The 1905 All Blacks: A New Zealand Perspective

Greg Ryan
Senior Lecturer in History, Lincoln University, New Zealand

We know 1905 as the year of Albert Einstein, and more especially of his special theory of relativity – the idea that space bends and that the shortest distance between two points is a curve. But as the eminent Welsh historian Gareth Williams reminds us, the theory was given its greatest and most public test not by Einstein, but by Teddy Morgan - a Welsh medical student. It was Morgan who, on Saturday 16 December 1905, saw his objective straight in front of him and embarked on an arcing run to reach it. Whether Einstein knew of this proof of his research is not known. But what is more important for the history of the twentieth century is that Wales led the All Blacks by a try to nil. And there the score remained. Wales went mad. And so, it is commonly believed, New Zealand also went mad – but for rather different reasons!

What is intriguing about these events is that few outside Wales can recall the details of the Welsh try. Yet anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with the history of New Zealand rugby 'knows' that Bob Deans scored a try for the All Blacks – or would have scored a try if not for cheating Welshmen, incompetent refereeing or both. Thus the All Blacks were denied an opportunity to win – and to preserve their perfect record.

For what it is worth, I think Deans did score. The day after the game he sent this telegram to the *Daily Mail*. 'Grounded ball 6 inches over line some of the Welsh players admit try. Hunter and Glasgow can confirm was pulled back by Welshman before referee arrived'. Bob Deans was perhaps the most sober and scrupulously honest man who ever set foot on a rugby field. We should take him at his word. But I suggest that whether or not he scored doesn't matter. The try denied to Deans was no different from innumerable other impossible or impossibly bad decisions made by referees in an age before video replays. On the day, there were other tries that weren't and several missed opportunities for both sides. If not for Deans, we would perhaps be remembering Duncan McGregor who was called back from a certain try because of a forward pass. More to the point, the All Blacks, both publicly and privately, declared that they did not deserve to win, that Wales had played the better game and perhaps should have won by an even greater margin.

The Deans try was not an issue during or immediately after the match. Only slowly did the certainty of it gain momentum in New Zealand, and its real poignancy came only following the death of Deans in 1908, at the age of 24, and of his tour captain, Dave Gallaher, at Passchendaele in 1917. By the time the 1924 All Blacks arrived in Britain, there was a strong sense of something to be avenged. And they did, by defeating Wales 19-0 – supposedly one point for every year since 1905.

Why has the Deans try assumed such legendary and controversial proportions that were not evident on the day? Why have New Zealand rugby followers tended to dwell on the one failure of an otherwise remarkable tour in which an unheralded New Zealand rugby team became the All Blacks, won 32

of their 33 matches and scored 868 points to 47? The answers to these questions reflect a great deal about the legendary power of the 1905 tour and the ways in which successive generations of historians, rugby and academic, have constructed or invented it - to emphasise the parts that suit their particular purposes, while ignoring much that does not. They see in the tour so much that they 'know' about New Zealand rugby and about the characteristics of the emerging nation as a whole – and the denial of Deans represents an injustice, an aberration that interferes with an otherwise perfect narrative.

Certainly there were many columns of positive press coverage for the team in 1905 and huge crowds welcomed them home in triumph. But in other respects the narrative of the tour is rather more complicated. We need to examine the myths and contradictions of 1905 and put the tour in its broader perspective – both in terms of rugby and the political, imperial and national structures within which it took place and within which Premier Richard Seddon loomed larger than his usually large presence. Beyond the positive press and subsequent nostalgia there are other readings of the 1905 All Blacks.

During the 1980s, when historians Keith Sinclair and Jock Phillips began to explore New Zealand nationalism and identity, and the ways in which the supposed qualities of colonial life were also used to define New Zealand's place within the wider world, the 1905 All Blacks naturally loomed large. The achievements of the tour are supposed to have reinforced strong bonds within the British Empire. More importantly, it provided an advertisement for the qualities of New Zealand life. Here was a rural, healthy, egalitarian paradise, a social laboratory that was leading the world into the twentieth century by producing men possessed of admirable physique, natural athleticism, dexterity, adaptability and initiative. Phillips declared that 'It was the 1905 tour… which created idols of the All Blacks and turned them into formal representatives of the nation's manhood', and that 'the model of manhood represented by the 1905 team was to remain the core of the male stereotype in New Zealand for the next seventy years'. In all of this there was a particular focus on the All Black captain David Gallaher as soldier, athlete and natural leader.

Certainly these and other accounts make some mention of the various controversies of the tour, but without exception these are marginalised in favour of an overwhelmingly positive narrative. Indeed, the more recent the work on 1905, the more selective and one-sided much of it has become. For many, 1905 is something of a creation myth from which stems a century of largely uninterrupted All Black supremacy and tradition. But this emphasis and interpretation is a long way removed from much that was written at the time of the tour and in its immediate aftermath.

A further difficulty with existing accounts is the tendency to seize on '1905' in isolation. Many who have written about the triumphs of the tour fail to balance them against a chain of events, and especially the appearance of rugby league in 1907, that plunged New Zealand rugby into crisis, fundamentally altered relations with Britain and undermined many of the apparent certainties

of the 1905 tour. Failure to consider the tour in terms of what happened in Britain and Australasia very shortly after is rather akin to the historian of the Great War who stops at Christmas 1914 and leaves the reader to guess the outcome.

There are several specific problems with the existing portrayal of the 1905 All Blacks and the rugby world from which they emerged. Firstly, there is little substance for any explanation of the growth of New Zealand rugby, or the success of 1905, in terms of 'frontier' masculinity, the rural rugby backbone or classlessness. Not only was the game urban in its origins, but its fastest growth and greatest playing strength, in terms of both numbers and results, remained in the four main cities and various larger provincial towns. Of course the game secured a footing in rural areas, but relatively speaking it was beset by obstacles such as poor transport and communication networks, small populations and the transience of the rural workforce. Equally, a range of social and economic factors determined how far players from different social backgrounds could progress in the game. Much depended on independent means or a sympathetic employer. While the proportion of the total population resident in the four main cities increased from nearly a quarter to slightly less than a third in the years 1881-1911, two-thirds of All Blacks selected prior to 1914 came from the four main cities. Using a broader definition of urban areas that includes New Zealand's twenty largest towns and cities, which accounted for slightly more than 40 per cent of the population, nearly 90 per cent of the All Blacks were drawn from urban clubs. The 1905 team, with 66.66 per cent from the four main cities, and 85.18 per cent (23 of 27) if the larger towns are included, are entirely consistent with this pattern. In terms of occupations, fifteen came from blue-collar industrial backgrounds, six from broadly professional occupations and three from transport. There were only three farmers – and none of them can be regarded as paragons of the backblocks. Indeed, prior to the tour, Bob Deans worked on the family farm at Riccarton – walking distance from the centre of the emerging city of Christchurch.

The second point to consider is that the All Blacks were not the inevitable outcome of a united 'national game'. Since its foundation in 1892, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union had been undercut by frequent and intense provincial rivalries and concerns among its middle-class administrators that some working-class devotees of the game did not pursue their leisure with the right motives or spirit. During 1904 and 1905 the NZRFU indulged in a good deal of hand wringing and soul searching over increasing instances of rough play and bad language at all levels of the game and an increasing number of reports of players gambling on the outcomes of games in which they were involved. But the most significant element was the tension between amateur and professional ideals. The former argued that the game should be played purely for its own sake and not for the pursuit of trophies or competition points – and certainly not for any form of payment. To play for a tangible reward raised the distinct possibility that some may corrupt the spirit of the game in order to obtain that reward. But others argued that a certain degree of intense competition was healthy. More to the point, they argued that if working men could not afford to play the game, had to take time off work in order to do so, or lost work time due to injury, they should be compensated. These

differences led to some ferocious debates within the NZRFU when the prospect of a tour of Britain was being debated in 1902. Those who saw rugby as a purely amateur game were highly alarmed by suggestions that the touring team ought to be compensated for lost wages. Indeed, Otago voted against the original decision to send a team, and others agreed only reluctantly. But it was eventually agreed that the tourists would receive three shillings a day allowance for expenses – a decision that caused little public comment at the time, but which would later come back to haunt New Zealand rugby.

Underlying these disputes were intense provincial rivalries – especially between Otago and Auckland. The selection of the 1905 team, admittedly handled with breathtaking incompetence by the NZRFU, provided a staging ground for various provinces to trumpet the claims of their players while denigrating others. More important, the appointment of Otago's Jimmy Duncan as coach prompted a formal protest from the Auckland RFU amid a series of acrimonious meetings and claims that previous New Zealand teams had been disrupted by bitter North – South dissension. Further compounding the problems of the touring team was its failure to perform on the field – including inept displays on a short tour to Australia and a 3-0 loss to Wellington the day before their departure to Britain. In all respects then, the build up to the tour was contentious and expectations for it were decidedly mixed.

Further problems arose on the boat to Britain when the appointed captain and vice-captain, David Gallaher and Billy Stead, resigned as they understood the players wished to have a say in the matter of the captaincy. Despite being told by the manager George Dixon that the decision of the NZRFU was binding, the players voted 17-10 to retain Gallaher and Stead – a majority, but hardly a ringing endorsement. Although the players subsequently did a remarkably good job of keeping their affairs out of the press, there was one report of an Otago player giving an Aucklander 'a good thrashing'. Meanwhile, Duncan enjoyed a holiday as Gallaher and Stead usurped him and coached the team themselves.

Now we must turn to reactions in Britain after the All Blacks arrived in September 1905. Certainly it cannot be denied that the team startled many observers with their open, running rugby, superior combinations and fitness. During the first four weeks of the tour they scored 341 points to 7 and the 23 English teams who opposed them scored a total of two tries. But it is critical to remember that there were other reactions to their success and other explanations for it.

During the early 1990s, in another effort to link rugby with themes of masculinity and nationalism, John Nauright argued that the success of the All Blacks was apparently used to counter contemporary concerns about physical deterioration and declining racial virility in Britain during the crucial years between the South African War and the Great War. That it had taken more than two years for 450,000 British and imperial troops to subdue 40,000 largely untrained Afrikaners apparently raised significant questions about the

standard of military recruits and, by implication, the standard of British manhood as a whole. In particular, observers pointed to the depopulation of the countryside, the rise of crowded, unhealthy cities and the urban degeneration of working-class men who constituted the bulk of the fighting force. Sir Frederick Maurice, in an influential article in the *Contemporary Review*, claimed that 60 per cent of those seeking to enlist in Britain were rejected as unfit. But if the core of the Empire was held to be rotting, the colonies, as epitomised by the All Blacks, were clearly in fine fettle.

Undeniably there are elements of this argument to be found in the columns of the *Daily Mail* – Alfred Harmsworh's mass-circulation tabloid that pursued a determinedly populist imperial agenda from the late 1890s. Indeed, in early October 1905 it was the *Daily Mail* that contacted New Zealand premier Richard Seddon seeking an explanation for the success of the team. His reply is revealing.

Information respecting the contests taking place in Great Britain is awaited almost as earnestly as news of the late war in South Africa and the results are received with great enthusiasm. The natural and healthy conditions of colonial life produce stalwart and athletic sons of whom New Zealand and the Empire are justly proud. (Richard Seddon – *Daily Mail*, 12 October 1905).

William Pember Reeves, the New Zealand High Commissioner in London, echoed these environmental determinist sentiments and was quick to exploit the tour as an opportunity to encourage emigration to a land with more space, better diet and shorter working hours. A number of English observers also shared these views. As 'Ex-County Captain' wrote to the *Daily Mail*:

We Englishmen seem to be fast losing our historical grit, allowing 'fat and flabby' to take its place. Until the Boer War, with its too numerous instances of white flag surrender by unwounded officers and men, knocked the conceit out of us, we used to claim that one Englishman was worth two of any other country. ('Ex County Captain' - *Daily Mail*, 9 October 1905)

But it is important to remember that the tone of the various official enquiries after the South African war reveals rather more about a narrow range of middle-class opinion, articulate propaganda and hysteria - the sort of thing the imperial-minded *Daily Mail* was good at - than any set of realities about the state of Britain or the Empire. In the first place, the Deterioration Committee were inclined to see the problem as a lack of fitness - which is certainly not the same thing as deterioration. Secondly, the committee only briefly alluded to possible links between sport and a better physique as a solution to this problem. Its recommendations were largely directed towards the provision of gymnastics and military drill - as distinct from organised sport - in working-class schools. But even this emphasis on a militaristic path to health needed to be approached cautiously as it was known to sit very uncomfortably with growing numbers in Britain who had either opposed the South African War from the outset or come to disapprove of the brutal 'scorched-earth policy' methods employed to finish it in 1902. Thirdly, it is also doubtful whether those in authority had unqualified admiration for white colonial manhood in the

years before 1905. It was widely perceived that colonial troops, who were almost all volunteers and not professionally trained soldiers, were lower class and prone to riotous behaviour. Various Australian accounts of the South African War reveal ample evidence of indiscipline and disrespect for the British command structure. One of the strongest examples here is the court martial and subsequent execution of the Australian 'Breaker' Morant in 1902 - a case in which his supposed conduct in shooting Boer prisoners highlighted a serious disjuncture between British and colonial social and military mores. And as we shall see shortly, much that the All Blacks did on the rugby fields of Britain in 1905 did nothing to alter this perception.

Beyond the determination of a few *Daily Mail* correspondents and a few more academic historians to conjure up fine masculine types, those in Britain offered a range of more practical explanations for the success of the All Blacks in 1905.

First among them was an acknowledgment of the limited opposition faced by the All Blacks. For every rugby player in Britain at least fifteen more men played soccer. There were 250 clubs affiliated to the RFU in 1905 and perhaps 7500-10,000 affiliated to the Football Association. More important was the state of English rugby. For 1905 was only ten years after the ‘great split’ – when the predominantly working-class northern clubs had been forced out of the Rugby Football Union in a dispute that was as much about their desire to compensate players for lost time as it was about broader class tensions and north / south antagonisms. During the following decade the RFU declined from 481 clubs to 250 – included amongst which were various Oxbridge colleges, some public schools and the Calcutta Rugby Club. But it was not simply that the RFU lost numbers of players, they lost their best players – the tough northern miners and mill workers who had dominated English teams during the early 1890s. What remained to oppose the All Blacks in 1905 was a small predominantly middle-class and determinedly amateur rump. Only Wales would offer them representative and cross-class opposition.

This realisation was also uppermost in the minds of some who responded to the physical deterioration hysteria by pointing out that it was inevitable that a team of ‘full-time footballers’, as the All Blacks were during their tour, would naturally be superior to amateurs who had to fit training and playing around their regular working week.

Much of the criticism on the alleged decadence of modern British rugby football is, to put it mildly, ‘utter rot’. Will these loud-voiced pessimists tell me what the result would be if a picked team from any of our countries were to play against ordinary club and county teams under the same conditions as the New Zealanders are now doing – i.e practically living for football and nothing else. (‘E.G.’ – *Daily Mail*, 14 October 1905)

What have the deterioration cranks to say in reply to the fact that all of the armour in the Tower of London is too small for most people of the present

day…. It is high time a check was placed on all this prevailing hysteria with regard to deterioration. ('Anti-Craze' – *Daily Mail*, 20 October 1905)

Others, such as *The Field* simply regarded the debates as silly hysteria.

There is never any lack of patriots willing and able to save their country by writing to The Times; and it is to be hoped that the Rugby Union will not fail to profit by the discrepant exhortations that have been showered upon them. They have only to determine whether national decadence in football is due to old-fashioned adherence to scrummages lasting a quarter of an hour, to a slow-witted preference for defence over attack, to the pedantic insistence of referees on the off-side rule, to obstinate disregard of the spectators right to see a bright and open game, to the players luxurious aversion to train like a prize fighter for six months at a time, to his slowness to recognise the merits of the simple life, vegetarian diet, ju-jitsu, somebody's system of muscle culture, and wing forwards. (*The Field*, 11 November 1905)

Punch also launched a scathing attack on Seddon.

In the person of the Rt Hon. Richard Seddon, New Zealand's ideal figure, we have a standard of physical culture that makes for national obesity. His bodily dimensions… can not but have exerted a baleful influence upon his loyal subjects, discouraging that abstinence and self-restraint which are essential to a perfect training. (*Punch* – 27 December 1905)

Later in the tour, even the New Zealand press would condemn the 'minister for football' for his blatant opportunism in associating himself with the team. Many felt that the neglect of state business in order to attend functions for football teams – even *this* football team – was an abuse of power.

Another element worth considering is the direct response to claims that the All Blacks were 'natural athletes'. Here we must consider the claims of Eugen Sandow, the father of modern bodybuilding, who insisted that it was his methods of training and physical development, rather than the natural environment, that shaped the team. While the validity of his specific claim is debatable, it is certainly the case that the team and their manager, George Dixon, made no secret of their dedicated training regime and insisted to all who would listen that this was what made good rugby players.

We now come to perhaps the most damaging rebuttal to the myths of 1905 – the widespread contention that the All Blacks succeeded because they displayed attitudes and used methods that were at least unethical and certainly contrary to the spirit in which rugby ought to be played. From early in the tour there were claims that they played a rough game driven by an over-developed determination to win – rather than to play the game for its own pleasure. Here we need to remember the gentlemanly ideal of Muscular Christianity – in which the ideal athlete was not only possessed of a healthy body, but also a healthy mind. He played games with the right style *and* the right spirit. It is clear, however, that while many could concede that the All Blacks were physically superior bodies, they were not ideal athletes because

they lacked the discipline and morality to play games in the right way. As one of their most persistent critics, Hamish Stuart, wrote:

The success of the victors was largely, though not wholly, due to their playing football which suggests a most careful study of the letter of the law, of the penalties attaching to breaches, and of the advantages to be gained by scientific evasion thereof. (Hamish Stuart – *Athletic News*, 4 December 1905)

In this context, the most sustained criticism of the All Blacks related directly to Dave Gallaher and his position as wing-forward. To understand this we need to understand the workings of the All Black scrum formation with a 2-3-2 formation and a wing-forward designated to both harass the opposition half-back and protect his own by positioning himself in such a way as to obstruct opposition players.

Many in Britain quickly came to regard Gallaher as an obstructionist who sought to gain an unfair advantage over his opponents and therefore did not play the game in the right gentlemanly spirit.

There is one blot on the game as played by the New Zealanders, and one which is against every canon of rugby union football. This is in the work allotted to the 'wing' forward. (*Morning Post*, 18 September 1905)

The 'wing-forward' is an abomination. His principal work seems to be to plant himself in front of the opposing half, and we find it difficult to regard an obstructionist as a footballer. (*Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 30 September 1905)

All of these criticisms reached a peak during the international matches. There was considerable antagonism displayed by the avowedly amateur Scottish Football Union and its players who declined to socialise with the All Blacks and petulantly demanded the return of the match ball that had been souvenired by one of their players.

In Wales, it was Gallaher and not Deans who was the central focus of reactions to the All Blacks performance. His play was savagely condemned and he felt that the pent up frustration of several generations of Welshmen had been let loose upon him.

To say that the game was vigorous is to state the matter mildly. It was rough. Early in the game Gallaher was warned for foul play. There is no doubt that the New Zealand captain is both rough and tricky. With all deference to New Zealand football, their idea of sportsmanship is not ours. (*Newport Argus*, 22 December 1905)

It is important to remember that these Welsh criticisms came after their victory. One shudders to think what would have emerged had the Welsh lost.

The final test of the reputation of the 1905 All Blacks emerges in the context of events during the decade after the tour. We need to consider the rather

different British responses to South African touring teams in 1906 and 1912; the implications of the tour of the Professional All Blacks and the emergence of the Northern Union game in Australasia in 1907; the decidedly fraught Anglo-Welsh tour of Australasia the following year; the equally acrimonious visit of the first Australian team to Britain at the end of 1908; and the retrospective campaign against the 1905 All Blacks conducted by Scotland during the early months of 1909. Collectively, these events triggered a collapse in Anglo-Australasian rugby relations that is entirely at odds with notions of imperial sporting unity and admiration for colonial manhood.

In certain respects it is difficult to draw comparisons between the All Blacks and the Springboks who followed them to Britain a year later. This tour must be seen in the context of concerted efforts at reconciliation after the Anglo-South African war. Naturally this gave the tour a vital political purpose that had not been possessed by the All Blacks. But it is clear, perhaps to the bemusement of modern players and followers of rugby, that by comparison the Springboks were regarded as scrupulously fair and chivalrous players who adhered to both the letter and spirit of the rugby laws. Their tour reinforced a less than positive retrospective view of New Zealand rugby.

During the whole tour we do not believe as much as a single hiss was heard, and, great as the New Zealanders were, one cannot but remember that their methods… gave rise to much discussion. Not so the South Africans. They have passed through the fire and the excitement of their tour without a single blot on their escutcheon. (*Sporting Life*, 2 January 1907)

As the Springboks charmed Britain, plans were afoot that would do considerably more damage to the reputation of the All Blacks. In 1907 a professional New Zealand team, including four of the 1905 All Blacks and four other former All Blacks, left for Britain to play against the Northern Union – the challenge that had been denied their predecessors. The tour marked the beginning of rugby league in Australasia and plunged New Zealand rugby into grave crisis as it struggled to come to terms with the amateur / professional debates that had always lurked just below the surface of the supposedly united ‘national game’.

Perhaps more importantly, the emergence of the Professional All Blacks confirmed many British suspicions about the rugby culture that had shaped the 1905 team. Amidst intense debate between conservative and reformist factions, the NZRFU moved to enlist the help of the RFU in ‘saving’ New Zealand rugby for amateurism by sending out a respectable touring team – ideally containing some Rhodes scholars. But animosity towards colonial rugby now triggered sharp divisions within the British game. While the more liberal Welsh were happy to lend their support to the RFU, the Irish and Scots flatly refused to become involved. What resulted was an Anglo-Welsh tour of New Zealand in 1908 – but one that entirely failed in its objectives. The tour quickly degenerated into acrimony and controversy, accusations of rough play, renewed complaints about the wing-forward and a general feeling among the tourists that New Zealanders approached their rugby with an exaggerated, almost religious, fervour. Such perceptions of colonial rugby

were reinforced when the first Australian team toured Britain late in 1908. Three Australians were sent off for various offences during tour matches and there was a suspicion in some quarters that the old ‘convict stain’ was asserting itself among the tourists.

Early in 1909 the Scottish Football Union tried to exact its own revenge for the sins of 1905. When they were finally provided with the various expense accounts from the All Blacks’ tour, they discovered, much to their apparent surprise, that both the All Blacks and the Wallabies were paid allowances of three shillings per day for petty expenses - variously described as ‘washing and tips’ or ‘wine money’. Despite an insistence from the English RFU that these allowances did not constitute any form of profit to the players, and simply saved team managers having to pay petty expenses as they arose, the Scots saw nothing but a direct breach of the laws regarding professionalism. They promptly cancelled their fixture with England scheduled for March 1909 and demanded that the All Blacks be retrospectively declared professional. Eventually they relented and agreed to play England.

Observers in Australia and New Zealand detected a good deal of hypocrisy in the Scottish position and several pointed out that the practice of paying daily allowances had originated with the 1899 British tour of Australia and these were certainly paid to all, including Scottish players, on the 1904 British team’s tour of New Zealand. More to the point, it was commonly known and freely stated that the All Blacks received this daily amount in 1905.

By 1912 it was apparent that rugby relations between Britain and Australia had broken down completely. In that year the South Africans were invited back to Britain for a second tour – a move that antagonised many who recognised that it should have been the turn of the All Blacks. In a display of very belated lip service to New Zealand claims, the RFU asked in July 1912, less than three months before the start of the British season, whether a combined Australasian touring team would be acceptable for a triangular tournament involving South Africa. While the New South Wales RU was willing to consider this as a special case, the NZRFU declined and stated that it had no desire to be involved in tours to Britain.

Ironically, it was the carnage of the Great War that reopened the channels for rugby. Many in Britain began to feel that as New Zealanders had made the supreme sacrifice for the British Empire, they should be accepted back into the rugby fold. A New Zealand Services team played 36 matches in Britain and two in France from January to May 1919. Even then, it only appeared once each in Ireland and Scotland. The All Blacks did not return to Britain until 1924, and not again until 1935, when they reacquainted with Scotland after 30 years.

There is a great deal of myth and nostalgia around the 1905 All Blacks. Much of it stems from those who look at the tour as a series of huge victories and one unjustified defeat, without understanding the full context of the tour, of the nature of Edwardian ideals of sportsmanship and of relationships within the British Empire more generally. On the other hand, our understanding of 1905

is also clouded by historians who have determinedly set the All Blacks within some parts of this broader framework. Their problem is that they do not understand enough about the context of British rugby and how the 1905 All Blacks, their methods and attitudes, sat within it. 1905 is a historiography of two halves – and full credit needs to be given to both.