

## *Review Article*

# **Up From the Ashes: The Phoenix of a Rugby League Literature**

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When Richard Cashman and I compiled *The Oxford Book of Australian Sporting Anecdotes* several years ago, one point about the country's sporting literature came through loud and clear: there is not much of it. And of all the high-profile athletic endeavours, rugby league is perhaps more poorly served by its scholars and bards and literary aficionados than almost any other sport.

The often excellent journalism on League since the game's inception in Australia in 1907 – by (amongst others) J. C. Davis, Claude Corbett, E. E. Christensen, Tom Goodman, George Crawford, Alan Clarkson, Ian Heads and Roy Masters, son of celebrated Australian writer, Olga – had until quite recently failed to stimulate virtually any more substantial creative or scholarly works about rugby league's imposing history, or its gallery of what Australian media personality 'Rampaging' Roy Slaven would call 'characters'. League's legends, eccentrics and larrikins have either been left to languish in a few paragraphs in hastily cobbled publications more suitable for a newsagent's front rack, or they have disappeared altogether because of the basically ephemeral nature of daily journalism, no matter how good the scribe. Yet, there are finally signs that, in the last ten years or so, this lamentable situation has begun to change. The drought has broken,

In this article I will focus on an impressive selection of books that, collectively, comprise the harbinger of a genuine Australian rugby league literature: Adrian McGregor's *King Wally* (1987), a detailed tribute to the footballer all New South Wales loved to hate; Ironbark Press' celebration of League and its roots, cannily entitled *Wayne Pearce Presents the Greatest Game*; renowned novelist Tom Keneally's portrait of the 'fine-souled' footballing 'Mr Perpetual Motion', Des Hasler, entitled *The Utility Player* (1993), Tom's transparent attempt to give the modern Manly millionaire club -the club that Ken Arthurson built – some soul; two biographical works (one of them available in two editions) recognising the illustrious career of Mal Meninga – namely, Alan Clarkson's publication, *Meninga – My Life in Football* (1995), and John MacDonald's flawed though interesting *Meninga – from Superstar to Super League* (1995); Paul Freeman's controversial biography, *Ian Roberts –*

*Finding Out*, a radically different perspective on rugby league from one of the gay community's courageous icons; and, last but certainly not least, two books published in 1996, Andrew Moore's social history of his North Sydney team, part-homage, part soul-purging, entitled *The Mighty Bears!*, and *League of a Nation*, a collection I edited with Lex 'The Swine' Marinos. *League of a Nation* features articles from a host of writers, from the oldest living rugby league Australian international, Harry Kadwell, to Bradley Clyde, from Ken Arthurson to H. G. Nelson.<sup>1</sup>

To adapt the words of that most creative American revolutionary, Thomas Paine, these are the times that try men's souls, and those of footballing women, all true League fans who have had to withstand the combined Rupert Murdoch/Kerry Packer assault on our sensitivities and sensibilities in recent years, as the two media giants fought for television control of the code. It is certain that the game will never be the same again. Yet, as I will show, some at least of that embattled group of diehards – fans of rugby league – can take heart, given the number and quality of publications to which I have referred. So, too, can that purportedly oxymoronic group know as League 'scholars'.

Don't get me wrong. The canon of, say, American baseball literature or English turf literature – or, for that matter, the literature of Australian Rules football – is in no danger of being overwhelmed by the League's largely latent literature. Yet there is much to catch the eye, and the hearts, in this recent blossoming. I will make a few general comments on the range and quality of the publications and then I will discuss each one individually.

The first point to be made is that the books in question provide the reader with a strong sense of the social, cultural and even political dimensions of rugby league. Three contain material enlarging on the absorbing though largely neglected early history, as the likes of Victor Trumper, J. J. Giltinan and James Joynton Smith – proprietor of the enormously popular journal *Smith's Weekly* in the first decade of this century – attempted to make serious money from a professional sport in its infancy. Second, the literary and intellectual range of the texts, taken collectively, is striking. Thirdly, the books supply us with a kind of narrative coherence. Five are biographical studies, three of them focussing on two players, Wally Lewis and Mal Meninga, arguably the two greatest players of the modern era. The other two introduce us to a couple of the game's most impressive individuals, men whose impact has not been limited to the playing paddock. Wayne Pearce's (read the actual writer: Geoff Armstrong's) *The Greatest Game* broadens my compilation with a cross-section of the game's best journalism since 1907; Andrew Moore focuses his trained historian's eye on a club at once representative and uniquely troubled; while in *League of a Nation* Lex Marinos and I, unlike Geoff Armstrong, did not opt for writing from the past. We selected writers from the present. Thus, journalists mix it with coaches, academics rub shoulders with players, comedians with cartoonists, politicians with nationally known prose writers. It is a talented

squad, a literary squad, deserving of attention for more reasons than merely as a source of football anecdote. These volumes have the whiff of dressing room lineament and of cultural merit.

Adrian McGregor's biography of *King Wally* is, by the modest standards of the genre, a very competently compiled, if rarely controversial biography of the 'King'. McGregor says in his Preface that he had 'no hesitation in writing criticism of Wally where appropriate', yet he is rarely critical.<sup>2</sup> Both the strength and the weakness of this book is the methodical and uncontentious way in which it is written. Chapter headings include 'The Boy', 'The Student', 'The Graduate', 'The Young Man', 'Promoted' and 'Demoted'. The book sticks assiduously to its task – an approach that is most satisfying in the early chapters, especially chapter two, 'The Student', covering Lewis' years at Brisbane State High School and the now famous 1977 Australian schoolboy rugby tour of Britain.

The fact that State High, a state school, is a member of the Queensland GPS (private school) association gives McGregor a number of provocative dichotomies around which to weave his first sections: League/Union, professional/amateur, affability/pretence, battler/high flyer, money/the lack of it, and so on. The writer exploits these cleverly. Our man Wally is proffered as a kind of working class hero, a strategy that works to particularly good effect when the writer addresses the 1977 schoolboy tour. That squad included, in addition to the likes of Chris Roche and Michael O'Connor, the dazzling talents of the Ella brothers, Mark, Glen and Gary. Another Matraville High School Aboriginal player with exquisite gifts, Lloyd Walker, missed out because he was in direct competition with Lewis. McGregor provides some entertaining insights into the close friendship that would develop between King Wally and Godlike Mark, one which began on the basis of mutual admiration for particular football skills, and evolved into a lasting bond.

If the first section of the book contains some surprises, the few comments supplied by those closest to Wally, apropos his academic abilities, contain none. Thomas Keneally, as I will shortly discuss, responded gratefully to Des Hasler's meditative, even intellectual side. No such biographer's option is available to McGregor. Wally's mother, June, herself a tough, uncompromising, successful sportsperson, when discussing her son's study habits damns with faint praise: 'I take the blame', she says. 'But he can read, write and count, and there's a lot out there who can't'.<sup>3</sup> Wally's reading material is surveyed only once in the text, and it appears (though McGregor misses the scholarly comparison) that one of the King's main literary mentors might well have been Bill Lawry, former Australian cricket captain and self-confessed student of *Phantom* comics:

Wally had been introduced to [Phantom comics] by his parents who read them avidly. Surf club mates had Phantom T-shirts and

skull rings. When Wally had the cash he sent away for a ring . . . [His] was a \$300 sterling silver number and his Phantom comic collection now extends to around four hundred. I tested Wally's commitment. What kind of dog does the Phantom have? 'He hasn't got a dog. He's got a wolf, said Wally. I knew that I was in the presence of a believer.'<sup>4</sup>

Literary skills and interests, it must be hastily added, are scarcely a prerequisite for performance on the footy field, as the history of all codes amply demonstrates. The only institutional background for football, the sages say, is the university of hard knocks. Chris Roche, one of Lewis' closest friends and also a Brisbane State High larrikin, puts the Lewis playing style succinctly: '. . . Wally would go up and thump a bloke and abuse him, and thump him and thump him and unless the bloke was exactly the same he'd back off eventually. It upset a few I'll tell you, bloody oath.'<sup>5</sup>

Of such uncompromising mettle are champions usually made. Add to that a total lifestyle commitment. As McGregor suggests in a later chapter (a theme I would have liked him to develop further), 'Wally's whole self-image was attached to his football status'.<sup>6</sup> He lived and breathed it. Such devotion, on top of ruthlessness and rare athletic gifts, basically explains why he won no less than five man-of-the-match awards of the first ten state-of-the-art, State-of-Origin matches between Queensland and New South Wales after 1980, and why he dominated player awards in his finest playing years, like no-one before or since – so much so that, as McGregor tells us later in the book, his 'Christian name constituted a headline on the back pages of newspapers as readily as the Queensland premier's did on the front page. That one word, "Wally" . . .'<sup>7</sup>

Given that *King Wally* was published in 1987, before Lewis' unsuccessful final playing years and sad coaching stint with the Gold Coast Rugby League Club, the book is a well-researched portrait of a contemporary champion. The final chapter is simply entitled 'Crowned'. John MacDonald, journalist and quirky biographer of Meninga, shapes his portraits somewhat differently. I say 'portraits' because MacDonald published his first assessment of Meninga in 1990 and the revised edition in 1995. The first, simply entitled *Big Mal – The Inspiring Story of Mal Meninga*, was put together by Lester-Townsend Publishing just before Lester and co. closed down. Meninga was particularly cynical about what happened; he did not earn a cent from the book.

Yet, publishing controversy aside, there are a number of things that pique one's curiosity in the book – especially MacDonald's interest not simply in the prodigious achievements of Meninga's career to 1990, but in the tensions that shaped his subject's life and, it seems, his personality as well. MacDonald is no eloquent literary stylist, or psychoanalyst, yet the investigative journalist in him teases out the substance of the difficulties Meninga had to endure during his career: among them, the ambivalent relationship with his footballing father

Norm who, after a serious accident ‘which changed his nature’, was responsible for inflicting ‘beatings’ on his children; the racial slurs he experienced, especially in his early footballing days; a succession of serious injuries; and, strangest of all, claims made early in his career that he was a ‘Poofter’ (homosexual).<sup>8</sup> When someone in the crowd at one of Meninga’s matches in 1983 called him a ‘black fag’, Meninga took the matter into his own hands. As MacDonald writes, he ‘remains unrepentant’ still.<sup>9</sup>

It is ultimately appropriate that the revised edition of Meninga’s biography is re-titled *Meninga – From Superstar to Super League – The Life and Turmoil of Mal Meninga*. In bringing the story up to 1995, MacDonald in his ambivalent title presumably refers to the fact that, while it is true that when ‘Meninga held aloft the Ashes trophy (the symbol of supremacy in rugby league contests between Australia and England) at Leeds’ Elland Road ground in November 1994 he stood alone as Australia’s foremost sporting icon’<sup>10</sup> (certainly rugby league’s ‘supreme icon’), this image of triumph was destined to be temporary. MacDonald opens his Introduction to the revised edition with two and a half pages of new text. He begins curiously, by defining the word ‘icon’. Then, almost immediately he raises the spectre of ‘Super League’ – the name given to the Rupert Murdoch-inspired model for rugby league – and (by implication, the reader realises) Meninga’s instrumental role in it:

Some members of a formerly adoring public who see Meninga as *betraying* their game through his involvement in Rupert Murdoch’s Super League would see him not as a Christ figure but as a *Judas*. [emphasis added]<sup>11</sup>

MacDonald is definitely no Murdoch or John Ribot de Bressac (Super League’s first CEO and now Director of the 1999 Premiers, the Melbourne Storm) fan. He tries to remain objective but simply cannot. He hates Super League. The additional paragraphs in the new Introduction hardly comprise seamless transition from the old text. Mal Meninga, we are now informed:

has been able to describe little of the Super League’s so-called vision. And as its figurehead, he has been virtually invisible. Not so much a prophet without honour as a prophet who hasn’t been heard.

It’s both ironic and tragic that the Meninga loyalty, his most admirable quality, is questioned, that he’s widely seen as a *mercenary betrayer*. [emphasis added]<sup>12</sup>

The gaze of the anti-Super League biographer scorches at times in the new edition. His portrait of his subject has been utterly de-stabilised by his personal thoughts on the ‘turmoil’ of the moment.

By contrast, that doyen of rugby league journalists, Alan Clarkson, in his collaborative book with Meninga also published in 1995, while regretting the chaos caused by the Super League saga, nevertheless does not let this affect the substance of his story. The book is marketed as an 'autobiography', but one with Clarkson's level-headed, shaping hand always present. *Meninga – My Life in Football* is written well, the rapport between Clarkson and Meninga enabling the talented journalist to tell the story in a fashion not unlike McGregor in *King Wally*. It is clearly inspired by Clarkson's great regard for his subject. Clarkson's introduction to the 'autobiography' commences with Meninga's now legendary try in the Second Test of the 1990 Ashes series at Old Trafford. He goes on to describe the 1989 Grand Final win by Canberra over Balmain as the best he has seen, and he concludes by extolling Meninga's qualities as a friend, 'a friend for life'.<sup>13</sup> Generically prototypical, the Clarkson book obviously reflects Clarkson's deep empathy with, and love for, rugby league. His admiration for Meninga is everywhere apparent. The book is a richly photographed and stylish piece of work.

One cannot make the same claims for Tom Keneally's *The Utility Player – The Des Hasler Story*. Recent Keneally novels and non-fiction works such as *Our Republic* (1993) have been scathingly treated by some reviewers because of their appearance of sheer haste in the compilation. They appear to have been carved out in one quick slice, from dictaphone to transcription, to text, to the public. There is some truth in the accusation. Indeed, *The Utility Player* acknowledges this openly when Keneally says, at book's end, it was 'written on the hop', 'a wild thing to attempt; but there are rewards'.<sup>14</sup>

Such rewards, fortunately, are not restricted to the biographer, thrilled at getting some Brookvale Oval (Manly's home ground) dirt on his hands. The readers, too, get their reward because one of the country's finest prose writers has turned his attention, albeit fleetingly, to the genre of sport biography. Keneally can write, and Des Hasler is an intriguing subject. Early in the book Keneally helps us to understand why, when he investigates the man's qualities:

Gentleness. In a man like Des Hasler? Forty-tackle-a-game Des! Well, that's the contradiction inherent in someone like Des. That's why they used to call him 'Sorry' in his first years as a star. Because he'd tackle someone like Greg Dowling, the ferocious Queensland prop and say, 'Sorry. You all right, Greg?'<sup>15</sup>

Yet it is these contradictions that attract the reader. Little wonder that Hasler's 'spiritual mentor' was not any one of the legends of rugby league such as Dally Messenger, Clive Churchill, or Johnny Raper, but Eric Liddell, he of 'Chariots of Fire' and 'muscular Christianity' fame. When Des Hasler went on tour as an Australian Rugby League representative, he actually liked being a tourist and he made sure he read up on the sites. He wrote home lovingly to his wife,

Christine. Hasler breaks the stereotype of the philandering, hard-living, mentally challenged rugby league player. As Keneally puts it: '[Christine Hasler] knew she was the only woman in the life of Des, the Zen practitioner of rugby league, the code's monk'.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes the biographer sweeps into passionate hyperbole, such as when he claims his subject to be 'an Australian version of Arthurian knight. His heart was strong because his soul was rigorously aligned'. It is certainly these ascetic, intriguing qualities that endure at book's end. Hasler would be interesting even if he were not a footballer of distinction. It would be difficult to sustain such a claim for many footballers in any code.

You can certainly sustain a claim for distinction for Ian Roberts, however. *Finding Out* is, as far as I am aware, unique in Australian football literature for Roberts is the first player to confirm that he is gay. His biographer, Paul Freeman – himself a member of Sydney's gay community – leaves us in no doubt at the book's beginning that we are about to engage with a very different sport story when he discusses the defamation pitfalls of the project because he had written about 'a young, living, known homosexual . . .'.<sup>17</sup> The fact that, in the author's preliminary note, football is not mentioned might ultimately be taken as a metaphor for what follows because the book is, first and foremost, a narrative of gay politics and gay culture in Australia. Rugby league comes an honourable second.

For me, this is the book's strength and its statement of difference. Roberts' own Foreword is equally direct:

I knew there was a story to tell, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to be open enough to tell it properly. It's been quite a process of emotional exploration and self-assessment. I've learned a lot about myself through the grillings Paul gave me, and through thinking about the journey I have been on so far.<sup>18</sup>

Roberts does open up on a range of subjects that must have been extraordinarily difficult to confront at all, much less to discuss in detail. We follow his struggle and, it might be said, his triumph – which does not take place on the football field but in life as he determined, in his middle twenties, to 'out' himself.

The route to this decision was obviously not easy. At age fifteen, for example, Roberts found he had epilepsy (a condition that appeared to be controlled yet recently recurred). On top of this, he had to mark out a course in his later teens that worked for him as a footballer, ultimately a champion footballer, who happened to be gay. Growing up in South Sydney, the home of rugby league machismo, was always going to be tough. Roberts recalls his initiation into the Souths' first grade side:

I was like this twenty year old . . . stick! And they're all geed up going, 'Mate! If the cunt sticks his finger in your mouth fucking

bite the cunt off! If he's in the bottom of the fucking strum, *kick* the bastard!<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Roberts was getting 'accustomed to unrequited love, or secret love. Love that you feel, but you're not allowed to have'.<sup>20</sup> Freeman makes the decision, no doubt in consultation with his subject, to concentrate primarily on the latter. So that while we do get a multiplicity of excerpts from the Sydney tabloids throughout the book on footy, the author's talents clearly are not this way inclined. Unlike the standard rugby league journalist, he is palpably not at home in the idiom of the sport. The principal narrative is what he does best.

The narrative stretches from Roberts' early years of psychological turmoil, to the double identity he was forced to assume both with his family and footballing friends, to his questioning of his sexual feelings and of those to whom he directed these feelings, to his finally telling his parents and the world who he really was. Gay icon status through the now famous photograph shoot for the gay *Blue* magazine was not far behind.

In addressing Roberts' sexuality, Freeman at a number of points in the book is also able to discuss gay history in Australia: the New South Wales Wran Government's law reformation on homosexuality, the recent activities of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, and the grim suicide statistics for gay men in Australia, especially those in the 15-29 age bracket. Indeed, apart from mentioning Roberts' elevation in 1997 to the captaincy of his last football team, the North Queensland Cowboys, the book ends as it began – with controversial discussion of Australia's on-going homophobia. *Finding Out*, and the brave behaviour of its protagonist, have already played a role in meaningfully confronting the problem. The reader finds out as well.

Ironbark Press' *The Greatest Game* is a worthy complement to the books so far discussed, principally because of the background research done by Geoff Armstrong, self-confessed, lifelong rugby league 'fanatic'. We are given the opportunity, in one volume, to engage with a cross-section of rugby league's best journalism, drawn from articles spread over almost one hundred years, by writers such as J. C. Davis, leading writer with *The Referee* for nearly fifty years, the legendary Claude Corbett and Sir James Joynton Smith, the man who controversially bankrolled rugby league when it was struggling at birth in 1909. A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson, Australia's most popular turn-of-the-century poet, in a gem of an article for the 1928 *Sydney Sportsman*, entitled 'Let the Punishment Fit the Crime', shows us that League history constantly repeats itself:

There appears to be epidemic of stoush and rough house tactics creeping into the league game of football and several players were sent off . . . In the argot of the football fans, the boys are making it a bit too willing.<sup>21</sup>



Armstrong also includes renowned Australian poet Kenneth Slessor's 1932 contribution to *Smith's Weekly*, entitled 'What It Feels Like to Crack a Shin or Two for Australia', along with Tom Keneally's account of the 1989 Grand Final won by the Canberra Raiders – their first, and won in overtime – called 'A Movie Script That Came to Life'. *The Greatest Game* is a fine anthology. All the writers selected understand the nuances of the game. Many relate that understanding to their society and times.

When Lex Marinós and I began commissioning writers for *League of a Nation* we had the Armstrong book firmly in mind, though the brief we set ourselves was largely to select the writers we *wanted* to include, and then extract a piece from them. Australian Rules over the years has been well-served by high-profile scholars and creative writers venturing to put their enthusiasm for the game into print. Manning Clark, Ian Turner, Barry Oakley, David Williamson, Bruce Dawe, Archie Weller, Brian Matthews and Garrie Hutchinson come immediately to mind. The same is not true of rugby league. Lex and I attempted to even things out a bit – with, I'd like to think, some success. Fifty-odd writers, and some of Australia's best cartoonists, contributed to the *League*. Many things continue to tickle my fancy about the book:

one article, 'Capital, Class and Community', by George Parsons, old St. George hooker and now Macquarie University economic historian, begins his contribution with two pithy quotes from Karl Marx;

Colin Tatz gives us the fascinating story of early North Sydney indigenous footballer George Green;

Kate Ingham supplies the insider's story of her father's sculpting of the Winfield Cup;

Hugh Lunn on the origins of 'State-of-Origin';

Tom Keneally on the demise of League's 'innocence' through the 'Super League' events of recent years; and

an elegant section, called 'Oceans Apart', which counterpoints contributions by Andrew Moore and Murray Hedgcock – the one by a resident Australian admiring the traditions of English Rugby League; the other by an Australian expatriated in England for decades (one of the Murdoch sport press' best journalists) discussing the attractions of the game in Australia.

There are many qualities in the book one could highlight, but one will suffice: its humour and humorists. Not for us the embarrassing drivel, cross-dressing and scarcely veiled racism of Channel Nine's 'Footy Show'. Rather, the more delicate touches, the sophisticated repartee of, say, satirist H. G. Nelson, as he enlarges on the contribution to the game of Tina Turner:

I love Tina. She is so Australian. I won't hear a word against her  
. . . Tina does that lewdy dancing and the endless singing of that

marvellous tune because she loves the League. She is a League freak. She is a mad Bears nut and has always had a very big rap for Greg Florimo. She would do her thing for the game totally buck-shee if only Phillip Street would let her.<sup>22</sup>

Barry Dickins, Melbourne playwright and journalist, is not quite so enthused:

Rugby League is the white man's revenge on having no ball-sense or conversational skills of any kind. When you go to a pretentious party, if Rugby League is on, you can always get shit faced and folks will respect you for it . . . I would rather kick a black on Australia Day than succumb to fucking Ruby League.<sup>23</sup>

When Australian comic and broadcaster Wendy Harmer responded to our call, with a piece called 'Four Synapses', she did not bother to discriminate between codes. All are lumped together:

Football is so stupid, not everyone can play. To qualify you have to wear a boot size bigger than your I.Q. If I said I was going to spend the afternoon with The Axe, Mad Dog, Bozo, Captain Blood, Buttocks, Tin Legs, Plugger, the Moose, Blocker, Crackers and Cement, you would think a) I was going to a meeting of the NSW ALP Right; b) I had just been selected for Paul Keating's Republican Committee; or c) that I was off to play a game of footy.<sup>24</sup>

Fortunately for us all, historian and scholar Andrew Moore does not share Harmer's prejudices. Anything but. The wait by the faithful for a book like *The Mighty Bears* has been even longer than that experienced by the ever-hopeful Bear supporter anticipating another premiership. A club in the original 1908 competition, Norths won it all in 1921 and again the following year. They have not won since; indeed, they have only played in one Grand Final since the glory double in the early 1920s – and that, way back in 1943. This interminable dry spell has been the stimulus for so many jokes in recent decades, as North's supporters have of necessity had to learn values about life essentially foreign to fans of, say, the Raiders, Broncos, Canterbury, Manly and St George: namely, a sense of humour (this above all), resilience, world-weary cynicism, a sense of foreboding, and bravery under fire in the face of, and through the experience of, disaster. Theirs is a sort of Gallipoli Complex.

Just as C.E.W. Bean constructed the spirit of his World War I history around the experience of the Australian soldier at the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey, its character-building and nation-building, so Andrew Moore writes this, his third work of history, from the psychological trenches that are the

permanent habitat of the North Sydney supporter. Thus embattled, he does an admirable job. You know this is not going to be merely another tribute to footy machismo right from the title pages as the author quotes one H. Ulrich 'on the music of Franz Schubert, but equally of Rugby League': 'noble melodies, piquant rhythms, persevering figurations, romantic melancholy, harmonic variety'. *The Mighty Bears* is both trenchant and ambitious, yet keenly aware of its obligations as an inclusive social history of a unique club.

The early chapters deliver generously on the assertions of the Introduction as we gain insight into the class reasons why rugby league began, and the game's inevitable appeal to a Sydney suburb geographically cut off from Sydney city (the Harbour Bridge opened in 1932) and occupying a big stretch of Sydney Harbour's foreshores. Little wonder that Norths in the formative years were 'the Shoremen' and that the Waterside Workers' Federation, a socialist union, played an integral role in the lives of a number of Norths' first players and officials. We get a range of brief yet most illuminating biographical cameos of men like E. ('Paddy') Boland, a stalwart of the Tramway and Omnibus Union, and Jack Geneley, of Irish background, the manager and promoter of boxers, and a tugboat skipper who had charge of Sydney's tugs. North Sydney was a no-nonsense area that produced genuinely tough men.

It does not take a Rhodes scholar to work out where the author's sympathies lie; because of them, he responds with real passion and belief to the history of Norths' formative decades. The first decade or so was largely unsuccessful, for a variety of reasons, but the club really came into its own in 1920 – the beginning of a genuine renaissance that culminated dramatically in the two successive premierships. Moore's handling of the era, in a section called 'Glory Years, 1920-22', is simply superb. His chapter begins this way:

Voltaire's *Candide* could easily have had 1922 in mind. It was 'the best of years . . . the worst of years'. In Australia in 1922 there were indeed many 'symbolic events . . . notable endings and beginnings'.

Of the beginnings few more were significant than the start of aeroplane services between Charleville and Cloncurry by a small Queensland firm, Qantas. And yet for all the entrepreneurial acumen this event illustrated, 1922 also saw the consolidation of the Communist Party of Australia. The First World War had left the Australian economy exhausted, with socialist enthusiasm apparently rising among the masses. Even in genteel Mosman in April 1921 'the largest attendance yet' flocked to hear an address at the Mosman Town Hall on the economic theories of Karl Marx.<sup>25</sup>

After the often futile prospecting for the *Sporting Anecdotes* book, this was like striking the mother lode! Moore perceptively surveys the year 1922's distinctive paradoxes and ironies, including those relating to D.H. Lawrence's visit to Australia and to Sydney's inner-northern suburbs. If this sounds like it might stretch the terms of a book on rugby league, let me assure you it does not. The social history makes the reader so much more appreciative of the footballing and footballers – especially those dazzling players of 1921-2, including the scholarly, trend-setting George Green (perhaps Aboriginal but probably Melanesian), Paul Tranquille (of West Indian descent) and rugby league's 'Pavlova', the 'best winger in the world', Harold Horder. Moore delights in the gifts of that renowned North Sydney backline (and takes us with him): Duncan Thompson, Dallas Hodgins, Herman Peters, Ted Taplan, Frank Rule, Cec Linkhorn and Horder. Mention of Peters prompts Moore to discuss his erudite diary, covering the 1921-2 Kangaroo Tour to England. No opportunity is missed to broaden the scope of the study.

Perhaps inevitably, the exhilaration of 'The Glory Years' is somewhat tempered in subsequent sections as we work through the Depression and World War Two years, and the history of so many bad seasons for the North Sydney club. But the quality of discussion of culture and popular culture never wanes. Nor does the author's skill in honing in on the important narratives: the 'mixed blessing' that was the Harbour Bridge, which made travel to the city easier, but also brought community disruption; the Depression's impact, captured by Moore in his telling story of Alf Faull, who had to pawn his 1921 premiership medal; the emergence in the early 1930s of the North Sydney ground's infamous granite-like surface as a key factor in explaining the club's continuing misfortunes; and the many seasons (1947-76) that saw the club guided by president Harry McKinnon, scholar and humorist, a man obviously radically different in style and demeanour to today's administrators. Unfortunately, McKinnon's last years with the club, in the 1970s were also some of its least productive. In measuring this era against those of the past, Moore responds with Michael Leunig-like humour, close to tears:

No decade in the history of the North Sydney RLFC produced more disappointment than the 1970s. This was the era when the jokes about the Bears proliferated. Mirroring the names of contemporary rock bands, Norths as 'Freddy and the Dreamers', Fred Griffiths' team of 1965 evolved into 'The Easybeats' of the 1970s. Unkind jokes such as 'Did you hear about the Irish burglar? He broke into Norths trophy room' became standard pub fare. To add insult to injury, policemen were reputedly 'patrolling the perimeter of North Sydney Oval to prevent children from leaving'.<sup>26</sup>

Rendering the seemingly endless losing seasons establishes the tone of later chapters as something less than buoyant, though the author's analytic skills dominate as he explains (assisted by the searing prose of novelist Kate Grenville, contrasting the fond memories of her childhood in North Sydney with the yuppified greed and cement rendering of the present) the changing demographics of North Sydney, which saw the club's ground revitalised by Ted Mack and his local council – from 'Concrete Park' to 'Caviar Park'. Saddened in part by this development, and clearly appalled by the onset of the Super League/ARL 'war', Moore records late in the book that 'the emotional bond between working people struggling to survive and rugby league players dripping mobile phones and expensive sports cars was broken'.<sup>27</sup>

Season 1996 added yet another chapter to the 'Mighty Bears' story. Though entering the preliminary final against St George as 11-4 favourite, Norths were hammered, thus missing out on their first Grand Final appearance in fifty-three years. In his *Daily Telegraph* column on the Monday after the match, Ray Chesterton could have been writing about so many Bear losses back through the years when he said that the 'planets are now all aligned again and Norths remains an icon of ineptitude'. A sorry saga it might be, judged solely on results, but the grander dimensions of the tragedy have now had peerless treatment by one very fine historian – and not one other rugby league club can boast as much.

In my Introduction to *League of a Nation* I wrote:

Rugby League began as a people's game in a few small but deeply passionate communities in the Old and New World. If this fact is forgotten in the chase for the sponsorship dollar, then we won't be talking 'the League' anymore. What we'll have is TV circus spectacle. For almost ninety years Rugby League in Australia has added so much to the national culture and the national fabric. It is part of our community's treasured heritage. If business values are allowed to determine the game's future, then the game has no future.<sup>28</sup>

After the horror of recent years, season 1999 delivered some improvements. The unified competition two years on, and, more importantly, the aim of those now administering the game once again to attract families through the turnstiles, represent a worthwhile start, yet this will be at the expense of several historic clubs such as South Sydney, North Sydney, Balmain and Western Suburbs who will either disappear or be merged by 2000. Ultimately, the game must be rescued by the people who love it. In this process the texts discussed here, the core of a solid, emergent rugby league literature, might well play an important role.

## NOTES:

1. Adrian McGregor, *King Wally – The Story of Wally Lewis* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987); Geoff Armstrong (Comp.), *Wayne Pearce present The Greatest Game – A Celebration of Rugby League* (Sydney: Ironbark Press, 1991); Thomas Keneally, *The Utility Player – the Des Hasler Story* (Sydney: Sun Australia, 1993); John MacDonald, *Big Mal – The Inspiring Story of Mal Meninga* (Sydney: Lester-Townsend Publishing, 1990); John MacDonald, *Meninga – From Superstar to Super League – The Life and Turmoil of Mal Meninga* (Sydney: Ironbark, 1995); Mal Meninga (with Alan Clarkson), *Meninga – My Life in Football* (Sydney: Harper Sports, 1995); David Headon and Lex Marinos, eds, *League of a Nation* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1996); Andrew Moore, *The Mighty Bears! A Social History of North Sydney Rugby League* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1996).
2. McGregor, *King Wally*, vii.
3. McGregor, *King Wally*, 21.
4. McGregor, *King Wally*, 57.
5. McGregor, *King Wally*, 32.
6. McGregor, *King Wally*, 120.
7. McGregor, *King Wally*, 229.
8. MacDonald, *Big Mal*, 64.
9. MacDonald, *Big Mal*, 64.
10. MacDonald, *Meninga*, ix.
11. MacDonald, *Meninga*, ix.
12. MacDonald, *Meninga*, xi.
13. Meninga, *Meninga*, 27.
14. Keneally, *Utility Player*, 194.
15. Keneally, *Utility Player*, 36.
16. Keneally, *Utility Player*, 97.
17. Freeman, *Ian Roberts – Finding Out*, iv
18. Freeman, *Ian Roberts – Finding Out*, ix.
19. Freeman, *Ian Roberts – Finding Out*, 72.

20. Freeman, *Ian Roberts – Finding Out*, 60.
21. Armstrong, *Greatest Game*, 44.
22. Headon and Marinos, *League of a Nation*, 187.
23. Headon and Marinos, *League of a Nation*, 186.
24. Headon and Marinos, *League of a Nation*, 190.
25. Moore, *Mighty Bears!*, 83.
26. Moore, *Mighty Bears!*, 235.
27. Moore, *Mighty Bears!*, 398.
28. Headon and Marinos, *League of a Nation*, ix-x.