

The dominant theme of this lecture is an exploration of the influence of various aspects of selective memory and nostalgia in understandings of New Zealand rugby history.

With the Webb Ellis Cup being contested in New Zealand in September and October, the lecture necessarily begins with some consideration of the supposed role of William Webb Ellis in the foundation of rugby. In reality his presence is a creation myth that tells us nothing about the actual development of the game but a great deal about late-Victorian middle-class sportsmen determined to shape a purely amateur game and to discourage working-class involvement and its seemingly inevitable descent to professionalism.

In turn the significance of the Webb Ellis creation myth to the split of British rugby during the 1890s between amateur (rugby union) and professional (eventually rugby league) had a profound impact on the pre-eminent creation myth of New Zealand rugby. For the reputation of the 1905 All Blacks was forged not against the full might of athletic British manhood, but against the mainly middle-class rump left in rugby union after the more numerous and talented working-class had been cast adrift – to say nothing of the vast majority who pursued soccer rather than rugby. Only in Wales did the All Blacks encounter a rugby culture with genuine cross-class appeal – and their struggle against that in 1905 is well documented. While counterfactual history is a fraught exercise at the best of times, it is interesting to speculate on what may have happened to the All Blacks and their legacy had they encountered a fully representative sample of British rugby prowess in 1905.

Regardless of this qualification on their success, and despite a multitude of controversies during the tour concerning the apparently illegal and over-competitive methods of the team, successive generations of New Zealand historians, rugby and academic, have reconstructed the 1905 All Blacks to suit a broader account of emergent New Zealand identity. The achievements of the tour are supposed to have reinforced strong bonds within the British Empire and provided an advertisement for the qualities of New Zealand life - a rural, healthy, egalitarian paradise and 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. This lecture will provide some further critique of this portrayal –not least to make the point that the strength of New Zealand rugby has always been found not in a rural heartland but in a disproportionately urban, educated and middle-class player base.

But it is important, in rugby terms at least, not to construe national identity as independent identity. There was an acute awareness of the importance of securing the imperial touring network through which New Zealand rugby had apparently confirmed its prestige while also lining its pockets from gate money. Therefore when the International Rugby Board moved in the wake of a somewhat acrimonious 1930 British Isles tour of New Zealand to abolish all local variations to the laws of the game and steadfastly refused requests for admission of the Dominions to the Board, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) meekly capitulated and reaffirmed its loyalty to the imperial rugby family. The question to be asked, then, is not simply what happened in 1905 but what happened next? The answers to that question run counter to a number of assumptions about the nexus between New Zealand rugby and emergent national identity.

For the next half century the NZRFU forged a reputation, in New Zealand at least – if not always in the eyes of the home unions and the IRB, for its vigorous and sometimes punitive determination to preserve an amateur structure at club, provincial and national level to ensure acceptance within the international fold. From the mid 1970s this loyalty began to erode in the face of growing concern at the ability of amateur players to finance their rugby careers during a period of high inflation exacerbated by the increasing pettiness of the NZRFU over money at a time when that body was also expanding the fixture list. Those who periodically rage against the failings of modern professional rugby would do well to ponder the contradictions and hypocrisy that frequently constituted the amateur alternative for players at the highest level.

Certainly one can argue that the problem is not professional rugby per se, but the way it has been implemented. But reflection on the past does at least suggest the need for a more measured critique of the present.

It is perhaps unsporting of me to undermine the mythology of the game on the verge of its most prominent moment in New Zealand for a quarter of a century. But there is a darker side to the elevation and mythologizing of New Zealand rugby that needs to be deflated. The spectre of Shayne Philpott wanting to return his All Black cap after being condemned by some among the public and media for his supposed shortcomings as a player, reminds us of the scrutiny to which players are subjected – and especially so when they fail to meet the imagined standards of the past. The vitriolic outpouring following the most calamitous of All Blacks failures to win the Rugby World Cup – in 1999 – is another example.

There is a chance that through non-divine intervention from food poisoning or inept referees the All Blacks may not win in 2011 (I do not include superior opposition as a factor in any failure to win – that has never been a legitimate explanation in New Zealand!) and the recriminations will no doubt begin again. If they do, it will be the responsibility of some of us to emerge from the gloom to query the veracity of much that modern players are unfavourably judged against and to question the stock (frequently rural) remedies that are always proffered for what ill the national game. On the other hand, we must also be prepared to challenge those – especially contemporary British rugby journalists and others who insist on a clear demarcation between sport and culture – who insist that New Zealand is tragically obsessed with rugby and really needs to grow up and move on quickly from any calamity. The journalists need to be reminded that on a global spectrum New Zealand sporting passions are decidedly moderate. The cultural guardians need to be reminded that while it is perfectly acceptable not to like rugby, it is simply churlish to deny its significance to the fabric of New Zealand society past and present.