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"Looking Forward to Saturday":

A Social History of Rugby in  
a Small New Zealand Township.

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## Abstract

This study examines the history of club rugby in Eltham up to the Second World War. It is based on the life-review accounts of a small number of elderly, ex-Eltham rugby players and backed by a study of club-records and newspaper accounts.

The study was stimulated by events surrounding the 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand and by a dissatisfaction with existing sociological attempts to examine the role of rugby in New Zealand society. Previous writers have too often uncritically celebrated the game, or succumbed to a number of recurrent theoretical and methodological shortcomings. "Cultural Studies" is introduced as a body of analytic theory and method with the potential to redress the limitations shown in existing writings on rugby. It directs the study of a sport to three critical emphases, all of which are evident in the current study.

Firstly, the sport needs to be considered in terms of the social-structural context it exists in. In the present study a strong link is identified between the development of the general social infrastructure and the form adopted by local rugby.

Secondly, we should approach sport as a significant dimension of local culture. Involvement in sport has significant effects on the way the people involved think about the world around them. In the present study rugby is discussed as a site where local men negotiated physical and mental responses to the class-characterised society they lived in. Rugby is addressed for the way it constructs and gives "common sense" meaning to ideologies like "egalitarianism", "community" and "moral asceticism".

Finally, Cultural Studies promotes a sensitivity to the historical dynamism of sport in both its practice and meaning dimensions. In this respect, Ingham and Hardy's recent theory of "Ludic Structuration" is employed to identify three distinct stages in the development of Eltham rugby up to the Second World War.

Overall, the study tends to discount the notion that "sport" and "politics" are clearly separated spheres. Rather, the notion of hegemony is used to explain how an ostensibly apolitical and enjoyable activity like rugby can, at the same time, be deeply implicated in the maintenance of existing patterns of power and privilege in our society.



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## Introduction.

History is always written as if the doings of ordinary nameless, faceless persons such as the young unmarried couple looking for a juice extractor were a grey and ill-defined background, the stage on which the politicians strut and strike attitudes and make decisions...in reality it is the other way about, the politicians are the grey background to ordinary lives, however their strutting and posturing and decision - and law making may bear upon the availability of juice extractors (C.K. Stead All Visitors Ashore 1984:128).

The above polemic from C.K. Stead's recent novel provides a useful summary of the approach which has been taken in the writing of this thesis. The common departure point is how the thoughts, choices and actions of "ordinary" people are seen as decisive in the making of history. At an academic level the position has also been argued by E.P. Thompson and Stuart Hall [1].

This thesis is not about juice extractors however, but about a different aspect in the everyday life of thousands of New Zealanders through history; the game of rugby.

It is only recently that the role of rugby in New Zealand society has become problematic enough to attract serious sociological attention. Until about 1970, (when sustained opposition to sporting contacts with South Africa began to emerge), rugby was generally perceived uncritically as "our national sport". There was a widely known cliché to the effect that along with racing and beer, rugby was our national religion [Sinclair 1959:299, Smith 1961:151, Thompson 1969:272, Mitchell 1972:64, McGloughlan 1984:482]. As John Mulgan had earlier expressed it;

Rugby Football was the best of all our pleasures, it was religion and desire and fulfilment all in one [1947:7].

More analytically, M.N. Pearson has pointed to the years 1956 and 1965 as times when "nation" coalesced around "rugby". During those years the All Blacks played very widely followed games against South Africa and other leading rugby nations. Significantly however, he refers to those occasions as "still a time of innocence for New Zealand" [1979:290]. If there was resentment against rugby, it was yet to be visibly expressed.

It was all different fifteen years later, however. As the credits rolled up on the main television news programme for the day of 12th September 1981, the vocabulary and images of innocence and consensus, previously characteristic of the coverage of national rugby events, were nowhere to be seen. News coverage of the Third Test Match at Auckland between the All Blacks and the Springboks that day was a

confusing montage of diving aircraft, baton charges, tries being scored, cheering, blood, and barbed wire. Chapman has written of wars and depressions as disruptions to social order that encourage artistic effort and sociological thought. This was a conflict of that order. At moments like these claims Chapman, the "crust of complacency is broken, allowing artists to see what l[ies] beneath" [1973:72]. Sociologists speak more fashionably these days of "shattered mirrors" and "cracked ideological shells", but the effect is the same. The intense conflict around the 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand has spouted a wellspring of religious agonising, intellectual debate, poetry, art and cinema [2]. In a like way the research presented in this thesis was stimulated by those struggles of 1981, particularly as they rebounded through Eltham, the small town I grew up in. The tour issue climaxed early in Eltham that year. A nationally organised campaign to oppose the tour was represented in Eltham by a march of 12-15 people on Friday July 3rd, 1981. Chapple in his book 1981: The Tour, evokes the events in Eltham that night with more detail and drama than is pertinent here. He describes a small anti-tour group that consisted mainly of local teachers, a minister, and several student "imports". They gathered at the town railway station and then;

Kyle and Ferguson led [the march] away. Directly towards the Eltham Hotel. Directly towards...the protest movement had a lot to learn. It was challenging New Zealand's most fundamental forces [1984:50].

As they turned left into the main street, the unpopularity of the anti-tour stance was revealed. All the footpaths were;

..packed, people spilling out onto the road. Cars with families hanging out of them...never seen the town so full, except for the Christmas Parade, Eltham's biggest event [1984:51].

The crowd was vociferous as well as large. A small-hard core dusted the marchers with flour, and several people threw eggs from the top of adjacent shops. Reaction for the most part however, was confined to verbal abuse; people yelling things like, "Why don't you fuck off back to Russia?", "Cowards!", and "Traitors!". Dozens of people who hastened out of the pubs to watch also sang snatches of "God defend New Zealand".

The experience of those who were at the centre of all this attention was that they felt,

..the whole town hunched over them, and it wanted to snuff that small flame [Chapple 1984:52].

One student in the march was incensed at being called a "red, fascist, commie, hippie bitch" and returned to Palmerston North to write a damning article about the people of Eltham. Her most memorable statement was;

If Goethe had been in Eltham he would have probably said, "There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action", (emphasis added), [Anon., "Eltham Marches", in Chaff, volume 48, no. 15:6]

The statement is quoted because, in a sense, this entire study is a reaction to it. Against that woman's position of (understandable) outrage I have sought to use history to inform the present. There was a need for more information on the processes leading up to the visually recorded situation. In other words;

to be in intimate contact with our subject... means to be familiar with the history of the subject (emphasis added), [Karpati 1981:133].

A Cultural Studies perspective would assert that the people of Eltham on that July 3rd night were not acting in ignorance, but rather defending a culture, a way of thinking, acting and living with its own relative integrity, conditions of formation and behavioural prerogatives. There were two strongly held points of view about the rugby tour that night, two groups from the same town and country, yet it is possible without being derogatory to either, to talk of two distinctively different (cultural) worlds. This feeling of estrangement, of essential alienation, comes through very strongly in the comments of the elderly ex-rugby players interviewed in the course of this research [3]. From the way respondents commonly address protestors as a "collective" we get a strong sense of the way protestors are perceived to be a completely different "tribe";

At the back of Athletic Park in the one down there, they were all over in that vacant paddock that's behind there. There was a lot over there. But in Auckland I never saw a protestor. I walked from Balmoral to the ground, and never saw a protestor. I saw what could have been a bit of ruction at half-time, when I went out to the toilet. I saw a baton or something fly over the top of a barricade but I never saw a protestor. There was none there when we come out. They were gone. (LAUGHS)... We walked over and there was a crowd on that little park on Dominion Road corner... There was about thirty there with a big banner, just standing there, never said a word.

DID THEY SCARE YOU AT ALL?

Na. (QUICKLY) [John].

Another respondent, Reg, happened to be kindly disposed to the leader of the local protest march but is quite puzzled about how that person could possibly hold the views he does;

I saw a few of the eggs thrown, and the tomatoes thrown. And I thought it was most unfortunate because the Minister [of Religion] who lead that march is a hell of a nice chap. And I think he was a sincere man. But he obviously got carried away, he must have come from a different environment [Reg].

Elsewhere in the same talk Reg is more adamant in his views. Like many others interviewed, he perceives anti-tour groups as a real threat to his own world-view. In this instance he humourously prescribes a suitable remedial action;

I think rugby has been made a scapegoat for political purposes today. I'm not proud to think that some of the people who are in high positions in New Zealand criticise rugby and criticise the Springbok Tour and that...it's just so much huey! And I don't think I'd run the risk of libel but if anyone was to say to me, "What do you think of Minto?". I would say, "I think he's a chap who is using rugby and apartheid to get notoriety for himself and if I had

my way, I'd put him at the bottom, I'd throw him into the scrum as a ball". That's what I'd do (LAUGHS), [Reg].

Charlie similarly perceives the tour issue in terms of a contest of differing world views and is quick to declare his resistance;

The H.A.R.T. people always say, "We've got the majority behind us". I'd like to know how the hell they work that one out. I really do. I don't know that they've got a very big financial membership, I think they've got a fairly small one. But this chap Minto has got the mouthpiece and the media always run to him and say, "What do you think Mr Minto?". And that annoys me. Because he's only another man with an opinion of his own. And he's trying to ram that down my throat, and I don't like that. I've got my own opinions. And I can see no reason why he should try and ram his down my throat [Charlie].

Ernie is even more vociferous and personifies anti-tour institutions in terms of the angular features of a leading anti-tour personality;

It's the rat-face jokers like H.A.R.T. and C.A.R.E., you know, winning over [Ernie].

The carefully thought out words of Joe provide a balance to these more intense expressions. With quiet sincerity, in a way that evokes empathy, he describes rugby as a "way of life";

CAN YOU TELL ME A BIT ABOUT YOUR VIEWS ON THE RUGBY ISSUES OF TODAY? LIKE RUGBY SEEMS TO BE UNDER ATTACK FROM ALL SIDES?

Well, of course when you ask somebody that question who has been rugby-minded all his life and lived rugby and still lives rugby, its a question that's pretty hard to answer. Ahh, we've all got our views. I s'pose you're meaning the South African Tour and what have you?



YEAH

Well in my opinion, it's just a pity that rugby has been subject to this because after all, it's a game, and anyone that's played it as much as I have and got so much enjoyment out of it, it's just a pity, that in my opinion that it's been curtailed like it has, what with politics and protesting and all the rest of it... I don't think that rugby will ever be replaced as the top sport in New Zealand, not by any means. That might be a parochial (LAUGHS) way of looking at it, I don't know? [Joe].

The culture that Eltham people are expressing in these statements and in their actions on that July 3rd night was forged by cultural and economic processes in play from even before Eltham's inception as a bush-fellers camp in the 1880's. It is certainly not my claim to give any comprehensive explanation of the intense reaction Eltham people made that 1981 night. Rather, from the myriad of contributing factors, I have sought to analytically refine and explore just one important influence in the lives of Eltham People (and thousands of other New Zealanders); that of rugby [4]. One intention of my study is to assess the local social implications of strong dedication to the game. A rather more general intention is also to promote much-needed critical consideration of the role of sport in our society. A review of the existing writings about rugby (in Chapter One), suggests that there is a reverence for sport in this country which has been antithetical to serious study of what is, after all, an omnipresent social phenomena. The methodological premises and practises of my own study are outlined in Chapter Two. Chapter Three and Chapter Four then provide a historical account of Eltham rugby. They depict that "critical consideration of the role of sport", need not necessarily involve an attempt to "knock" sport at every opportunity. Rather, it is shown

here how the sport of rugby was a generally liberating activity within the constraining social climate of the time. In Chapter Five however, (which maps the period immediately prior to the Second World War), some rather more insidious developments in the local game are identified. Overall the study produces findings that would tend to support a recent claim made by Camille Guy that;

Failure to acknowledge the strength and cultural deep seatedness of working class resistance to sporting boycotts of South Africa leads to unrealistic action programmes [1985:8]

In other words it seems unlikely that recently deployed techniques such as physical confrontation will help to "change the mind" of a person who has seen the Springboks play in 1921, 1938, 1956 and 1965. In 1981, when one such person was introduced to the Springbok team in Auckland, he found them to be;

a decent lot of chaps... [Reg].

For the rugby it brings (whether involvement or spectacle), this person always has, and probably always will, "look forward to Saturday".

Footnotes

[1] See Thompson's Preface to The Making of the English Working Classes, Penguin, 1963, and Stuart Hall, "The Culture Gap", Marxism Today, January 1984.

[2] See for instance Chapple 1984, Edwards 1981, McCreedy 1981, Meurant 1982, Newnham 1981, and also Merata Mita's documentary film, Patu!.

[3] Excerpts from these interviews provide the main data for this thesis. Emphases shown are those of the researcher. This has been necessary to direct reader attention to particular aspects of the oral responses. Care has been taken to ensure such emphases are not insensitive to the intentions of the respondent concerned. In the interview excerpts, background commentary and the responses of the researcher are shown in upper case. The respondent's name follows the excerpt in square brackets.

[4] For some rather more systematic attempts to specifically analyse the Rugby Tour issue, see Pain (1973), M. Pearson (1979), Fougere (1981a and b), Tew (1982) and the work of the Victoria University History Department (1982).