay their money and take their chances, is heavily reliant on historical reference points. Sometimes this involves strong emotional attachments to a club, community and district. There is a constant tension between football club management who must by necessity set commercial considerations alongside the more traditional and 'pure' attachments of a club's supporters.

Indeed there lies a further source of complication for the promoters of Rugby League. On the one hand the sense of tradition and long-term allegiance of many supporters who pay at the turnstiles cannot be ignored; on the other the post-1983 Rugby League marketing mentality has successfully incorporated new social groups for whom entertainment rather than tradition is a major consideration. As Wayne Pearce puts it: 'People who had never wanted to have anything to do with the "working class game" suddenly became fans, proud to be involved with a fast, high quality sport' (p. 142). The needs of these divergent groups must be accommodated. Perhaps the League's historical marketing emphasis – even the 1993 television advertisement embraces footage from the early

1980s – is a deliberate ploy to convince the new groups of supporters that they too are part of the game’s [foreshortened] past.

I end where I began with another sad story about Martin Bella. It seems that since joining Canterbury Bankstown ‘The Thinking Man’s Prop’ has been up to his old tricks. Unfortunately his new captain, Terry Lamb, has his mark. ‘Harry Craven’ reported in the *Sun-Herald* on 18 April 1993 that:

Marty is less scholarly than his Manly and Norths days. Over in New Zealand for the game against Brisbane, ‘Baa Baa’ [Lamb] made Marty a little sheepish. At breakfast, each time Marty began espousing a treatise on the geological formation of the upper Hutt River shale, Lamb told him to shut up and left the table. Marty now talks about manly things such as drinking till you spew.

The conclusion I draw from this is that the boy from Alligator Creek should ignore philistines like Roach and Lamb. Perhaps, too, he should eschew geology and stick to history.

## NOTES

1. *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 23 Dec. 1992.
2. *SMH*, 10 March 1993.
3. Steve Roach (with Ray Chesterton), *Doing My Block*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1992, p. 160.
4. Tony Sarno, ‘Big Bad Blocker has them rolling the aisles’, *SMH*, 28 Aug. 1992.
5. None of these books are lodged in a major public library in Sydney. The only one I have sighted is Clive Churchill’s *They Called Me the Little Master*, Percival Publishing, Sydney, 1962, which was ghostwritten by J Mathers. For access to his copy I am grateful to John O’Hara. A section of Ian Walsh’s *Inside Rugby League* is republished in Geoff Armstrong, ed., *The Greatest Game: A Celebration of Rugby League*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1991, pp. 24-6; Interestingly Walsh probably could boast the most eminent ghost-writer ever associated with such a venture, Keith Willey. Vic Hey’s *A Man’s Game: 10 Years in English Rugby*, Excelsis, Sydney, 1950, is referred to in the bibliography of Ian Heads, *True Blue. The Story of NSW Rugby League*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1992, p. 495, and in private correspondence from Ian Heads, 13 April 1993 where it is referred to as a ‘booklet’. Twelve years later when Mathers prepared Churchill’s reminiscences he claimed that *They Called Me the Little Master* was the ‘first Rugby League book of its type ever published in Australia’. Hey’s ‘booklet’ must certainly be a rare volume.

6. On reflection it seems to me that a particularly sensible position is adopted by John Docker in 'Popular Culture and Bourgeois Values' in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, eds, *Constructing a Culture: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, pp. 241-58.
7. Sales figures are from the 1992 *Ironbark* catalogue and from personal correspondence from Ian Heads, 19 April 1993.
8. This small cadence of class in the form of property ownership I notice in Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 134.
9. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 17.
10. Rex Mossop with Larry Writer, *The Moose That Roared*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1991, p. 15.
11. Phil Mosely, 'The Game: Early Soccer Scenery in New South Wales', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 8, no. 2, May 1992, p. 147.
12. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 158. On the other hand I would respectfully point out to Mr. Roach that at my preferred Friday night watering hole, the Riverview Hotel in Birchgrove, where mine host is Brian 'Grumpy' Hambly, the former Parramatta and Australian second rower, Rugby League is a staple topic of conversation. Roach does not also seem to appreciate that many Balmain fans have chosen to boycott Leichhardt Oval until the club dispenses with the services of its coach Alan Jones, the right-wing radio commentator and former Liberal Party staff member. And when this was achieved, by offering only two home games at Leichhardt Oval in 1994, it seems that the club has deserted its community rather than vice versa. While acknowledging the effect of demographic change in the Balmain area, I remain unconvinced that Balmain is no longer a Rugby League area. The following is a story related to me by Mr J C A Lacey, of Balmain. While standing in the checkout at Woolworths Balmain store, two local ladies were discussing recent events. It was the Sunday after the 1993 federal elections. One lady confessed that she had been unsure of how to vote, the ALP having lost its working-class roots, but that in the final resort the Coalition's GST proposals had caused her to vote for the local ALP candidate. Her companion, however, had another defeat on her mind, the same day's thrashing meted out to Balmain. 'Yes', she said, 'They'll never win another game until they get rid of that Jonesey'.
13. Wayne Pearce, *Local Hero*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1990, p. 33.
14. Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, OUP, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 164-5.
15. Pearce, *Local Hero*, p. 86.
16. Mossop, *The Moose that Roared*, p. 241.
17. *North Sydney League's Club Journal*, Jan. 1971, p. 7.
18. *SMH*, 25 March 1993.
19. For example see Roy Slaven, *This is the South Coast News and I'm Paul Murphy*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1990, p. 27.
20. Roach, *Doing My Block*, p. 131 refers to a group of Australian footballers' extra-curricular exploits in the south of France. Roach reports: 'We were being given a guided tour by some official who's pointing to priceless objects and artworks and saying, "and this was the painting commissioned by Louis XIV in 1666 and so on" and we were thinking, "Shit, how boring is this".'

21. See Roslyn Pesman Cooper, 'An Australian in Mussolini's Italy: Herbert Michael Moran', *Overland*, no. 115, 1989, pp. 44-53.;
22. Malcolm Andrews, *ABC of Rugby League*, ABC, Sydney, 1992, pp. 435-7; the name of the Norths lock forward who recently played State of Origin for Queensland is Gary (not Greg) Larson. The club record holder for most games played is Big Don McKinnon (277), not Norm Strong, 260 games (not the 210 referred to by Andrews, *ABC of Rugby League*, p. 437).
23. Personal interview, Frank Hyde, Warriewood, 18 Feb. 1993.