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Australian Nationalism and Working-Class Britishness: The Case of Rugby League Football[1]

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Abstract

Sport has traditionally been seen as a vehicle for the expression of Australian nationalism. Following W. F. Mandle's work on cricket and nationalism, sporting contests between Australia and England have been portrayed as asserting Australian feelings of independence and hostility to Britain. This article challenges this view by examining the history of rugby league football in Australia and its relationship to Britain. Predominantly working-class in composition, with close ties to the labour movement and the Irish Catholic community, rugby league saw itself until the 1960s as profoundly and proudly British. Violent confrontations between Australian and British teams on the football field did not translate into hostility to Britain or the Empire off it. This article argues that Australian sporting culture closely resembled that of the north of England, sharing a democratic self-image and hostility to social snobbery that enabled the sport to assert a form of imperial working-class Britishness.

Recent developments in the historiography of 'Britishness' and Australia have questioned the extent and importance of Australian nationalism in Australian politics and society before the 1960s. As a number of historians have pointed out, the telescoping back in time of contemporary Australian national feelings ignores the deep sense of Britishness that pervaded all levels of Australian society for more than the first half of the twentieth century.[2] Indeed, this was not only true for overtly pro-British conservatives Australians but also for the leadership and significant sections of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and trade union movement.

Much of this debate has so far been conducted at the level of high politics, in the governmental and diplomatic sphere. In contrast, this article attempts to look at Australian Britishness through the medium of popular culture, and in particular how Britishness was reflected in the sport of rugby league football, which, after cricket, has been the most common arena for Anglo-Australian sporting contests over the past century. In this,

it takes issue with the widespread assumption of the past three decades that sport was a vehicle for Australian nationalism and nation-building. Starting with W. F. Mandle's 1973 article 'Cricket and Australian Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century', most historians who have looked at the role of sport in Australian society have tended to exaggerate its importance as an indicator of nationalist sentiment. The binary nature of sport – win/lose, for/against, us/them – makes it easy to overestimate it as an indicator of nationalist or separatist feeling.[3] In fact, as Ken Inglis pointed out in a 1979 rejoinder to Mandle, cricket was above all an expression of shared Britishness throughout the Victorian era.[4] Even the controversy over the notorious 1932–33 'Bodyline' cricket tour of Australia by England was caused by Australian outrage at the apparent departure from the norms of imperial cricketing decorum by English captain Douglas Jardine.

Rugby league gives us a somewhat different perspective on the importance of Britishness to Australia. The sport is viewed in both countries as a predominantly working-class pastime with strong ideological connections to the labour movement. Whereas support for cricket and Australian rules football stretched across the classes, and rugby union confined its appeal to the GPS-educated middle-classes, rugby league viewed itself as the sport of the working man (although rarely as that of the working woman). Given its ties to organized labour, its widespread support in Catholic communities and the overwhelmingly proletarian composition of its teams and crowds, Australian rugby league has in many ways been representative of what Gavin Souter described as 'those who in varying degrees had rejected, outgrown, forgotten or simply never known the British inheritance. To [this] group, which might be called the indigenous Australians, belonged a large part of the working class, most Irish Catholics, the children of European immigrants, the industrially militant and the politically radical.'[5] Souter argues that these Australians were the wellspring of nationalist feeling. Yet, despite its central place in male working-class popular culture, rugby league saw itself as no less British than any other sport.

The case of rugby league also highlights a methodological problem that is shared by both sides of the debate about nationalism and Britishness. That is, the assumption that Britishness equates to identification with the English upper- and middle-classes based in the south of England, embodied in sporting terms by the public school-educated, amateur captains of touring England cricket teams. However, this dominant notion of Britishness was sharply contested not only by the non-English nations of Britain but also within England itself. The idea of a democratic, meritocratic north of England free of privilege and patronage was a strong ideological factor not only in nineteenth-century Liberal and twentieth-century Labour politics but also especially within the popular culture of the north itself. Indeed, much of what has traditionally been seen as a distinctively Australian sporting character is not qualitatively different from the sporting

culture of the industrial north of England. Concepts of Britishness and what it meant to be British were not uniform.[6] In short, as this paper seeks to argue, from the perspective of the British Isles not all British sportsman were Douglas Jardine, and from the perspective of Australia not all British-loyalists were Robert Menzies.

An Anglo-Australian sport

The origins of rugby league can be traced back to Britain in the 1880s when a huge influx of working-class players and spectators into the hitherto exclusively middle-class sport of rugby union led to intense class friction, expressed through a debate on the virtues of amateur and professional sport. In 1895, the two camps split, when the predominantly working-class clubs of the north of England broke away from the zealously amateur Rugby Football Union (RFU) to form the Northern Rugby Football Union, which later became the Rugby Football League (RFL). A decade or so later, rugby league had become a separate sport in its own right, with distinctive rules, culture and constituency. In 1907, the sport underwent international expansion when a team of New Zealand rugby players broke from the domestic rugby union authorities and toured Britain to play the new game. On their way to Britain, they played in Sydney and helped to provide one of the catalysts that led to the formation of the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) and a similar body in Queensland.[7]

The new sport spread rapidly through the rugby strongholds of the eastern states, not least because it was closely associated with the working class and its culture. As in Britain, there had been simmering discontent among rugby union's growing base of working-class players and supporters throughout the early years of the century, exemplified by disputes over the lack of compensation paid to injured working-class players, most famously in the case of Alec Burdon of the Glebe club. Tightly controlled by members of the professional and managerial middle-classes, the Australian rugby union authorities took their lead from the English RFU and attempted to impose a strict amateurism on rugby, not least as a means of keeping in check the burgeoning working-class interest in the game. Although rugby league was promoted by sporting entrepreneurs such as the Australian cricketer Victor Trumper and the businessman Sir James Joynton-Smith, the sport was from the outset, as Andrew Moore has pointed out, 'strongly circumscribed within a labour universe, a reflection of the self-confidence and sense of separate identity of a working-class movement recovering from the defeats of the 1890s. Drawing upon a value system that prized masculinity, aggression and local identity, the game tapped into aspects of working-class life.'[8] Harry Hoyle, the first president of the NSWRL, was a prominent activist in the railway workers' union and an ALP election candidate. Ted Larkin, the league's first full-time secretary, was elected ALP member for Willoughby in 1913. Many of the

founding clubs of the NSWRL had prominent ALP or trade union leaders as committee members or patrons. Future prime minister Billy Hughes was the patron of Glebe, while North Sydney's patron was Teddy Clark, the first president of the cabman's union. John Storey, who became NSW premier in 1920, was a founder of the Balmain club. In Queensland, the central figure in the split from rugby union was Jack Fihelly, the future deputy leader of the Queensland ALP and prominent Irish nationalist. Fihelly also symbolized the strong link between the sport and Catholicism in Queensland. Similar ties were established in early in the game's history in NSW. Ted Larkin sought to establish the game in Catholic schools before World War One, and in 1918, Christian Brothers' schools affiliated to the NSWRL, followed by Marist Brothers' in 1926.[9] By the 1930s, these links with the labour movement had been deepened and broadened, to the extent that between 1934 and 1950, the trophy for the winners of the Sydney club competition was provided by the *Labor Daily*, the newspaper founded by the Miners' Federation and run by supporters of Jack Lang in the 1930s.

From the sport's inception in Australia, reciprocal tours by British and Australian national sides were a central feature of its culture. The first Australian tour to Britain took place in 1908, the first British tour to Australia two years later, and, interrupted only by war, tours continued on a four-year cycle until the mid-1990s. Based on the format of cricket tours, the centrepiece of each tour was a series of three 'test' matches, the overall victor of which would win the rugby league 'Ashes'. Lacking the links to the imperial elite of cricket or rugby union but, unlike Australian rules football, able to compete regularly at an international level with British representatives, rugby league seemed to provide an arena in which national antagonisms could be played out at their most intense. Indeed, the fierce rivalry between the Australian and British national teams appeared to be a graphic illustration of Australian self-assertion and hostility to the British connection. Test matches were marked by the brutality of the combat and high levels of violence. The first test match between the two countries to be held in Australia in 1910 set the tone. It was, said the *Referee*, a 'rough, foul game'.[10] The resumption of matches after the First World War revealed that little had changed. 'The contest was not characterised by anything striking in sportsmanship: that is, the striking things done were with fists or boots', wrote one reporter about the first test match of the 1920 series.[11] The tone intensified even more in the 1930s. 'To call it a game is a misnomer', wrote the *Yorkshire Post* about the drawn third test match of 1930, 'War is a more appropriate term.'[12] The 1932 tour became notorious for the second test match, the 'Battle of Brisbane', which Australia won despite being reduced to ten men at one point because of the injuries sustained during the course of the match. Claude Corbett, probably Australia's leading league journalist of the time, described this match as 'hard all the time, rough most of the

time and foul frequently' and called for the sport's officials to clamp down on violent play 'otherwise there will be a fatality on the field which will not be accidental'.[13] There was to be no let up in subsequent years: in 1936, Australian forward Ray Stehr achieved the unprecedented feat of being sent off twice in the same three-match test series.

The experience of soldiering alongside each other in the Second World War did little to bring the two sides together; less than half an hour into the first test of 1946, Britain's Jack Kitching was sent off for punching Australia's captain Joe Jorgensen. Clive Churchill's abiding memory of the 1948 Kangaroo tour to Britain was the violence meted out by the British club sides they played in the early part of the tour. Bradford forward Ken Traill described the third test of 1952, known as the 'Battle of Bradford' as the roughest game he had ever experienced. Perhaps the depths were finally plumbed in the 1954 Britain versus New South Wales tour match that was abandoned by the referee after just sixteen minutes of the second half due to incessant fighting among the players.[14] But even this salutary experience was not heeded; the 1960s saw more players sent off for violence in test matches than in any other decade, culminating in the 1970 World Cup final at Headingley, when vicious fighting between the players did not end when the referee sounded the final whistle.

Indeed, it appears that the officials were often as culpable as the players. The British winger Alf Ellaby blamed the tour managers for 'indoctrinating' players in the dressing room before test matches and remembered as 'disgusting' the speech given before the first test match of 1928 in Brisbane. Some support for this view was provided by Claude Corbett, who claimed in 1932 that British players had told him that 'they acted in a way which would not have permitted them to stay five minutes in the game at home'. Post-war British RFL secretary Bill Fallowfield certainly had little truck with those who criticized the exuberance of touring teams: 'rugby league players are not supposed to be cissies', he told journalists in 1952 in response to criticisms that the Australian tourists were overly physical in their approach to the game. In 1958, Ray Stehr, now a prominent journalist, noted that it wasn't only the players who felt it necessary to resolve their differences through fisticuffs when he recalled, perhaps exaggeratedly, a fight in the team hotel between Australian tour manager Wally Webb and Bradford chairman Harry Hornby in 1934.[15]

On the basis of evidence such as this, especially when taken together with the social and political underpinnings of rugby league in Australia, it would be easy to conclude that the sport acted as a repository of deep hostility to Britain and its Empire. Certainly the evidence here is as strong, if not stronger, than that presented for cricket as a vehicle for nationalist feeling. However, and perhaps counter-intuitively, this is not the case. In fact, the representatives of Australian rugby league were unashamed in their Britishness and vocal support for the imperial link.

This can be seen throughout the early years of the sport in Australia. Welcoming the first British touring team to Australia in 1910, the president of the NSWRL, James Joynton-Smith, assured the visitors that they 'could rely absolutely on getting British fair play', following which his guests were treated to a rendition of 'God Save the King'. Up to and including the 1921–22 visit to Britain, the touring side was known as the Australasian team, representing a region of the Empire rather than separate national aspirations. In 1926, the NSWRL (historically the most important body in the Australian game) invited Britain to send a touring team over a year ahead of the normal cycle of four-yearly tours, because they felt that 1927 would be 'an appropriate occasion for the visit of an English team, in view of the Duke of York's visit to Canberra'.[16] At a dinner in honour of the 1928 British tourists, Harry Sunderland, a leading Queensland rugby league official, told the visitors to 'remember Captain Cook; if he hadn't planted the Union Jack here, Australia might have become a Dutch dependency'. In 1928, Sydney's City Tattersall's club presented a trophy to be awarded to the winner of the Ashes test series, expressing the hope that they were 'helping to perpetuate the true sporting spirit which is characteristic of all sporting bodies in the British Empire'.[17] Perhaps the most notable of these expressions of loyalty came from Australian Foreign Minister, H. V. Evatt, who in October 1945 addressed an RFL council meeting in Manchester to persuade them to organize a tour of Australia. 'The close relationships that have been built up between Australia and New Zealand and the North of England is in the nature of a history and the building up of this history ought to be resumed as soon as possible, in the best interests of rugby league football and of the Empire', he told the meeting.[18]

These sentiments continued to be expressed well into the 1950s. 'We are just as British as you are', protested Harry 'Jersey' Flegg, the president of the NSWRL, in 1950 during an argument with British tour manager George Oldroyd.[19] This view was reiterated strenuously four years later by E. S. Brown, who addressed the British RFL Council on behalf of the Australian governing body: 'Australians look to England as the mother country in war, in industry and also in rugby league football'. He went on to explain that 'there is a strong desire in Australia to get along with England from every point of view'.[20] This view was more than backed up by the Australian sporting press until the 1960s. The 1914 third test in Sydney was named 'the Rorke's Drift Test' – in favourable comparison to the 1879 rearguard action fought by a hundred British troops in South Africa against King Cetshwayo's Zulu armies in January 1879 – not by British but by Australian journalists. Even as late as 1958, the Australian *Truth* could begin its report of the second test match, again a landmark British victory against overwhelming odds, by quoting Shakespeare: 'This happy breed of men, this little world . . . this England.'[21]

How Australian was Australian sport?

This apparent contradiction between imperial loyalty and ferocious sporting rivalry can be explained if we examine the relationship between the sporting culture of Australia and that of the industrial north of England, rather than that of the dominant south of England. Following Mandle, there has long been an unquestioned assumption among historians that Australian sporting values and attitudes were distinctive and, in general, counterposed to those of England. Mandle identifies forthrightness, egalitarianism and opposition to snobbery as the key distinguishing features of Australian sporting culture.[22] But, leaving aside the somewhat contentious implication that Australian sport was free of social discrimination, these characteristics were far from being unique to Australian sporting identity. They could just as easily be ascribed to sport in northern England. The counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire were associated with frankness and 'speaking one's mind' almost to the extent of parody. Criticism of snobbery in British sport was common in the north, especially in those sports which had a mass working-class following, such as cricket, soccer and rugby league. Explicit and implicit criticism of the hypocrisy of amateurism, of favouritism shown towards members of the southern English middle classes and of the division of sport into the 'classes and the masses' was a feature of the writings of northern sports journalists and newspapers such as the *Athletic News* from the 1880s onwards. For example, widespread admiration of the prodigious talents of W. G. Grace did not stop northern commentators from attacking his 'shamateurism' or the favours shown to him by the English cricket authorities.

Closely connected to this hostility to aristocratic and upper middle-class control of British sport was a strong sense of regional sporting identity that defined itself very much in opposition to the metropolitan centre. This was particularly noticeable in cricket matches between the leading northern county cricket clubs, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire, and Middlesex and Surrey, the exemplars of southern privilege in the eyes of many northerners.[23] But this antagonism was even more apparent within rugby before and after the 1895 split when the strict amateurism of the southern-based RFU was identified by many in the north as an excuse for hypocrisy and snobbery. One of the most acute expressions was to be found in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the reward for the winners of rugby's county championship was a match against the England team. Northern counties won the championship every year before the 1895 split and the game against England became the occasion for expressions of antagonism towards southern England. For example, if one substitutes 'England' for the South and 'Australia' for the North, the sentiments of this representative passage from the *Yorkshireman* magazine in 1890 echo those found in the pages of the *Bulletin* in the 1890s or in the popular press at the height of the Bodyline controversy:

> 'For years the South has been the "be all and end all" of English football. But this privilege is a thing of the past. The centre of English football has been transferred to the North, and to Yorkshire particularly. If Southerners don't recognise this cordially they will have to be made to do so.'[24]

This hostility to 'the South' as the embodiment of middle-class traditional Englishness was deeply rooted in the worldview of rugby league and its followers. But it did not see itself as anti-British or separatist. Its conception of Britain was industrial, meritocratic and egalitarian – indeed, it was very similar to how many Australians saw, or would like to see, their own society.

This was not the only way in which sport in northern England resembled that in Australia. 'Barracking', the Australian term for spectators shouting with varying degrees of hostility at players or match officials, has been held up by Mandle and many others as a distinctive feature of the Australian way of sport.[25] Yet this was a common feature of soccer, cricket and rugby crowds in the north of England from at least the 1880s. Indeed, the criticisms of Australian cricket crowds voiced by English cricketers such as A. E. Stoddart – 'we have been insulted, hooted at, and hissed in every match and on every ground without exception' – were repeated by middle-class English commentators about crowds in the north of England. Why should gentlemen rugby players, pondered Bertram Robinson in 1896, 'pander to the howling mobs that crowd the circular stands of some Yorkshire coliseum'?[26] Moreover, the experiences of Australian rugby league tourists to Britain suggests a strong case for arguing that the phenomenon was actually more pronounced in the north than it was in Australia. For example, Chris McKivat, the captain of the Australasian rugby league side that toured Britain in 1911–12, complained at a farewell dinner at the end of the tour that, 'on some grounds the conduct of your spectators is much worse than we have in Australia. You take your defeats far too seriously'. In 1948, full-back Clive Churchill played in the Australian tourists' first match of their British tour at Huddersfield and discovered that 'the English crowds were viciously patriotic towards their own players. English crowds, in fact, are one-eyed and shockingly partisan.'[27]

Highly competitive, partisan, hostile to privilege and egalitarian; these were features of northern English sport as much as they were Australian. And this was especially true of rugby league, in many ways the quintessentially northern sport. Indeed, the similarities between mainstream Australian attitudes to sport and those expressed in the industrial north were far more numerous than the differences. A poem published in the Manchester-based *Athletic News* in 1910 on the eve of the departure of the first British rugby league tour to Australia expressed the values of sport in the north in a way with which most Australians could easily identify:

> You're not of the bluest blood, boys,
> Not aristocrats, what then?

You're something that's quite as good, boys,
You're honest young Englishmen.
And what does it matter the rank, boys,
'Tis better that you should claim
That you are straightforward and frank, boys,
And keen upon 'Playing the Game'.[28]

The themes of the poem reflect British rugby league's view of itself: honest, straightforward, frank and critical of privilege ('what does it matter the rank'). These were qualities central to self-image of the north of England – and were also the values that were promoted by Australians as being specific to Australian sport. And, as the poem implies, class was central to the construction and articulation of this discourse. Just as in the north of England, much of the Australian criticism of 'English' sport was actually a critique of English upper- and middle-class mores and values. The condemnation of Douglas Jardine during the Bodyline tour (and, to a lesser extent, the violence of touring British rugby union sides) was in large part based on the perceived hypocrisy of what he represented: a member of an upper class that spoke about 'fair play' in life and in sport yet did not practise it. This was exactly the complaint of northern English sports followers about the southern-based sporting authorities. It should also be noted that class was also central to much of the hostility towards Australia from the British upper- and middle-classes, a social snobbery that was also directed equally at the working-class in Britain, and was perhaps best exemplified by the belief of English upper-class novelist Angela Thirkell that Australia was 'an entire continent peopled by the Lower Orders'.[29]

British rugby league teams that toured Australia therefore stood in marked contrast to the dominant perceptions of Britishness, both in Britain and Australia. Captained and led by workers from the industrial heartlands of Britain – almost certainly a unique phenomenon among imperial travellers in the first half of the century – the British players were working men just as the Australian players and spectators were. They thus presented an image of the Empire which appeared to resemble Australia more than it did Britain; ostensibly meritocratic and egalitarian, yet still very much British.

'The most democratic of sports . . .'

The consciousness of class was deeply woven into the fabric of the culture of rugby league in both countries. However, this was not a class consciousness that saw the working class as having interests fundamentally opposed to capitalism or to other classes. At its most 'political', it reflected a belief that the division within rugby demonstrated how society was divided into 'us and them'. Rather than class conflict, its goal was the equality of the working class in the life of the nation. Writing in 1941, the secretary of the NSWRL, Horrie Miller, explicitly laid out this philosophy when he wrote that rugby league 'is a game for every class and

all classes to play. It is not a caste game. Any game which brings together, on the field of sport, men and boys of every type, must be a nation-builder . . . it is essential that every class in a community should understand and appreciate the worth of every other class.'[30]

The idea that the rugby league had a quasi-political purpose was also reflected by the way in which it was described in both Britain and Australia. As early as 1914, the manager of that year's British touring team, John Houghton, had defined the purpose of the tourists: 'their mission was to propagate their game of [rugby league] football because they believed it was the people's game'. From the 1920s onward, it became commonplace in Australia for the sport to refer to itself as the 'people's code'.[31] It also sought to promote itself explicitly as a democratic game. Eddie Waring, the famous English sports journalist, claimed on many occasions that rugby league was 'the most democratic game in the world', a belief that was reiterated on many occasions by its Antipodean followers. 'Rugby league, with justifiable pride, always emphasises the fact that it is the most democratic of sports', proclaimed Sydney's *Rugby League News* in 1946.[32]

This close social affinity between sport in Australia and the north of England can be seen in the reactions to Australia of touring British rugby league teams. The idea of Britain as 'home' was just as common in rugby league as it was in middle- and upper-class Australian culture. The visit to Britain by the Australian rugby league team was universally regarded as 'the trip Home'. Eddie Waring was struck by the strength of the sentiment during the 1946 British tour of Australia and New Zealand: 'everyone calls England "Home". It is immaterial whether they have ever known anyone from the old country. It appears to be everyone's ambition to go "home" and to hear youngsters with no English connections at all talking about "home" – England – was truly remarkable.'[33] But what is perhaps more noteworthy is the extent to which these feelings were reciprocated by British rugby league tourists to Australia. The manager of the 1932 British tour, Fred Hutchins, told a reception held in Sydney for the visitors that the tour 'is like coming home'. On tour four years earlier, he had reported back to the British rugby league authorities that 'none of us are homesick'. Bob Anderton, Hutchins's joint manager on the 1932 tour, took this identification with Australia even further during an interview on Sydney's 2UE radio when he told listeners, 'I suppose you would all like to hear my impression of our bridge and our harbour', referring to the Sydney Harbour Bridge that had been opened a few weeks before the tourists' arrival.[34] Partly these sentiments were based on common feelings of British racial patriotism, as Harold Wagstaff, the captain of the 1920 British tourists, made clear when he called for test matches to be played in 'the British spirit of sportsmanship, for we are Britishers of the old land and you are Britishers of the new land. We're all the same in blood and sport, and know how to lose and, I hope, how to win.'[35] Similarly, at a dinner for the 1936 British tourists held in Brisbane, tour manager Bob

Anderton recited an acrostic poem he had written, based on the name of the host city, which ended, 'A for the Anzacs who fought with such fame / N is our Nation of which we are proud / E for old England, let's cheer long and loud.' As he recorded in his letter home, both parties did indeed cheer long and loud.[36]

But there was another aspect of the British tourists' experience in Australia that caused them to feel so comfortable there: the apparent absence of the overt class discrimination that they faced in their own country. To some extent this was because rugby league was the dominant sport of NSW and Queensland and the tourists enjoyed a level of interest there that, outside of the game's heartlands in Cumberland, Lancashire and Yorkshire, was unattainable in England. But it was also due to what they perceived to be the egalitarianism of Australian, society. Coming from the rigidly class-stratified society of Britain, the lack of social deference and hierarchy was highly noticeable. Even their on-board experience of the sea voyage to Australia could be socially uncomfortable – the 1936 tourists changed from a two-class ship to a single-class ship for the journey back to Britain – but once ashore in Australia, they found a society in which they felt themselves to be accepted as equals. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the tourists were regularly referred to as the 'chooms', a variation of the friendly Australian colloquialism 'chums' that denoted a recently arrived immigrant, suitably adapted to reflect the broad northern English vowels of the visitors. Unlike in Britain, the reference to accent carried no social stigma.[37] The fact that they were welcomed as national representatives also offered a degree of social esteem that was denied them at home – indeed, in 1924, *The Times* had even questioned the rugby league tourists' right to be called English, placing quotation marks around "English" when describing the team.[38]

This change in their social status when in Australia was most noticeable when the tourists attended the many civic receptions and dinners that were held in their honour. The 1936 tour managers were not alone in being moved by the 'wonderful hospitality from the Government and Civic Authorities down to the humble citizen'.[39] When Governor-General William McKell organized a reception for the 1950 tourists, the party was amazed to find that not only could he talk with great knowledge about rugby league but that he came from a similar social background to the tourists, having been a boilermaker in Balmain. 'He sat and talked with us and in his presence we were quite at home and very much impressed', reported the tour manager George Oldroyd. This stood in marked contrast to their experiences at home, where the opportunities to talk to representatives of the monarchy or holders of high offices of state were effectively non-existent for the sport and its representatives. In this context, it is also worth noting that the highest ranking government official to meet with the British RFL up until the 1960s was an Australian, H. V. Evatt, when he met the RFL Council in 1945 to discuss the 1946 tour

of Australia. As Oldroyd's comment implies, the rugby league tourists' sense of affinity with Australia was based as much on ideas of class equality as it was on notions of racial identity.[40]

This idea of an imperial British working class united through sport was underlined in the *Souvenir Brochure* of the 1933 Australian rugby league tour of Britain, in which an anonymous Australian author sought to appeal to a sense of shared proletarian origins in order to promote trade between the two countries:

> every sport and pastime has given men and teams of the Motherland and the Commonwealth opportunities to meet in friendly combat; . . . these contests have the effect of helping us to understand each other and realise that we are still members of one family. . . . [but] practical work must be associated with this idealism. Just as it is impossible for the worker here at Home to live upon fraternal handshakes and slaps on the back, so it is impossible for the same man when he leaves the shipyard of the Clyde, the coal pit of Northumberland, the rolling mills of Birmingham, the hills of Wales or the warehouses of London to settle on the land in Australia . . . to be successful, unless, when his farm or orchard or vineyard comes into production, he can sell what he produces.[41]

This synthesis of working-class identity and imperial Britishness can also be found in the sphere of biography. In the late 1940s, Harold 'Jersey' Flegg – president of the NSWRL from 1929 to his death in 1960 and arguably the most powerful administrator in the history of Australian league – was introduced by William McKell to Lord Macdonald, visiting from England. Mishearing the peer's name, he greeted him: 'G'day Claude'. McKell corrected him: 'No Jerse, it's Lord, not Claude', to which Flegg responded, 'We don't go with that bullshit here. This is Australia.'[42] Yet, despite his refusal to doff his cap in deference to the British aristocracy, it was also Flegg who vehemently proclaimed his Britishness to the British tour managers in 1950 and who had refused to attend meetings with the Australian (Rules) Football National Council to explore a possible merger in 1933 because, he told a reporter, 'he takes pride in the British tone and atmosphere of rugby and . . . will not have the fusion at any price.'[43] The biographies of two of the early leaders of the sport also demonstrate how widespread was the holding of these two seemingly contradictory positions. Ted Larkin, a Catholic and an avowed socialist, enthusiastically enlisted in the army just two weeks following the outbreak of World War One. He met his death at Gallipoli. Even Jack Fihelly, possibly Brisbane's most noted anti-war campaigner from 1914 to 1918, was a model of decorum when, as acting Queensland premier, he welcomed the Prince of Wales to Queensland in 1920.

From chooms to Poms

As with so many aspects of the Anglo-Australian relationship, the ties that bound rugby league so closely together began to tear apart in the early

1960s. The changing economic relationship between the two countries, the diplomatic consequences of decolonization, the ending of free entry into Britain for all Commonwealth citizens, and the Macmillan government's application to join the European Common Market without consulting the Australian government led to growing Australian alienation from Britain. In rugby league, the traditional imperial relationship was transformed within a generation. In 1946 and 1950, the British tourists had been treated as heroes. The NSWRL presented each member of the 1946 touring team with a food parcel worth one pound to take back home with them because, said the league's vice-president Frank Miller, 'we admire the way England took it, and is still taking it, and these men, and their families, know austerity as we never knew it'. At a reception for the 1950 tourists at a Returned & Services League club in Brisbane, they were welcomed with a speech in which, according to tour manager George Oldroyd, the chairman told them 'how they valued our contribution in the last war when we stood alone for one year and [how] Australia would have been in a poor plight but for our efforts'.[44]

But by the mid-sixties, this attitude had almost completely disappeared. The tourists were no longer regarded as 'chooms' but as 'Poms', and even, on occasions, 'Pommie bastards'. The 1950s had seen a series of administrative disputes between the British and Australian leagues which reflected the changing economic strengths of the two bodies. The legalization of poker machines in New South Wales in 1956 opened up extensive sources of revenue for rugby league clubs, which could now use gambling revenue from their associated leagues clubs to subsidizse their on-field activities. Coupled with the abandonment of the residential qualification for players in 1959, which meant that players no longer had to live in the immediate catchment area of their club, and the development of a formal contract system, Sydney rugby league clubs were now able to compete financially with British clubs. From the early 1960s, British players began to take advantage of their football skills, and the assisted passage scheme, to emigrate and play in Sydney. Among the million or so British citizens who emigrated to Australia between 1947 and 1970 were a considerable number of high profile rugby league players, bringing expertise to the Australian game and concomitantly weakening the British. At the same time, the precipitous decline of heavy industry in the north of England, traditionally the basis of rugby league support, led to a severe reduction in spectator numbers that also undermined the strength of the sport.[45]

The changing balance of forces was highlighted in 1961 by an Australian threat to cancel the forthcoming 1962 tour by the British unless a more equitable division of the tour's revenue could be negotiated. To cancel a tour, hitherto seen as the cultural and economic lifeblood of the game, was an unprecedented threat. British attempts to play the imperial card were rebuffed. Tom Mitchell, the manager of the 1958 British tour, unsuccessfully appealed to the Australian league authorities on the basis

that 'agreement in sport should always be possible, *and between members of the Commonwealth family a certainty*' [emphasis in original].[46] Eventually a compromise was reached and the tour went ahead. Despite considerable British success on the pitch, the tour was blighted by continuous off-field disputes, perhaps best encapsulated by an argument between the British tour manager Stuart Hadfield and an official of St George leagues club which ended with the official telling Hadfield that 'you are a lot of English bastards'.[47]

In many ways, this marked a watershed. Previous British tourists to Australia had been surprised, and perhaps shocked, at the common use of 'bastard' in everyday conversation but had always regarded it, in the words of Eddie Waring, as 'a means of affection' used between friends.[48] Certainly there are no reports of it being used in a hostile or aggressive manner during social or business events before the 1960s (although the same could not be said for players or spectators during matches). The fact that bastard was now invariably preceded by 'Pommie' (or conversely that 'Pom' invariably followed 'whinging') meant that terms hitherto generally seen as friendly were now viewed by Australians and British as being antagonistic and often confrontational. This rising sense of suspicion and hostility was highlighted most strongly in the Australian tabloid press, especially during the struggle between the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* in Sydney for afternoon supremacy in the 1960s.

By 1966, the use of 'Pommie' or 'Pommy' by the press to describe the British touring team of that year had become ubiquitous. Perhaps the most egregious example was in a series of interviews given to the Sydney *Daily Mirror* by the British tour manager Jack Errock, in which he allegedly stated that the actions of his Australian counterparts 'had made my Pommy blood boil' and that he would 'never tour Australia again'. Over three days, Errock complained about the rudeness of Australian officials, the bias of referees and the poor quality of the food he was served. The interviews created such a furore that the RFL held an inquiry into them when the touring party returned to Britain at which, as was to be expected, the blame was ascribed to the sensationalism of the Sydney press.[49] Undoubtedly there was some truth in this allegation. But the articles were also a reflection of the changing attitudes of Australians towards the British, even towards those with whom they had traditionally shared some affinity. Errock had been portrayed by the press as a stereotypical 'whinging Pom' who disliked everything about Australia. What was more, he had appeared to embrace the characterization by apparently describing himself as a 'Pommy', thus emphasising the antagonism between Britain and Australia. Every Englishman, it now seemed, was a potential Douglas Jardine.

This division had become a gulf by the 1970 British tour to Australia. Shortly after arriving, the tourists were embroiled in controversy after a fight at a party in Brisbane involving one of their young stars Malcolm Reilly, who took exception to an Australian who had called him a 'Pommie

bastard'. This rumbled on for weeks and culminated in Reilly's arrest in Sydney. Far from being seen as 'chooms', tour manager Jack Harding complained that the first test match had been portrayed as a 'hate war' and that the players were being described in the press as 'a beer swilling, pot-bellied lot'.[50] In many ways, the working-class image of rugby league players also fitted with contemporary Australian tabloid stereotypes of immigrant British trade unionists who were held to be responsible for strikes and other industrial disputes. The idea of the whinging Pom could apply equally to arrogant British managers or lazy unfit players.

These changes in attitude were also seen in the behaviour of Australian touring teams to Britain. For example, the 1967 tour was the last in which the Australians began each match with an aboriginal war cry. This was a custom which dated back to their first tour of Britain in 1908 when tour manager Jack Fihelly had taught the players a war cry, allegedly originating from Stradbroke Island, that had been performed by a troupe of Queensland aboriginal men before the NSWRL's first grand final.[51] Although none of the players on that tour were of aboriginal descent, the practice had been continued both by rugby league and rugby union touring sides. In the broader context of colonial discourse and representation, the war cry symbolized the subservience of Australians to the Empire by emphasising their link with peoples viewed as 'primitive' and by seeking to highlight a sense of the exotic, but unquestionably inferior, otherness of the farthest reaches of the Empire. The ubiquity of aboriginal displays during royal visits to Australia highlighted this relationship between these non-threatening, tightly controlled displays and Imperial loyalty. In this it was very different from the embrace of aboriginal symbols by the 'new nationalism' that appeared from the late 1960s. By the 1967 tour, the war cry was viewed by the players as a joke and its performance as an occasion to make up their own words. It was not performed on the next tour of Britain in 1973.

The 1967 tour was also notable for highlighting the change in attitude of the players. No longer was the tour of Britain seen as a journey 'Home'. Off the field, it had become an occasion for ostentatious displays of larrikinism and drunkenness. Although there had been reports of players misbehaving on the 1959 tour of Britain, the 1967 tour is remembered in rugby league folklore less for its on-field action than for the 'man in the bowler hat' affair, in which an un-named player strolled through the centre of Ilkley, the Yorkshire town in which the tourists stayed, wearing nothing but a bowler hat. Hotels and pubs used by the team suffered extensive damage due to players' 'high spirits', resulting in two of the most senior players being fined A$250 and having so much of their tour bonus docked for disciplinary infractions that they earned no money at all from the trip.[52]

In the 1970s, the relationship between rugby league in Australia and Britain changed fundamentally. As well as the end of deference towards

Britain and the contrasting economic fortunes of the sport in the two countries, the balance of power in the playing of game had tilted hugely in favour of the former junior partner. The 1970 test series was the last to be won by Britain; indeed, between 1978 and 1988 the British did not win even a single test match. This collapse in competitiveness exacerbated the tendency that was exhibited in other sports, especially cricket, in which the focus of Australian sport shifted from the Anglo-Australian arena to a world stage. But the narrow international base of rugby league meant that in Australia the importance and intensity of Anglo-Australian test matches was replaced by the annual NSW versus Queensland 'State of Origin' series, in which the same aggressive masculinity originally displayed against fellow British 'chooms' was now employed against fellow Australian 'mates'.

Conclusion

In many ways, rugby league could be described as the most 'Australian' of sports because it encapsulated the two seemingly contradictory attitudes of imperial loyalty and hostility to privilege. Unlike the geographically limited Australian Rules and the unashamedly exclusive rugby union, Anglo-Australian rugby league test matches provided an arena in which these attitudes could be displayed to the full. Although they may seem to be mutually exclusive when viewed from a present day point of view, they are not. Historically, just as the British Labour Party supported the monarchy and the Empire, the ALP's White Australia policy was intertwined with racial pride in being British. Britishness did not necessarily have to be that of the English home counties or of conservative Australians. It could also be expressed in ways that were seemingly oppositional and egalitarian, at least for those with white skins.[53]

Indeed, when viewed through the perspective of working-class Britishness, one must also ask how distinctive was Australian sporting culture, and by extension popular culture itself? Those sporting traits identified by historians in the 1960s and 1970s on closer inspection turn out to be little different from those displayed in the north of England. And, as the experience of rugby league tourists to Australia demonstrates, the similarities between society in the north and in Australia were such that the tourists possibly felt more at home in Sydney than they would have done in London. Again, this should come as no surprise. The millions of British immigrants to Australia came overwhelmingly from the working classes, and many of them explicitly sought a new life free of the ossified social restrictions of Britain while seeking to preserve those customs they valued at home.

Historians of empire have generally ignored the role of sport as a form of cultural identity and exchange. This has left a significant blind-spot in our appreciation of the way in which the British Empire was understood by large numbers of its subjects. Cricket in India, rugby union in New

Zealand and rugby league in eastern Australia were all means by which the Empire was understood and interpreted among ordinary people, especially men. And this was a two-way process: their understanding and practice of 'Britishness' in the sporting arena was neither uniform nor a simulacrum of that which emanated from the English public schools. If we abandon the simplistic idea that sporting contests necessarily represent nationalist rivalry and instead explore the complexities of Britishness in the sporting context, perhaps then we will be able to paint a more complete picture of what the British Empire meant to the great mass of peoples who found themselves under its rule.

Notes

[1] I am grateful to the Council of Australian State Libraries for awarding me a fellowship in 2004 that allowed me to conduct much of the research for this article at the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

[2] N. Meaney's 'Britishness and Australia: Some reflections', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31 (2), 2003, pp. 122–35, provides a good overview of this debate. A more detailed treatment of this view can be found in S. Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Melbourne, 2001).

[3] W. F. Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian nationalism in the nineteenth century', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 59 (4), 1973, pp. 225–45. For a more nuanced analysis of sport's relationship with Australian nationalism, see R. Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination. Australian Sport in the Federation Decades* (Petersham, 2002).

[4] K. S. Inglis, 'Imperial cricket: Test matches between Australia and England, 1877–1900' in *Sport in History: The Making of Modern Sporting History*, ed. R. Cashman and M. McKernan (St Lucia, 1979), pp. 149–79.

[5] G. Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: The Initiation of Australia*, rev. ed. (Sydney, 2000), p. 357. See also S. Alomes, *A Nation At Last. The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism, 1880–1888* (New South Wales, 1998), p. 16.

[6] For a comprehensive and outstanding discussion of northern English identity, see D. Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester, 2004). For links between the north of England and Australia, see A. Moore, 'Yorkshireness and Australia: Some preliminary observations', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 21 (2), 2001, pp. 49–59.

[7] On the origins of rugby league in Britain, see T. Collins, *Rugby's Great Split* (London, 1998). For Australia, see C. Cuneen, 'The Rugby war: The early history of Rugby League in NSW, 1907–15' in *Sport in History*, ed. R. Cashman and M. McKernan, pp. 293–306.

[8] For more on the links between rugby league and the Australian labour movement, see A. Moore, 'Opera of the proletariat: Rugby league, the labour movement and working-class culture in New South Wales and Queensland', *Labour History*, 79 (2), 2000, pp. 57–70.

[9] E. Scott, *Rugby League in Brisbane: From the Genesis to the Formation of the Brisbane Rugby League* (unpublished MS thesis, Human Movement, University of Queensland, 1990).

[10] *Referee*, 23 June, 1910.

[11] Quoted in R. Gate, *The Struggle for the Ashes* (Ripponden, 1986), p. 20.

[12] *Yorkshire Post*, 6 January, 1930.

[13] *Sydney Sun*, 26 June, 1932.

[14] NSWRL minutes, 12 July, 1954.

[15] Undated interview with Alf Ellaby, cassette tape (Rugby Football League Archives, Leeds). Corbett, *Sydney Sun*, 26 June, 1932. Fallowfield quoted in Churchill, *Little Master*, p. 145. Ray Stehr, *Sydney Sun*, 7 May, 1958.

[16] *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 12 June, 1926.

[17] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May, 1910, Sunderland quoted in the diary of Harold Bowman in *Harold Bowman on Tour Down Under*, ed. M. Ullyatt and D. Bowman (Beverley, 1992), p. 13. Letter from City Tattersall's Club to E. Osborne, 25 July, 1928 (RFL Archives).

[18] RFL Council Minutes, 10 October, 1945. It should be noted that Evatt was a keen follower of rugby league, being the driving force behind the establishment of the Sydney University rugby league club in 1920 and serving as patron of the NSWRL for many years.
[19] Australian Rugby League Board of Control minutes, 21 July, 1950.
[20] RFL Council minutes, 18 November, 1954.
[21] R. Lock and P. Quantrill, *Zulu Victory* (London, 2003) reveals that the British forces who relieved the troops at Rorke's Drift also massacred over 800 wounded Zulu prisoners in the aftermath. *Truth* quoted in B. Manson, *Another Battle for Britain* (Altrincham, 1958), p. 58.
[22] W. F. Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian nationalism', p. 241, and also W. F. Mandle, *Going It Alone. Australia's National Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne, 1978), p. 31.
[23] See D. Russell, 'Sport and identity: The case of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, 1890–1939', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (2), 1996, p. 2.
[24] *Yorkshireman*, 1 October, 1890. The similarity between Australian national sentiment and English regionalist feeling has also been noted by John O'Hara in *Sport, Federation, Nation*, ed. R. Cashman, J. O'Hara and A. Harvey (Sydney, 2001), p. 185.
[25] See, for example, R. Cashman, *'Ave a go, yer mug!': Australian Cricket Crowds from Larrikin to Ocker* (Sydney, 1984).
[26] Quoted in W. F. Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian nationalism', p. 241. B. F. Robinson, *Rugby Football* (London, 1896), p. 67.
[27] McKivat quoted in I. Heads, *The Kangaroos – The Saga of Rugby League's Great Tours* (Sydney, 1990), p. 41; C. Churchill, *They Called Me the Little Master* (Sydney, 1962), p. 67.
[28] *Athletic News*, 28 February, 1910.
[29] G. McInnes, *The Road to Gundagai*, 2 ed. (London, 1985), p. 72.
[30] *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 7 June, 1941.
[31] Undated press clipping (c. July, 1914) in JC Davis collection, box 51, item 4, Mitchell Library, Sydney. For Australian usage of 'the people's game', see, for example, *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 29 May, 1926 and many subsequent references.
[32] For example, E. Waring, *England to Australia and New Zealand* (Leeds, 1947), p. 5. *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 4 May, 1946.
[33] See, for example, J. F. O'Loghlen (ed.), *Rugby League Annual and Souvenir* (Sydney, 1928), p. 108. Waring, *England to Australia and New Zealand*, p. 85.
[34] *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 28 May, 1932; G. F. Hutchins letter to John Wilson, 13 July, 1928 (RFL Archives); *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 4 June, 1932.
[35] Harold Wagstaff speech at Sydney Town Hall, *Referee*, 2 June, 1920.
[36] Letter from R. F. Anderton to John Wilson, 6 July, 1936 (RFL Archives).
[37] For the use of 'chooms', see E. Waring, *England to Australia and New Zealand*, p. 33.
[38] *The Times*, 30 September, 1924.
[39] *1936 Tour to Australia and New Zealand Report* (undated). See also the letter from G. F. Hutchins to John Wilson, 18 June, 1928 (RFL Archives).
[40] *1936 Tour to Australia and New Zealand Report*; G. Oldroyd, *1950 Tour Business Manager's Report* (undated, RFL Archives). While an apprentice boilermaker in 1901, McKell had helped train the future Australian rugby league captain and coach Rick Johnston as a riveter in a shipyard. *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 17 June, 1946.
[41] *Souvenir of the Australian Rugby League 'Kangaroos' World's Tour, 1933–34* (Otley, 1933), p. 6.
[42] Quoted in A. Moore, 'Opera of the proletariat', p. 64.
[43] *Referee*, 3 August, 1933.
[44] *Rugby League News* (Sydney), 18 May, 1946; Oldroyd, *1950 Tour Business Manager's Report*.
[45] For the impact of poker machines on Australian rugby league, see A. Moore, *The Mighty Bears, A Social History of North Sydney Rugby League* (Sydney, 1996), pp. 290–8. For the residential qualification, see I. Heads, *True Blue* (Sydney, 1992), pp. 298–9. British considerations in 1957 can be seen in the minutes of the RFL Council, 10 October, 1957.
[46] Tom Mitchell, *Memorandum on 1962 Tour*, 15 November, 1961 (RFL Archives).
[47] Stuart Hadfield to RFL Council, 9 July, 1962.
[48] Waring, *England to Australia and New Zealand*, p. 23.
[49] The articles are reprinted in the minutes of the RFL Council meeting, 21 December, 1966.
[50] J. B. Harding, *Australian Tour 1970 – First Report* (undated), p. 7; *Australian Tour 1970 – Fourth Report*, 24 June, 1970, p. 2 (RFL Archives).

[51] The background is detailed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August, 1908.
[52] RFL Council minutes, 3 January and 22 February, 1968. I. Heads, *Kangaroos*, pp. 177–9, 215–8.
[53] On the question of Labourism, race and the empire, see J. Hyslop, 'The imperial working class makes itself "white": White labourism in Britain, Australia and South Africa before the First World War', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12 (4), 1999, pp. 398–421.

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