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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF
MASCULINITY IN GREG MCGEE'S
FORESKIN'S LAMENT**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

McGee's play interrogates contemporary constructions of masculinity centred around the national game of rugby. With the play being set in the late 1970's, rugby was still central to the national ethos in a way that would no longer be thought universally valid in the 1980s.

The play presents an exploration of male Pakeha New Zealanders at a time when the ethos was steadily being corrupted. Elements of the comradeship that the game could promote are noted together with its more negative effects - the attitude of the team to women being one of the foremost and including the derogatory attitudes to homosexuals and people of other ethnicities. The eponymous Foreskin is seen as someone who tries to unite in himself the rugby ethos and intellectual life. In the Lament he addresses his failure at this endeavour.

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INTRODUCTION

Men's studies, the discussion of masculinity (or as some would insist, masculinities), is a relatively new field. One gathers this from perusing library shelves and bibliographies and finding nothing remotely theoretical on the subject that pre-dates 1984. And, in any event, there are relatively few such studies even today. In the Massey University Library, by comparison, there would be at least twenty times as many volumes relating to women's studies, and to femininity in general, as there are about masculinity.

Further, in terms of gender assessment men have very evidently needed a helping hand. Of the five books readily available in public libraries on masculinity in New Zealand, two are written by women: *The Jones Men*, edited by Alison Gray (1983), and *Will the Real MR New Zealand Please Stand Up?* by Gwendoline Smith (1990). One of the most interesting of the compendium volumes discussing masculinity, *Male Order* (1988), owes half its text to women writers, and other compendium volumes owe at least some.

Helen Franks's influential *Goodbye Tarzan* (1984) has as its subtitle *Men After Feminism*. Given the dates of publication of the first men's studies works one may observe that, while men may have existed before feminism, the topic of men's studies didn't.

In its early productions Greg McGee's *Foreskin's Lament* was thought scandalous by some, particularly because of its onstage male nudity, in the post-shower episode in Act I. However, if a risqué element were the play's only virtue, the piece would have fizzled out long ago. As it is, over the twenty years since its inception it has been repeatedly revived by professional companies, has been rewritten several times (by McGee himself), has proved notably successful in Australia, and has been performed by a good many amateur groups into the bargain. It has been observed that its characters (types if you prefer) are instantly recognizable and the language much closer to the idiolects of local everyday speech than one is used to encountering in the theatre.

Newspapers, both local and national, have been full of encomiums for McGee's play since it first opened and in my reading of them I have yet to come across a critic who actively disliked the play.

Its particular strength for me lies in McGee's ability to so accurately capture the language of the average footballer. Having to direct an episode in Act 5 II for an English exercise at Massey University I wondered how it might fare with a cast of girls playing the male roles - Tupper, Clean, Mean and Irish. Magically well, as it happened. Any direction from me was beside the point as the girls loped across the stage, swearing like veritable troopers, and seeming totally at ease. The characters portrayed were so recognizable, so authentic to them, that the roles almost seemed to play themselves. Observing this was for me a revelation that determined me to work further on this play if this proved at all possible.

A similar insight into the play's authenticity was provided by a female lecturer with whom I was discussing the text. I commented that one of the things that intrigued and rather puzzled me about my observation of women's reactions on the occasion I had seen the play was the vast amusement over sections of the play which the female sex is so grossly scorned. Her response, after pointing out that they had been watching an entertainment which was not ultimately threatening to them (as real life might be), was that in the men that were being portrayed they recognized their boyfriends, their bosses, their neighbours, who frustrate them with their masculine prioritizing. Far from being an insult, male chauvinism thus identified and made recognizable on the stage would be likely to have a cathartic effect.

Rugby remains the country's national game, even if it has no longer the same hold on the national psyche that it used to have. Every weekend during the season many thousands of New Zealanders watch rugby either live or on television.

It is significant that since this play was written there have been notable changes in the rules which have significantly affected the way that the game is played. For example, McGee's coach, who clearly sees his backs as mere adjuncts to his forwards, exhorts the backs, particularly the first five and the fullback, to always keep the ball in front of the forwards; it is almost as if this was their only function, at least until they got inside their opponent's twenty-two. This exhortation was made at a time when players could kick the ball into touch on the full from anywhere between their own and their opponent's goalline - in a very marked contrast to the present laws which only allow a player to kick into touch on the full from within his team's own 22. This was the era of the kicking backs, especially

the first five, second five, and fullback, with the resultant lineouts providing the forward re-engagement that this kind of coach found desirable.

The pattern of play which one used to often see between two evenly matched senior provincial sides was frankly defensive (hardly warranting the title of “attacking”) and to modern eyes it would seem a rather predictable affair. The fact that, in these earlier times, an unconverted try had only the same value (three points) as a penalty goal meant there was less incentive for the players (particularly the backs) to be overly venturesome. With an unconverted try today now worth 5 points, the spectacle of a team eager for points foregoing the penalty kick which the referee has awarded them, and opting instead for a tap kick (or even a scrum) which might lead to a more profitable try, is a reasonably common one.

Nowadays new rules and more intensive scrutiny have been introduced to deter or penalize on-field actions likely to cause injury such as punching, rucking or stomping. On a more serious note, the insistence of this play’s coach that his team should, when unobserved, “put the boot in”, should be read in the light of the laws pertaining at the time. In those earlier days there was open talk (at least in the media) of particular talented players being deliberately “taken out” - a term that would be less likely to be used today. Moreover, if a player is injured to the extent of having to leave the field, a fresh and usually warmed-up substitute can come on at a minute’s notice (ie with the consent of the referee). At the time of this play no replacements were permitted and the affected team would have been reduced to fourteen men. Should such a loss happen early in the game, even a normally well-performed side might be struggling to prevent their usual game going into decline.

The coach in the play is quite specific that player misdeeds should only be performed when the ref’s back is turned. Today, at both provincial and club level games the two touch judges will also be qualified referees who may see infringements that the referee cannot; they may consult with the referee and their comments can result in penalties being awarded by the referee or even a player being sent off. The referee’s head may be turned (to use the coach’s phrase) but nowadays he effectively has eyes in the back of it. At the highest level, although it cannot affect the actual outcome of the game, there is in a sense a fourth referee: a television camera. In cases of over-robust play which were not noticed by the

officials but were recorded by the camera (with film that can be slowed and magnified for close inspection) players have been retrospectively penalized, and even suspended, for on-field behaviour that was seen by the “unobserved” eye. There is also provision for members of the public to lay charges against players which the officials are obliged to consider. This relatively high profiling of over-aggressive play has undoubtedly reduced its occurrence.

While the intensiveness of competition at the upper levels has increased, law changes and more stringent on-field supervision have dissuaded players from blatant on-field offending when the chances of doing so with impunity have become slenderer.

It is generally accepted that it is the traditional assumption among men in New Zealand that the game of rugby is an effective agency for encouraging healthy maleness (that is, a healthy construction of masculinity) in the male youth of the country as a whole. By taking the Waitaki second grade provincial side, as it is presented in Greg McGee’s *Foreskin’s Lament*, I wish to examine the validity and implications of this assumption, and further, to examine what role the super-masculine “macho” player may have in the team, and how his talents are employed and encouraged.

Broadly speaking, the elements of male construction which can be seen being acquired by the players are: physical strength and power, leadership qualities, aggressiveness, hardihood, endurance, the cooperative spirit, the will to win, and camaraderie.

Some of these qualities, such as aggressiveness, of which a certain amount is presumably needed if they are to be able to compete at the senior level, can be seen to be double-edged - too much, and problems may ensue. Likewise, ambition and the will to win are necessities but can become obsessions. A level of hardihood at the senior level is a necessity, but for a player to become too hardened might mean that, socially, the very edge of his personality could end up by being blunted. Thus several of these qualities of maleness or masculinity *per se* cannot be regarded as being unquestioned assets.

Basically McGee in his gender construction is concerned with two elements: the male drive for dominance, and the male propensity for competitiveness.

In the dominance area there is the need on the part of the players to seem to dominate each other in even the smallest ways - for example, in conversational confrontation, increasing the number of expletives they employ when their areas of dominance seem under threat. The coach also feels the need to dominate, and feeling the distance of years and ideals between him and his men, does so by putting up what proves to be a false front of a super aggressive approach to the game in his coaching. From the way they are talked about in the background of the play, the women (“bits of fluff”) hardly seem to warrant dominating, and the one woman in the play, Moira, who stands up to them, effectively discounts herself, from their point of view, by the play’s end.

The team players’ sense of competitiveness is seen fairly universally as being an element that makes sport (and particularly the more vigorous contact sports) especially appealing to males. To the coach, a World War II veteran, engaging, and if possible conquering the opposition is a near obsession, and to do it he will encourage his men to commit illegal infractions on their counterparts (orders which, it transpires, he does not intend that they should literally obey). One player, Clean, is so hardened to this competitive ethic that he does not bother to compete fairly and squarely for the captaincy of the team which he so desires. He instead takes it upon himself to override the code and during forward rucks (in two separate matches) violently kicks the head of the team’s present captain. Thus does a “true” macho player assert his masculinity and acquire an almost frightening status by the play’s close.

According to newspaper articles, McGee, himself a New Zealand rugby trialist, was seriously dismayed by his own experience of the level of on-field violence that could be encountered by a player in a senior rugby match. In Clean (a dramatically believable character) he seems to be portraying masculine gender construction run awry. Like Hitler’s subordinates, Clean might claim that he was simply following orders - except in this case the coach was (at the worst) advocating him making victims of the opposition - not of his own teammate.

In stark contrast to the men’s on-field frenzy of activity we are told by the coach what is expected of the ladies - that they bring a “plate” for the after-match functions.

The first chapter deals with aspects of masculinity positively affirmed via the ethos of rugby. Although we see relatively little of these in action they are very much present in the men's discussion. In the second, the men's attitudes to women are discussed, with the latter's role in life being seen as substantially subordinate.

The third deals with the team's attitude to homosexuals and people of other ethnicities. The local team (and particularly Tupper and Foreskin) are a vocal lot and their prejudice in these areas is etched in unambiguously.

Chapter Four examines the two-sided nature of Foreskin himself as rugby player and university student.

Chapter Five considers the erosion in the ethical standards of rugby, and their implications.

Chapter Six is principally concerned with the lament of the play's title which consists of four and a half pages of densely allusive but invigorating rhetoric addressed by Foreskin to his dead team captain, his fellow team members and ultimately, the audience.

In the conclusion an effort is made to recapitulate elements of masculine construction in the Waitaki team throughout the play.

The play's "lament" is for a lost innocence identified with the idea of a decent, relatively homogeneous community, in which rugby was a central icon.

Written in 1980, but implicitly located in 1976, the sense of loss of faith both in the ethos of rugby and in the idea of shared community values is epitomised; for McGee and others in 1980 this loss was still painfully recent and would become even more severe on account of the 1981 Springbok Tour.

We can still share that sense of loss, but also relate the play to a certain historical moment - now 15 years back in the past - the sense of loss has since faded away along with the memory of that which was lost.

The special references of the lament itself both to the rugby heroes and to the (mainly American) radical intellectual culture of the 1960s and early '70s again embody a certain time that is now past.

The location in place is both broad and more narrowly specific. Broadly, it is provincial New Zealand, in which the way of life has not changed as rapidly as it has in the cities; but more narrowly, aspects of the play can be related to a town like Oamaru in the South Island, a town big enough to support just one senior rugby team, that plays against teams from other provincial areas. In such a setting the team has a special potency: as Tupper says, “This is a team game, son, and the town is the team. It’s the town’s honour at stake when the team plays, God knows there’s not much else around here”. (48).

CHAPTER 1

MASCULINITY IN THE ETHOS OF RUGBY

The traditional status of rugby in New Zealand has been such that those who play it become icons of masculinity for the whole community. This chapter will explore the ethos of masculinity as it is constructed relative to the members of the team.

The objects of McGee's interest are the relatively small numbers of New Zealand males who have the requisite degrees of mental and physical stamina to actually play rugby on a regular basis, week in and week out. While there have been, more recently, some women's teams with their own competitions, the play relates to an era when it was an exclusively male game. Of the fifteen players of McGee's fictional Waitaki team, only five appear on stage: Ken, captain and first five eights, by occupation a building contractor, Clean, the vice captain and prop, a policeman, Mean, one of the locks, a farmer, Irish the number eight forward, evidently, from the comments he makes, engaged in some kind of physical work during the week, and Seymour, otherwise Foreskin, the fullback who is a student at a nearby university and regularly travels back to his home town to train and play. Foreskin has to decide during the course of the dramatic action whether he is "tough" enough ("masculine" enough; or, to put it rather differently, amoral or callous enough) to play the kind of rugby which is being encouraged and pursued.

Clerical workers or junior managers make no appearance in the team's range of occupations. To wonder whether they may have been included among the players who are not present is a profitless exercise, as at no stage during the play is another member (other than the five listed above) referred to as an individual. This given "team" is thus seen to be McGee's rugby world in small, and it is this "team" that is the reader's (or audience member's) main focus throughout this play. The presumption then is that they are representative of the larger group.

The national media from time to time make us only too well aware of the fact that rugby football, even at so-called lower grade levels, calls for a high level of physical hardihood on the part of the individual players, regardless of whether any specific game is to be called "social" or fully competitive. It has for instance been recently determined that during a

scrum up to one and a half tons of pressure can be exerted on the necks and shoulders of the hookers of opposing teams.

For all their diversionary banter, McGee's players remain deadly serious about their rugby, not in the least unaware of the physical dangers of the game but sufficiently fit physically to keep themselves relatively resilient in mind and body throughout the game's rigours.

As well as fitness, players manifestly require courage, to sustain eighty minutes of hard and bruising mauls, scrums, and tackles.

Another aspect of masculinity that Tupper, the team coach, is repeatedly stressing is the importance of people playing as a team and not just as a collection of disparate individuals. He tells Foreskin, "This is a team game"; and, "You're too much of an individual". (48, 51) For him, the heart of the game is effective forward play; and a rugby scrum, in particular, depends for its effectiveness on the (temporary) willingness and ability of the players to surrender some of their individuality for the good of the whole. A well-knit forward-moving scrum can be seen (almost literally) as a unit, a kind of model of the idealised unit the team should comprise.

The term "solidarity" could throw further light on this ideal scrum performance. It can be seen as the epitome of team solidarity. It is through the achievement of this sort of selfless solidarity that Tupper sees the game as a character-building exercise for his men. Moreover, for a player, abandoning his personal safety, to go down on the ball when the opposition boots are flying, or to go to the aid of a comrade who is in the process of being rucked, is what, for him, guts, character, and masculinity are all about.

Thus the ethos of rugby can be seen as also including cooperation among the players, the developing of teamwork, and an ability on the part of the individual to sharpen his more Spartan impulses, giving him an ability to "tough out" a wearisome or even painful stretch of play or practice. Implied here is the importance of the development of discipline in the player himself, which must, naturally, precede the development of team discipline.

Although a great windbag, Tupper seems to have devised his own system of strength training for his men, which while fairly functional and cursed about at the time by the men themselves (particularly Irish), seems not ineffective overall. By this system, individual

skills are to be disciplined into the team pattern. A modern-day equivalent is to be seen in the team gym workout - one that thoroughly stretches the individual and collective resources of the team. There are indeed several occasions when Tupper is seen to be rendered breathless by his own exertions, in his evident need to show the boys that he can keep up with them. This kind of match fitness or match sharpening which is here being developed should be differentiated from the purely physical strength the players bring from their workplaces.

To be seen as a “real” man one has to be seen to be tough and to regard the claims of the game and of the team as paramount. This last is particularly seen when Ken, the captain, is (to the audience particularly) seen to be concussed, and yet allowing himself to be emotionally blackmailed by Larry (the team manager and masseur) and by Tupper into playing yet another game. Given his condition he knows he shouldn’t, and he disregards pleas from Foreskin that he consider the interest of his wife and children who depend on him to keep his health and his “contracting business” intact. By the team criterion, Ken is proving himself to be a “true” man, forgetting for the moment about his sore head and donning the jersey one (last) time. It is probable that by this point in the play the virtues of supermasculinity will have already become questionable for the theatre audience.

CHAPTER 2

THE PLAYERS' ATTITUDE TO WOMEN

In *Foreskin's Lament* the women are seen, in terms of their likely bestowal of their affections and their attendant demands, as an outright distracting influence, clouding the issue of prized pristine masculinity. A man must preserve his sporting energies for the game. Almost the sternest quasi-command that Tupper makes to Foreskin is that he summarily desist from sleeping with, any one of his ladies the night before the game. Almost as great as Tupper's worry that Foreskin might not regain his quantum of energy by the game's kick-off time (three o'clock the following day) is no doubt the worry that Foreskin's commitment to rugby will have lost some of its psychological intensity, probably even of interest. Generally speaking, in *Foreskin's Lament* women are viewed by the players with some hostility. In all, the script contains eighteen instances of their being spoken of in derogatory ways, and sometimes quite scathingly. The five remaining comments are more even-handed, if somewhat grudgingly so.

The most extended of all the derogatory perspectives is conveyed in a ditty sung by Clean and Irish while showering in the changing rooms in Act 1;

"Here's to the girl I love best!
I love her best when she's undressed!
I'd fuck her sitting standing lying
why, I'd even fuck her as she lay dying
And when she's dead and long forgotten
I'll dig her up and fuck her rotten".(36)

In his introduction to the "New Zealand playscripts" edition, Michael Neill picks up these lines as evidence that for Clean sex is an act of self-violation (13). Further, he claims that the rhetoric of rugby violence, the exhortation "Play the fucken game", points to a game for men in which the principal aim, according to Tupper is simply to "Kick the shit out of everything".(49,45).

Upon later exiting from the showers and preparing to get dressed the same two players are singing another ditty of which some theatre audiences would probably hear more of the full

song, although the reader is presented with only one identifying line, “The gash that never heals”. This would suggest a certain fear of women and give further evidence of the sexual disgust that characterizes the earlier ditty.

In other instances the players’ attitudes to women are more mildly expressed, but they can be, in a quieter way, similarly reductive. For example, Ken talks about his collapse during the practice session caused by the concussion incurred during the previous Saturday’s game: “I got dizzy and fell over. All of a sudden, I was okay as soon as I hit the ground. Felt like a real girl.”(25) A girl, it seems, might be expected to behave in a weak way in a situation like this; but there is no excuse, even in the face of injury, for a man to let his true manhood temporarily slip.

The players are not unaware that pleasurable encounters with women are possible. It is simply that the pleasure is seen as transient and suspect. Tupper comments to Foreskin, who is contemplating such an encounter with evident delight, “You’ll get over it. In a couple of years you’ll rather have a glass of beer any day.” Then he adds, pointedly, “Unfortunately, when that day comes you’ll be bugger all good for rugby either.”(49). Thus he urges his player to use his best energies for the good of the game rather than indulging himself in what he sees as quasi-emasculatation.

Tupper, on another occasion, frustrated by what he regards as dewy-eyed idealism and liberalism in the part of Foreskin and his student peers, lets off a tirade in which women serve his argumentative purposes as a breed of (passive) avenging angels. He says that Foreskin and his student friends wanted a good kick “up the khyber” (in the form of adult responsibility). They need to be “told to get in with it: a wife, a couple of screaming kids and [being] mortgaged to the tonsils [will] do wonders for your perspective of the world”, he claims.(53)

When Larry privately accuses Clean of kicking Ken deliberately in a ruck during a game, Clean while not admitting to it states, “I’ve got a wife and kid to pull through this world”(39), as if his having such incubi might justify any action from him: it is almost as if he feels that he has the right to exact retribution from the world for the toil he is suffering. On the basis of this response one can imagine that his attitude towards his wife would be coldly dutiful at best. His response prefigures for the reader the cold shiver Moira is to

experience (66) when Clean talks about women, as well as his rampantly go-getter philosophy, in the most elemental terms that he, or the English language for that matter, can summon up.

Towards the end of a speech which he's making as captain at the after-match function, Clean seems to come close to paying the ladies a compliment when he refers to them as "the fairer sex"; then, as if deliberately undercutting any hint of praise he observes, "I prefer them dark myself". Seeing his audience impervious to his intended irony, Clean commands then to laugh; it is supposed to be a joke. Clean does go on to make an amusing remark, though not a subtle one, about women, but its effect has probably been undercut by his earlier gaucherie. He observes that the ladies have brought some goodies - and a plate. One has the impression that for Clean behaving towards the opposite sex with simple naturalness, not to mention a sense of equality (or even camaraderie), is an impossibility. However, without eloquence, he probably puts into a nutshell why, to the men, the women supporters of the Waitaki team are seem to be of more than negligible importance. They bring/provide the goodies (i.e. they provide aesthetic, even sexual values) and they bring a plate (they have their practical function). The uttermost limits of their importance have thus been stated and Clean would be incapable of understanding how diminished some women might feel to be so slotted into a minuscule pigeonhole. With rugby being a "man's game" they should perhaps feel honoured to be allowed to fight for the crumbs.

With his teammate Irish, as already noted, Clean is able to sing boisterously about women in the shower. However, in this play a man's success with women can seem to be almost in inverse ratio to the bravado he tries, in his masculine way, to evince. As an example of this phenomenon, when Clean first meets Moira, Foreskin's girlfriend, a feminist and activist, his first ploy is to put her down as "fluff". Then, as if to encourage her, he lets her know that he's "into fluff in a big way". Moira looks at him piercingly and observes: "You mean you'd like to be" (63). There is no verbal response from Clean to this comment and his physical advance upon her is stopped by her threat to scream.

However, Clean perseveres in this situation. Finding Moira a little harder to pin down than he'd imagined, he compliments her by raising her to the status of "spunky chick". When, however, Moira, a barrister by profession, makes it clear that she has recognized him as a

policeman from a succession of courtroom situations, Clean is temporarily floored. Moira, reconstructing his preconceptions, acidly interrogates them: that he “wasn’t to know “that she is a person rather than a bit of fluff? Or a lawyer, rather than a mere person?” She is prodding altogether too close to Clean’s stereotypes for his comfort. He makes ~~he~~ a blunt riposte: “I don’t want to get into any of that shit”.(65) Again he gives words to his preconceptions. “Shit?” she repeats. “I thought we were talking about women?” Then, with exquisite neatness reversing the substance of Clean’s earlier claim, she remarks: “You did say you were into women. Or was it shit?”(65)

It is however Tupper, the team coach and war veteran, whose previous relations with women are not spelled out to us in the play, who tries (to the amusement of the audience as well as to the temporary incomprehension of Moira) to turn a professional woman into a mere team utility, a kind of equivalent to the masseur. He proposes to her (with what by his standards might pass for delicacy) that she devote herself sexually to Foreskin. The latter will likewise devote himself to her, become regularized, and start attending Tuesday and Thursday team practices regularly and obediently. By dint of her compliance, Foreskin will “get his oats regularly”, and, for her trouble Moira will almost certainly get “a rock” thrown at her in due course: an engagement ring that is. Tupper is calculating that thereby Foreskin, undiverted by his current run of “floosies”, will be free(er) to concentrate on working for his own, his own team’s, and not least, his coach’s benefit.(76)

Moira is at first outraged at being treated by Tupper in so casually utilitarian a manner. However, it is clear that she does not strongly dislike Tupper, and she does amusedly agree to provide, for the good of the team, some sexual servicing of Foreskin. In Tupper’s terms, this involves “taking Wee Arnold” (the physical site of the hoped-for stirring) “for a trot”.(75) As Michael Neill observes in the play’s introduction, this talk of Arnold makes him sound amusingly “like some schoolboy rep.”(13) While there is a realization that Tupper is trying to play something of a game with Moira (he had previously confided to Clean that he would try “a bit of the old sly on her” (73) he evidently has little doubt that this projected scheme of reining in Foreskin (if it could only prove feasible) would be a veritable master stroke. Foreskin’s masculine imperatives would be not so much toned down as redirected (for most of the time) to the place where they can be most profitably employed - on the rugby field.

Given that this sequence is conducted by the playwright with more light-heartedness than most, the expected part of Moira within this equation (paralleled perhaps by the situation of every dutiful rugby wife/partner) can be essentially stated. It is an admittance of the unstated prerequisite that she will just “fit in”, regardless of her own particular interests or her horror of blood-sports: she will selflessly blend herself into the team’s support network, providing upon demand the regular requisite “oats” and tirelessly tending the offspring resulting from her services.

To Tupper women are the reverse side of the coin which has a member of the rugby Invincibles on its face, its underside being thereby relatively inconsequential.

Of the players who are shown in this rugby team, the only individual who seems to have notable success with women is Foreskin. At least two reasons might be adduced for his apparent relative success: his rather diverting sense of the oddball, which seems to render him agreeably unpredictable even to his teammates; and a questioning mind, which is evident in almost every speech. He has an intriguing habit of talking about women (including those with whom he has been intimate) in almost worshipful tones, calling them at one point “the lovely ladies”. To his teammates this term would pass for merely a gender description, but for him, we are made to feel, each member of the series is a “lovely lady” in her own right. In the sphere of sex stereotyping, Foreskin seems to have kept an open mind allied to his open arms, a fact which is clearly appreciated by his women friends.

The ascendancy of Foreskin in this area is well illustrated when Tupper, thinking he is making a concession to Foreskin, declares: “You can do all the fucking you like on Saturday night after the game is over - if we’ve won son, you’ll be a hero and you’ll have the pick of the girls.” To which Irish amusedly responds: “He does even when we lose.”(49)

Later during the same exchange Foreskin mocks the sacred notion that women should be attracted to rugby players on account of their noble deeds. He claims the reverse is likely to be the case. In his words: “By the time they get into the pit they’re too shikkered and tired and knocked up to even think about giving someone else a bit of pleasure.”(49) He is saying that playing rugby, with its masculine concerns and exhaustions, may not exactly

provide an aphrodisiacal tonic to one's post-match sexual partner. The ability of a man to push himself physically to the limit may be proof to his teammates of his virility: a woman, however, may simply see evidence of a man's already worn frame being (needlessly) worn out yet further. In such a situation evidence of a man's unused rather than his spent energy would be seen as more desirable.

The women however, despite their manifest shortcomings, continue to play an ongoing role, if only on the fringe of the team. In terms of their redoubtable masculinity, the women provide a means for the team members to reaffirm their individual prowess. "Wee Arnold" gets taken for a trot or, as Moira teasingly indicates, he may even be taken by her for a "proverbial gallop". The sensitive Foreskin may not like to think of his "lovely ladies" as a mere proving ground but there is about even his amorous behaviour a playfulness that is reminiscent of lines from a song from the French musical "Irma La Douce". An onlooker watching the menfolk eyeing Irma, their favourite woman, observes:

"Oh! What delight!

There is no poule
as beautiful

Oh! What a joy
to be a boy
and prove again
that we are men".

Such utilities are not to be taken for granted in what Michael Neill in his introduction terms the "indefinitely extended adolescence of masculine camaraderie."⁽¹¹⁾

CHAPTER 3

THE TEAM'S ATTITUDE TO "THE OTHER" (CONTINUED)

If women constitute one category of "the other", homosexuals and non-pakehas (for this ethnically homogeneous South Island provincial team) are further categories. As distinct from women, who have their softer edges and uses, homosexuals are seen by the team as a class of individuals of whom one should stay decidedly clear. A telling example of this kind of thinking reveals itself when Clean tells Larry the team's masseur-manager that though he's a poof, he's okay - "at a distance of more than six inches".(58)

In Clean's and Irish's game of mock-buggery in the changing rooms, the two emphatically do not retain this distance between themselves as they writhe away in the simulated delights of their act, but by limp-wristedness and the studied effeminacy of their manner, they reduce this act (they suppose) to one that would repel the masculine element in the audience, and humiliate Larry, while still providing general amusement.

Shortly after Tupper has been making a general observation to the players that rugby is a "man's game", possibly the play's most stinging insult is delivered to Larry. To Larry's request that he be able to have a talk to him "man to man", Clean's derisory riposte is "Man to What?" For, in Clean's eyes, and the eyes of the others (if we take their relative silence on the issue as a quasi-assent to Clean's views), Larry as a self-acknowledged homosexual has divested himself of his essential maleness, rendering himself almost a non-person. One may wonder, in the context of the roles he performs, about the justice of the emotional ostracism. Larry is, after all, not an undesirable hanger-on at the club; indeed he seems to acquit himself well in his roles as masseur and manager. Viewed from every other point excluding his sexual preference, Larry would indeed seem to be a distinct asset to the team - ready to offer his home for the after-match party in full awareness that, as with a similar party of the previous year, there may well prove to be a lot of wreckage to clear up. He also shows himself ready to stick up for Foreskin's point of view in the face of Clean, incurring the latter's wrath - a venture that few of the others would be game to essay.

That Larry has frankly changed his sexual preference, and is not merely, as it were, “suspect”, is made clear in a revealing conversation he has with Moira at the after-match function in Act II. He observes, “My deep dark secret seems to be common knowledge anyway. Even closets have ears”. (62) What need not be a secret from the sympathetic and non-judgemental Moira must still be guarded from the hostile public world.

Any conversation between Clean and Larry will result in some kind of barbed dismissal, for example; “How do you blow out a candle, Larry? Poof!”(62) As a shortened form of “poofter”, it is milder than some derogatory terms Clean uses. For an instance, when he is warning him off supporting Foreskin in an argument, he calls him a “fucken queer”.

In presenting Larry, for all his congenital defensiveness, as one of the play’s three most sympathetic characters, McGee seems to remain at some distance from the “closed shop” approach to homosexuality in sport. A viewer of the play, or its reader, may be aware throughout the play of a strong sense of latent homo-eroticism.

Whilst, for instance Clean and Irish evidently render the grotesque ditty about necrophilia in an appropriately grotesque fashion, stressing the song’s Edgar Allan Poe-ish elements, the mock-buggery episode (in the performances I have witnessed) is played almost straight. Both sequences are calculated to disgust, and do; but it is certainly the rather stunning quasi-realism of the second which is remembered, and the alacrity of the players can actually make the experience seem rather as enjoyment passing for disgust. In general throughout the play, and here, in conjunction with Irish, Clean protests a good deal too much. Indeed, one may go further and observe that it is curious that players who are secure in their sense of masculinity should object at all to the mode of behaviour from which by dint of their own fine heritage and their own strong wills they are forever separated.

Another form of otherness involves ethnicity. As if to prove that he, for one, is not ethically neutral, Tupper makes a significant observation - it does not seem a slip of the tongue. In Act I he is observing to Foreskin that he doesn’t want a particular formation practiced by the team within its own 25 (ie within 25 yards from its goalline). A little smartly, Foreskin reminds Tupper that the dividing line in question is nowadays referred to as the 22 (metre line). With a little exasperation, Tupper remarks facilely, “Wog measurement, whatever”. (46) Using a word that is usually applied to people of a skin

colour different to his own as a synonym for a standard of measurement he doesn't trust can be seen as symptomatic of his attitude toward people of different ethnicities, who don't routinely fall into line with him and his particular attitudes.

However, it is principally Foreskin, in a speech which he intones after showering midway through Act I, that fully alerts the audience to the kind of problematic ethnic attitudes which the team and the society it derives from display, and by implication, practice.

Clean repeats the slogan "Keep politics out of sport". Foreskin responds with, "Oh yeah, Clean, sure. And we'll keep politics off television and out of economics and taxes, and away from sex and drugs and rock'n'roll, and out of parliament and life. Away from mental defectives, minors, majors, little corporals and aircommodores." (40) Foreskin seems to be saying, to paraphrase a saying of the Christian church, that society is bound together in the bundle of the life of its members. For a member to pick and choose the bits of the bundle he wants is to show himself to be not only prejudiced but illogical to boot.

Foreskin then rhetorically cocks an ear at an imagined audience as he continues:

"What's that I hear you say, madam? Some of your best friends are Maoris? (a telling little touch of mock-surprise on Foreskin's part here). And dogs, madam, wogs commies coconuts coons kaffirs pommies polys wolllys gollys picks spucs spades spastics the PYM queers and other long-haired fairies - yes! We love them all." (40) The implied associations of ideas damningly expose the prejudiced claims to lack of prejudice.

CHAPTER 4

FORESKIN'S ATTEMPT TO COMBINE IN HIMSELF THE ATHLETE AND THE AESTHETE

Although, by comparison with Clean and Irish, Foreskin is relatively comfortable in his sexuality, he is revealed as far from being totally self-assured. The play's early movements reveal him to be prone to glibness, and to a tendency to overuse irony in conversation as a means of giving himself the edge over others who might find it hard to deal with. As the play progresses it becomes clear that behind Foreskin's charm there is, at times, a palpable sense of unease, a dividedness, a lack of reconciliation of inner tensions. It is these unreconciled tensions which I propose to dwell upon in this chapter.

The first, and ultimately the lesser, of these tensions involves the very spontaneity with which Foreskin approaches the game of rugby football, which leads to him having to withstand pressure from the captain, from the forwards (particularly Clean), and from the coach, who, in their various ways, are urging him to conform in his style of play and become (like themselves) predictable.

The external pressure does not cause Foreskin anything like the soul-searching to which his internal pressures subject him. These arise from his need to hold in balance the athlete in him, the rugby player, and the aesthete, the university student studying literature, the need, indeed, to so combine them in himself as to achieve a kind of completeness of being.

A full-back who attends university fulltime during the day is something of a puzzle to his fellow players. As Ken, the captain expresses it midway through Act 1: "You're a weird bastard sometimes, Seymour. A good bastard, but weird, you know".(35) He is a puzzle particularly to Tupper. The coach admits at one point that his young full-back has more natural talent than any of the rest of the team, but because he witnesses him frittering it away on lesser interests, his rugby career seems strangely unfulfilled. Tupper nonetheless makes it clear to Clean (who is assuming the role of captain and would like to see Foreskin ousted) that despite his tendency to talk over-cleverly and to prove unpredictable on the field, there is never any question that he will be retained in the team.

The relative lack of criticism Foreskin receives from the coach (as opposed to the regular harangue which is directed mainly at the forward pack) is partly accounted for by the fact that having been a forward himself, Tupper tends to see the game from the forwards' point of view, and his instructions to the backs, who include the captain at first five, are relatively desultory. The general instruction is that the backs should keep the ball in front of the forwards at all times, with the only pointer as to how to achieve this being to encourage the use of their trusty boots to kick to touch.

Foreskin, playing at fullback, is thus being encouraged to play for the sake of the team, with a kind of soulless predicability. However, by virtue of his very nature, he has evidently seldom been predictable in this way, endeavouring to set up movements (and, one gathers, doing so quite successfully at times) when a simple kick into touch was all that was "required". Like Ken, Tupper has found this approach exasperating, but he has a liking for the "lad"(72), which clearly has enabled him to overlook some of Foreskin's less successful exploits.

Foreskin's motivation for playing rugby, as it emerges from his own remarks, also seems markedly at odds with those of the others. While he communicates a sense of the game being exhilarating to him, the best the others (including Tupper) can manage to convey in talking about the game is the experience of a kind of prolonged doggedness. For Ken it may be that the game has served as a temporary escape from familial responsibilities. In his conversation with Moira (65-66), Clean reveals his own motives for playing the game with cold clarity and no consideration of exhilaration. He states, simply, that he wants to make a name for himself (which he could achieve by becoming captain), so he can ride on it. Rugby was to contribute to him not he to it.

What Foreskin's motives are for playing rugby is rather a mystery to the rest of the team. Tupper, when disagreeing with Foreskin about the concept of rugby, puts his exasperation fairly succinctly: "You're too much of an individual. You're a bloody romantic"(51). When Foreskin asks him how these qualities can be a disqualification, Tupper makes an effort to explain:

"You're an individual with a lot of skill. But that's not it, that's not the truth about rugby. It's always been a test of guts and character, not skill. And it's better that

way: a man, an ordinary bloke, can find out a lot about himself and his mates. I see myself as building a platform, a standard for the team to try for. And the standard has got to be one of character, of desire, of the spirit to go through the fire, the war, the dangers with your mates, and come out stronger for it at the other end.”

Then almost pleadingly, he adds, “Do you understand? You must.”(51)

Not unmoved, Foreskin indicates (with a reservation which relates to his teammate Clean’s “overkeenness”) that he understands Tupper’s position very well. However, the question remains: is the desirability of the acquiring of “guts and character” on the part of the team members the sole and sufficient reason for motivating a player to physically give his all? Might not the concern for the development of intestinal fortitude (which is, essentially Tupper’s analysis of the game’s benefit) seem to others narrow to the point of being obsessive? Rugby is made to sound like a routine, a doughty weights workout, whereas, as Foreskin is reminding the other players, it is just a game - a game which one has the temerity to assume people actually play for enjoyment. To Tupper’s sonorous “The town is the team” (48), Foreskin responds, tellingly: “Who is this team Tupper? What is the team? They’re just a collection of human beings, the team has no magical properties of its own.”(51) Again, in this instance, it is probably only Tupper’s natural affection for the younger player that enables him to withstand this kind of “heresy”.

Clearly, Foreskin’s and Tupper’s approaches are antithetical. Tupper is involved in the game for reasons that can seem to have more than a touch of masochism about them. Foreskin, by contrast, is involved in it for the sheer fun of it. Rather than submerging his individual skills and flair, he hopes to have scope for them, and to develop them further.

It seems quite significant that while Clean makes great play about Foreskin’s electing not to pass when the opponents’ line was beckoning, he makes no accusations about any recently missed tackles by him, as the team’s last line of defence. What this suggests is that his commitment and his physical courage are never in doubt. In spite of being described in the dramatic personae list as “more delicate in physique than the others’, he invites attack several times during the dramatic action for expressing his suspicions about that kick to Ken’s head, from the distinctly brawnier Clean. He is to precipitate the play’s catastrophe by forcing Tupper to grasp what Clean had done, causing Tupper to attempt to

assail his player, perhaps to the surprise of an audience who would have become engrossed in the mutual stalking of Clean and Foreskin.

Foreskin's notion of playing rugby to achieve a kind of aesthetic "perfection"(89), as opposed to devotion to sheer grind, goes only a little way to explaining the perceived differences between him and the other players. Larry virtually tells him that he should stick to his own class of people: "Why do you come back here to play, Seymour? You could do much better playing for the university."(36) Tupper, in trying to mollify Clean, makes a point about his perception of the differentness of Foreskin's usual associates: he's "just been led astray by some of these university roosters".(72)

Part of the university mystique, in the eyes of his fellow-players is found in the fact that the terms which Foreskin uses to talk about his style of play would be assumed by them to be university terms: "I'm a class removed from you donkeys - the laws of gravity, kinetics, time and space and kicks in the head don't apply to the likes of me".(35) He explains to Ken that his reason for playing is "to make poetry through motion".(35)

He can be seen here to be mocking his talents in the very act of celebrating them, a paradoxical performance that Ken, finds simply "weird". He wraps his most serious affirmations among jokes and riddles.

All the same, if his university experience helps in removing him from the level of the donkeys, it is not in itself "enough" either. As he says in the following exchange, "It's a question of contrast, Larry. You know, sometimes up there I get the feeling life itself is just an abstraction. I like coming back here a couple of times a week, keeping some involvement. Oh, I know I couldn't live here again, but Jesus Larry, you've no idea what it's like up there in the ivory tower."(36) However, he will return to "the ivory tower", and never gives a hint of prematurely quitting it.

Hence, there is evidence of a tension within Foreskin himself: between university and playing rugby in Waitaki, "my earth", as he calls it. Or, to put it differently, there is a tension between the two roles, the aesthete and the athlete. Foreskin had clearly hoped that these two dimensions of his makeup and experience would prove supremely complementary. However such was not to be, as each of them manifestly calls for a

completely polarised set of expectations - the university for initiative and independence of thought, the rugby team, at this level, for self-abandonment for the good of the team, with predicability honed to a knife-edge.

Foreskin is subsequently to conclude the play with there and a half pages of monologue. I shall be examining the substance of this "lament" at a later stage, but can stress here that within it the tension between "aesthete" and "athlete" is very acute. Thus the lament is at once shot through with knowledge both of the rugby tradition and of the intellectual culture of the 1960s, and dense with resonant names and yet quite bracing in its effect. It is the address of a man who substantiates his claim that he is of the people, and yet gives evidence, at other points, that he is patently "with it" intellectually (in the context of 1980).

The lament makes an eager interest in rugby into almost a communal cult as he talks of the legendary players of the past: Skinner, Bekker, O'Reilly, Jackson, Viellpreux and Joe Maso, "Pinetree" (Meads), and the rest, who had been the stuff of his daydreams as a boy and were still shining examples of magically stalwart footballers. The mythic associations of the great footballers provide meaning and standards for the aspirations of the young player.

Foreskin's earlier statement to Moira about Waitaki being his "earth" may suggest that he plays rugby precisely because he feels the need to ensure, with the quixotic brilliance and fierce intelligence that his lament shows him to possess, that he keeps his feet firmly planted on that earth even though his head, for much of the time, is up in the clouds. Thus he can, to some extent, in the companionship of his rugby mates, evade the limitations of the abstractions of the university world with which he has chosen to deal, yet mistrusts.

The long lament in its very texture gives evidence of the opposing stresses in Foreskin between his instinctual affinity with the concerns and simple logic of the community of the "ordinary blokes" and the irresistible temptation of self-conscious hyper-articulateness. For an example of inventiveness: "The old order never would have changed. We were DBed, BGed, jardined, cooked, nicholled, elvidged, fred allened, otagoed in 1949, bayed through the 60s".(94) These names of rugby greats and provinces have been cleverly abbreviated into a mouthful of speech, as it were. And not a half dozen lines later, "Then, later, a lot older, slower, more in need, standing on bare boards in cigarette smoke, a cold

sausage roll in one hand and a warm jug of beer in the other”(94) we are back down to earth with the plainest of language, yet still witty in its rhetorical shaping.

The tension is also manifested in his earlier tirade addressed to his girlfriend Moira. While she would probably be happier being thought of as a “liberal” than as an “intellectual” or “aesthete”, he sees her liberalism, from which he does not altogether dissociate himself, as a diversion from reality which can serve a similar function to the detachment of an aesthete. To him, her conveniently simpler reading of what he takes to be “The heart and bowels of the country”(68) amounts to an aesthetic disregard of the truth. The long harsh speech he delivers to her (68) is initially precipitated by her scornful comments about Tupper (while having seemed to be amused and accommodating to Tupper’s face), and about Clean (whom she did come to genuinely detest and possibly fear). To the question “What the hell” she wants from these people, whom Moira has indicated she thinks of as animals who “only understand grunts and belches”, there is perhaps a half-sneering implication that she as an over-sophisticated woman is expecting too much. Her response seems, by comparison with his stirring language, so extraordinarily pat, as to instantly set off Foreskin’s tirade against what he terms “effete intellectuals”.

What Moira says she wants from “these people” (such as Tupper and Clean) is “Normality, warmth, empathy, a little communication of interests, ideas - no more than [she’d] expect from any gathering of reasonably aware human beings”(68).

This response to an urgent question from Foreskin sounds like the opening of a civics lecture for the simple minded. One could have expected her, in the very next sentence, to extol the virtues of kindness, niceness and civility. Her observations in the text, even if they are well-meaning, remain light-years removed from reality as it is being currently lived by the members of the Waitaki rugby team. Moira’s insularity (to which these remarks attest) brings forth a long, probing and quite virulent speech about “people like you” from Foreskin. “Alright”. He had been searching for the appropriate term to apply to Moira.

I meant effete intellectuals like you, like us, trendy lefties or trendy fascists, makes no difference, who indulge in profound discussions with esoteric peers, pick over the issues like a pack of erudite hens tossing stale wheat back and forth, too satiated to

know what it really tastes like. We indulge in polite proselytising bounded by petty rules of good form - nothing more than gentility masquerading as reason - gut-feelings, bed-rock passions, honesty have nothing to do with it. We're playing games Moira, which have nothing to do with reality. Reality is here, not in the bouquet of a '72 Cabernet or in meaningless landscapes of the Shotover, or in the people who create them. This is the heart and bowels of this country, too strong and foul and vital for reduction to bouquets or oils or words. If you think they're pigs, then you'd better look closer, and get used to the smell because their smell is your smell. It's they who decide for us which road, what speed, how far, and who drives - they decide how and why we live and tolerate us for the rest or best.(63)

Here Foreskin's plainness of speech, and meaning, are so unambiguous as to leave little room for misinterpretation and this is certainly how Moira sees it. Foreskin is certainly eloquent, indeed one feels some sympathy for the well-meaning Moira who has to withstand this tirade. Yet despite his air of certitude, one has the feeling that he is working out his position as he goes along. As the logic of social morality (camaraderie, respect, decency) is seemingly failing him he gains the mental energy to attack what one may term the "non-essentials" with greater vigour than ever, possibly as compensation. He not only displays a loss of faith in the intellectual life but admits to the realisation that the inescapable power of the provincial people is no longer comforting.

In a later confrontation with Moira, just before she departs in a fairly decisive manner, Foreskin is similarly dismissive. She again speaks of Tupper as "imbecile", and Clean as a "moron", and proceeds to give Foreskin what seems to her a very easy choice- between her companionship or theirs. Again, she seems to display the same penchant for abstracting realities into sincere simplicities. Why Foreskin's continuing to keep acquaintance with her should be contingent on his terminating relationships with teammates is by no means apparent. Foreskin mocks the notion of Moira as the female all-sufficing panacea, the liberal stronghold, as it were. The problem must be lived through not abandoned, nor should attempts be made to cut it down to size. As Foreskin says, "This is my earth [which includes Tupper and Clean], I'm rooted in it, whatever my fine aspirations."(88)

This last sentence indicates the tension which Foreskin experiences between (as he perceives it) the bedrock of reality (which includes the more brutal aspects of rugby) and the pursuit of aspirations that are in any sense “higher”. On the other hand, Foreskin’s general disillusionment with rugby, and with its team ethic, which becomes increasingly apparent as the play progresses, springs principally from the fact that it has nurtured a player like Clean, and half-encouraged him in his thuggery, through a “rip, shit, and bust coach” (to use Clean’s own terms) verbally encouraging aggression that could become excessive in his players.(52) When the news comes from the hospital that Ken, already in a coma, has been pronounced dead, Foreskin’s rugby idealism suddenly snaps. His struggle to persuade himself that things were not as bad as they seemed is done with.

During an entanglement with Clean in which Irish tries to intervene, Foreskin declares: “No! No! the masks have been on long enough. Let’s drop them, stop this masquerade in the name of team spirit. I’m sick and tired of it”. Clean replies, sneeringly. “Give it away then. If you can’t hack it, give it away.” (85) Clean is not denying the necessity for wearing masks but observing that it requires people of the requisite gall to wear them.

There then follows an anxious moment for Clean. Foreskin insists that Tupper be present. Clean evidently guesses that this is so that Foreskin can further pursue the question of Ken’s demise, but Foreskin seems rather to want the presence of a well-proven touchstone to counter the pervading cynicism around him. Irish, in this heated situation, prefers the very kind of advice that Foreskin does not want to hear at this point: “Just ... play the game, Foreskin, it’s easy enough” (86). To Foreskin’s admission that “the rules just don’t seem worth it,” Irish replies: “Worth what? Costs nothing to [play along] (86).

Shortly before Clean had enlightened Foreskin as to his real feelings about the coach. “He’s just an old fart left over from the Second World War ... he thinks that was all about chivalry and camaraderie too” (85). Evidently Clean believes that “chivalry and camaraderie” were qualities of a bygone age, if ever - certainly not appropriate for this more brutalising modern one. He has seen war at first-hand, in Vietnam, too recently to have retained any illusions about it. He continues: “He’s a dying breed. There wouldn’t be one cunt in this team who takes him seriously”. When Foreskin disagrees, Clean allows

that Tupper may have one solitary supporter. Then, observing that he has “had enough of this shit”, Clean stalks off. Although told to follow, Irish (who normally tags along happily with Clean) significantly doesn’t on this occasion - evasively telling Clean (who is not fooled by his prevarication) that he’ll be with him in a moment.

Irish’s refusal to accompany Clean is functionally important to the play at this stage as it leaves him, with his double talk and jester-like qualities, onstage as a soundingboard during some of the most important lines of Foreskin’s coda of disenchantment: questioning his assumptions about the system with the same rigour as he did those about the intellectual aesthetic life during his tirade directed to Moira.

He recognises that the life of the team itself is largely a charade:

“No look at us all Irish. Playing along humouring each other, bullshit in one sustaining bullshit in the other. Tupper play acting for the team’s benefit, all you guys playing along for his benefit. I was the only one who believed the whole charade was serious. When does the charade stop?”

Irish doesn’t think charades are too worrisome a prospect. “Well, if it’s only a charade, why (worry about)”. But to Foreskin the things being done in a charade can only have one ultimate effect. As he puts it: “The values get fucked” (86), an observation repeated in his next speech.

The irony is reinforced with, “You know what Tupper said to me on Thursday night Irish? This is the best experience these guys will ever have”. (87) The discovery that Tupper is not held in any ultimate respect by the other players (and it is perhaps ironic that he is addressing, in Irish, the player who apart from Clean, is the furthest removed from any kind of idealism, is clearly a blow to his sense of that camaraderie which Tupper and he himself has been enjoying. Or, has this supposed camaraderie all been an illusion of his?

“What the fuck’s wrong with me Irish?” Foreskin proceeds to compare the status of what he had taken to be the real world with the appearances of the aesthetic world, finds them disconcertingly similar.

“I used to think it was more dangerous to spend too much time with those academics up at the university. I spend hours being lectured on the unauthentic voice of modern literature by academics who live vicariously, through books and abstractions. I looked down on them, I thought they were cowards, cowering from the nitty-gritty”. (87)

Irish: “And now you find the nitty-gritty’s a charade?” Foreskin couldn’t have put it better himself. He continues: “Yeah. What the fuck’s everyone hiding from?” (87)

In the lament that is to end the play Foreskin continues to ask his questions about authenticity and identity with such urgency and remorselessness that they are virtually replaced by a more Beckettian question “What would a person who didn’t hide look like?”

CHAPTER 5

THE CORRUPTION OF TEAM STANDARDS

There are elements that the Waitaki team's ethos encompasses that seem admirable - fitness, skills, hardihood, mateship (camaraderie), good sportsmanship, dedication to the team itself, trying to win. Tupper however endorses another imperative that seriously compromises the effect of these. It is the imperative - the conflicting ethos - of winning at all costs. This imperative he endeavours to ensure they pursue and his pep talk to the team at the training session makes this clear. The way that Tupper goes about trying to ensure success for his tea ostensibly contributes to bringing about the corruption of the moral standards of one of its members.

In the situation which McGee presents to us, he is encouraging them to turn their game into a process of assault - the members of the opposing team are to be thrown off their game by means of intimidating aggressiveness. The opposing players are the enemy and sportsmanlike considerations accordingly are set aside.

Many of the heroes on Foreskin's list, even at international level, in his later lament, had showed some sportsmanship in their behaviour (such as evincing immediate concern for an opposing player who seemed to be injured), but concerning this significant aspect of the game Tupper is silent. It is perhaps fair to speculate that, by his rules, to show such sympathy, a player would be simply indicating that he had "gone soft", his behaviour being characterised by a flaccidity inappropriate for a team supposedly propelled with masculine impulses.

Although Tupper later claims that he did not intend his remarks on on-field aggression and sneaky offences to be taken literally, this by no means places him outside the realm of culpability in relation to Clean's drastic on-field behaviour. The reader will find nothing in his previous words to indicate they were to be taken at other than face value.

Overall, two results are seen to ensue from his overly explicit rucking instructions. The first is that Clean, for his own reasons, adheres to Tupper's encouragement to kick another player on the head, the only difference being that the target of Clean's boot happens to be a member of his own team.

While obviously Tupper was not directly responsible for the tragedy that occurred, it could be argued that he bore some degree of responsibility for the death of Ken in that his very associating of a boot with a player's head could have sown the germ of an idea in the mind of Clean. More generally, advocating disregard for some moral inhibitions can be seen to lead the way to disregarding any.

The second result is that, at least partly because of Tupper's (almost comically) over-the-top approach, he has ceased to be taken entirely seriously by the team. We later gather that what we have been seeing at team practice is a bit of a charade. Tupper has been giving orders as if they were meant literally but is not, ultimately, intending that this should be so; while, for their part, the players are busy pretending to take Tupper literally, while privately having no such attitude.

Thus we have a situation where Tupper is trying to manipulate his men by using a code in the hope of building up team spirit, a will to win, an aggressive, strenuous approach to the forthcoming game. On their part, the players generally read his code only too well, but pretend they don't.

The second element in the corruption of standards is this very distortion of communication between coach and players. Briefly put, how is a team to function, to know what is required of them, when their coach, their mentor, proves ambiguous in his instructions? A team talk is surely an occasion for straight talk. At the highest level (ie All Black) one would hardly expect duplicity in a coach of the Fred Allen or JJ Stewart mould. Similarly, at second grade level (as here), it would seem evident that the team needs to know exactly where it stands and "psychological boosting" needs to be identified for what it is.

Rather than using more direct methods, Tupper has engaged in a kind of verbal semaphore, in which it was understood that the players would receive his message and transmit it to their muscles and joints. Ultimately it may have been when they perceived that Tupper did not really mean what he was saying that the players gradually lost their respect for him, and that Clean, in particular, came to despise him.

Tupper several times harks back to the Second World War as having necessitated embodiments of manhood, and leadership. However, in that war, ambiguous and brutal

commands of the sort that Tupper issues would, if translated into military action, have led to a wholesale moral degradation of one's own forces, through the committing of war crimes which would criminalise and possibly disgrace those who took part in them.

On occasions, Foreskin affectionately refers to Tupper as "dad." (28) He observes on one occasion that Tupper is an altruist (54), (the meaning of this term is not known to Tupper), and listening to him talking about ordinary blokes as being the salt of the earth, he describes Tupper as a "romantic". No doubt Tupper would give his life for the team if the need arose. But, excepting perhaps for Foreskin, his absolute dedication to the game is not shared by the others. To spur their will to win Tupper feels it necessary to exaggerate his rhetoric when coaching. His motives, as he sees them, have been unimpeachable, but the observable results prove calamitous; and they are presumably, exemplary of a more widespread degradation of the spirit of New Zealand rugby.

CHAPTER 6

THE LAMENT

The concluding lament comprising four and a half pages of monologue provides at the same time a summation of the play's action and an opportunity for Foreskin to make some acerbic remarks about the manner of his friend's death and to grieve for his loss of faith both in the national game and in the university world.

The lament develops out of a confrontation, extending to blows, that has broken out between Clean (brazen as ever), and Tupper, with Larry trying to break it up and getting knocked out. Foreskin then enters with a bottle, screaming, and aiming it first at Clean then dashes it into the offstage television set.

In his published script of the play, McGee's stage directions specify that Foreskin's speech that follows is initially directed at "Clean and Tupper and those who were supposedly watching the television, but as he progresses, he moves downstage so that he is addressing himself to the theatre audience".(92)

The opening of this speech is reminiscent of Clean's which he made as acting team captain, to the visiting Ngapuki team and his own, in much more convivial circumstances. In contrast, however, the script details that in Foreskin's speech "the dominant emotions are...anger...sorrow...anguish".

"Gentlemen, Lads, Boys" are his opening words, and they can be seen as representing a descending order of manhood.

A "Gentleman", whose attitude would be characterized by some degree of the spirit of sportsmanship, would not have been capable of Clean's act, or indifferent to its consequences. Of the players we see only Ken has approached that standard, although his loyalty has served only to make him vulnerable.

"Lads" also has an odd ring in this context. It is a term perhaps associated with the phrase "being one of the lads". It conjures up an ambience of male camaraderie.

“Boys”, as in the phrase “men called boys”(93), is commonly used when addressing team players as a group. It would certainly seem to connote a prolonged immaturity on the part of the participants.

Foreskin proceeds with: “Unaccustomed as I am”. By using the same stock phrase “straight” when making his own speech to the visiting Ngapuki team, Clean displayed a verbal gaucheness which we are well aware in no way characterizes Foreskin. Thus, in employing this phrase, which is, in fact, used almost exclusively at weddings as a kind of joke-cliché within a pastiche, Foreskin can be seen to be indulging in savage irony. In this situation, a funeral oration rather than a wedding celebration, the phrase jars with its cosiness. He is unaccustomed, he says, to the “small ethics of the situation”. To credit ethics with a particular size is logically absurd, with Foreskin seeming rather to be mocking the degrees of absence of ethics on the part of his original listeners.

About Ken, Foreskin remarks, “He’s dead plain enough...And that ought to be a finish, an end to it, surely” (which it might prove to be, soon enough, in the minds of those - excepting Ken’s immediate family - who will be attending the funeral). But, as he observes: “I’m unaccustomed to leaving questions unasked”.(92) So as to forestall being blithely fobbed off (as with the team’s totally incurious reaction to Ken’s fate in the drama), Foreskin observes that he has never measured his questions by the possibility of their being answered. In asking “why” (did Ken’s death occur) he is asking for “continuity in place of the natural void”.(93)

Foreskin next suggests that they sing for Ken, “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow”. This, as he knows, would be monumentally inappropriate as the chorus is traditionally sung for (and to) those who are very much alive. He goes on to an even more outrageous suggestion - that the players “form a ruck at the side of the grove”. A ruck - or, more precisely the side of a ruck that the referee could not see - was the ultimate locus of the kick that caused Ken’s death. Foreskin’s further suggestion that they “rake earth over him with their sprigs” serves to further heighten his bitter irony as this kind of action was, again, the context in which Clean could deliver the fatal kick. The sardonic tone is continued by Foreskin’s suggestion that they “make a wreath of dirty laces” - any homage by the team to Ken would have to be soiled; a wreath in pristine condition would be patently bogus.

Foreskin's going on to propose "We'll thank the referee" seems ironic in context. Clean's act was presumably planned so that it could not be seen by the referee, so it would be unfair to blame him too much for not spotting it, but he has nonetheless failed.

Clean's two assaults were presumably seen by "the God Almighty" who is seen here as another kind of referee, but it would seem that no intervention was deemed necessary by Him at the time. When Foreskin then goes on to observe: "Lord, it's a tough game", there is the sense that it is the divine decision (i.e. not to intervene - as in Ken's case) that Foreskin finds particularly hard to accept (whether his Divine Being happens to be a construct or is here being spoken of by Foreskin in a personal sense).

The next two paragraphs are worth quoting in full, as it is hard to capture in a comment the feeling of nostalgia they convey.

I was born of the same mothers as you - all.! I was part of a whole generation that grew up on wintry mornings running from between Mum's coat ends on to dewy green fields that seemed as vast as the Russian steppes. And we'd swarm, this way and that, the ball a nominal focus the rows of earnest parents our sidelines having no idea of how to score, how to win or lose, or even which way to run if we got the ball, except away...from all that attention, but even then, ambition wasn't far away. I could feel it rising in steam-breath from the screaming side-line mouths "Kill him!"

There were times of closeness, father and son, brother and weary brother, waking very early on cold mornings, huddling together under a blanket in front of a wireless waiting for it...wait for it...wait for it and for a whole generation God was only twice as high as the posts.

The passage is full of notable images. It is perhaps amusing to consider that for the tyro rugby players the ball was "only a nominal focus", until we recall that for one of the older and more experienced players, Clean, the ball has continued to remain simply a nominal focus of interest, a chilling consideration. Foreskin observes that the young players would run around with the ball hardly knowing how to score but then adds savagely that "ambition wasn't far away" - it could be felt rising from the "screaming side-line mouths" of the watching parents - "Kill him!"

Thus does the focus shift on to the game of rugby itself which, by its very nature as a vigorous contact sport, is likely to bring out unwonted instincts of unruly aggression in the game's supporters and, as they grow older, in the players.

Having recognized this fact, Foreskin immediately switches back to the nostalgic mode: "father and son, brother and weary brother...huddling together" in the early mornings "under a blanket in front of a wireless" - for the purpose of listening to rugby matches when the All Blacks were playing in Britain, France or South Africa. This change of key gives us an insight in to his current thinking on the state of the game. Whilst he will not be silenced on its licence for uncontrolled aggressiveness, which he sees as its chief flaw, he is still quick to admit its appeal and is very far from having altogether abandoned its spirit. The "Wait for it, wait for it", refers to the unique commentating style of Winston McCarthy, who by his intense vocal attentiveness to the game involved the listener absolutely, particularly in the recounting of the goalkicks (that which is being waited for). As Michael Neill expresses it in his foreward to the play, "Fathers, sons and brothers [were] united in the surrogate orgasm of conversion".(12)

In the next section, everything that does not concern the game of rugby is effectively parenthesized: "one thing we know with certainty: come winter, we'd be there, on the terrace..." "Certainty" during times, and moods, which could be so changeable for young people seems particularly noteworthy: for them rugby had an elemental quality - a quality more total and involving than mere enthusiasm.

Reminiscing some more about the conviviality of the game (and its after-match functions), Foreskin goes on to observe, "I know the lore, I know the catechism". He then, interestingly, repeats "I was born of the same mothers as you". Physically he is of their ilk, but no longer, we can conclude, spiritually - the very reason he continues to feel "unaccustomed" even in their "customary" company. Brutality on the rugby field has changed this for him, and what has perhaps influenced his thinking as much as anything is the casual indifference of others to the thought that a fellow player's injury may have been deliberately caused by a fellow player. Tupper's and Larry's frantic performances in the last stage of the dramatic action cannot atone for their earlier indifference. Michael Neill suggests that rugby camaraderie is in their case a kind of indefinite extension of

adolescence and in these terms one can indeed see all involved continuing as social adolescents while they continue to “play the game”. In a sense, in the act of calling their attention to their own (adolescent) indifference Foreskin proves that he has outgrown the need for the blanket of camaraderie which they have provided him with.

Next, in metaphorically colourful language, Foreskin grapples with his unease with the cultural experiences of his recent university past. The galaxy of famous modern writers, film-makers and other intellectual cult figures that he names shows that, even taking into account the dimension of “someone else’s ... resonance”, he is impressively well read and possesses a penetrating mind. For instance, the series of alliterative pairings of intellectual cult notables, “behanned and bowied”, or the use of the writers’ actual names as part of his text - “bellowed at, barthed, pynched on” - show effectively how they and their works have been incorporated into his own consciousness. In this connection one can also note the visceral onomatopoeia for Foreskin’s “What could I think or shrink that was not thurbured vonnegutted”.

The reader has to this point in the play probably been unsure as to why Foreskin has been so dismissive of the university as an centre of intellectual culture. He has spoken vaguely about its relative remoteness and its abstractions but in this, the penultimate section of the lament, and in the middle of his brilliant puns about writers, he elucidates his suspicions about the culture it promotes. For instance on p94 (“Tortilla-flatted”), he and his fellow students live in a “ghetto” - the impression is of a narrow physical and emotional comfort zone - within which they were “intellectually awakened” by being “bellowed at, barthed, pynched on” and “bowied into submission”. His own words, his own life were thereby “parenthesized” - this suggests a stifling of spontaneity - and impression confirmed two lines further on: “What could I possibly say that was original/write that was not already Khayamed/breathe that was not already oxidised” (the very air was pre-used). The phrase “perelmaned pun” refers to Sidney Perelman, the illustrious humorist, who was probably the most notable of the Marx Bros writers. A pun at which some of his teammates might have laughed (or groaned) would have at least seemed to them original, but the more astute of his fellow students would have identified it as originating from somebody else. This second-handedness of the university culture seems to mean that one must use someone else’s language, imitate someone else’s lines of thought.

However, in this constricting situation there was, states Foreskin, an option open to him - that was “withdrawal to burroughs”, to a state of being “garboed in solitude” (this celebrated actress’s most famous pronouncement is said to have been “I want to be alone”). Or worse (he seems to make it clear that the following was an option), one could submit oneself to “heroined insularity”. The ironic similarity between the word “hero” and “heroined” (ie drugged) is pointed up. Or, using milder drugs one could be “kerouaced into speed, keseyed into acid”. And yet, even then, he would be “never, ever, blessed with the absence of resonance”. The presence of resonance might seem no bad thing, but it would inevitably be “someone else’s, naturally”.

For him at university it was “Always the other” that was being considered, or that he was being required to consider. For himself to come back, to re-emerge, he chose to come back to rugby: “I think you saw me, playing fullback”. (95)

Now however, in the act of “hanging up (his) boots”, he challenges the audience (while questioning himself) “whaddarya?”, seeming to wish to deflect attention from his own actions by questioning the degree of masculinity of each member of his audience. He is now “kicking for touch”, “kicking it in the guts”, the ball here symbolizing the game itself, or the rugby culture. (96)

Two lines after his third “whaddarya?” challenge he becomes quieter and states slowly with pauses (physically indicated in the text by ellipses), “Just ... couldn’t ... hack it”. This can be seen as a personal admission which is relatively unrelated to his challenges to others. It is as if those had distracted him from that simple truth.

“Can’t play the game” is, by contrast, almost defiant - giving the impression that the game is not such a good thing to be playing. The impression is fortified by his observation ~~that~~ he can’t “anymore wear the one dimensional mask” (96). That this would be worn “for the morons’ Mardi Gras” confirms the tone of scorn as he dissociates himself from its wearers. A mask can hide from the observer the actual physical appearance or identity of the wearer, substituting a pseudo-identity, and it can conceal what is going on in his mind, what he thinks or feels, leading to a deficiency in independant thought or feeling. The Waitaki rugby players (partly admittedly from early parental and societal conditioning - Foreskin’s remark about having learned “not to cry a vale of tears ago” (93) seem apposite here) have

shown themselves to be seriously deficient in any true feeling about the plight of Ken. Foreskin himself had been slow to react adequately to Larry's early tale about having witnessed the delivery of the first kick Ken received. However, the "she'll be right" attitude quickly gave way to genuine concern, when he tries vehemently to dissuade his concussed captain from playing. The other players' attitude, and that of the coach and manager, is that he should play for the good of the team, whatever. Their pressure on him mingles usual camaraderie with blackmail. The camaraderie is attuned to their own needs and can thus be fairly termed one-dimensional and justifies itself via the stereotype of the hardened player. Foreskin observes that at "the morons' Mardi Gras", they ask you "Whaddarya?" - but don't really want to know. In like manner, ostensible camaraderie can become just an empty form.

"Well? Why Whaddarya?" Mmmmm? Foreskin is seen to be almost teasing the truth from the audience/reader.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The foregoing pages have seen the construction of an ethos of masculinity as an important and ongoing process in the business of playing rugby. Certain key ideas in this development can be recapitulated.

First, to be masculine involves being stoical - learning not to cry (of youngsters) or to show unsanctioned feelings (of grown men). As Foreskin puts it in his final lament (as if announcing a fact of life), "I learned not to cry a vale of tears ago" (93), although this Biblical metaphor implies that there were tears which should have been shed, but couldn't be. Stoicism, in addition to its aspect of personal mental hardening, can lead to an indifference to others of the kind which characterises the players' attitude to Ken's situation.

Secondly, to preserve one's masculinity in absolute form, it is necessary to objectify and degrade any perceived threat to it. Women, regardless of their degrees of attractiveness or intelligence, are by virtue of this rule, consigned to being "bits of fluff". Their ability to be at times amusing and engaging is not held up to question - they are simply non-essentials in the male order of things pertaining to rugby.

Homosexuals, like Larry, are seen to be simply "poofsters" - gradations of innuendo are not needed. This term is used by Clean, generally the team's most outspoken member, but the audience becomes uneasily aware that it is not felt by the others to be inappropriate. The game of mockbuggery with which Clean and Irish humiliate Larry has the effect also of exposing the extent to which repressed homosexual feeling feeds their cruelty and contempt towards the scapegoat.

Thirdly, to be masculine is to be one of the boys, wanting nothing more than the approval of one's teammates and coach. Marriage, family ties, job responsibilities, are seen to be subordinated to this principle. Despite knowing that he was seriously affected with residual concussion, Ken was easily persuaded to dismiss his self-protective instincts and the interests of his family. According to Tupper, through submission of his personal persona to the team's collective persona, a man can really learn to be himself, and to

experience “grand emotions”. Beside what happens on the rugby field, life can seem a much smaller game.

Fourthly, the object of this man’s game is to win. The importance of factors of character is seen to pale in comparison with the imperative that the team must win at almost any cost. To be a man is to realise that there are no prizes for second place. Accordingly, by Tupper’s extension, to not take advantage of the fact that the ref’s back happens to be turned and hence to fail to put the boot into opposing players is to put yourself into the position of having your masculinity challenged (“Whaddarya?”).

Fifthly, the same masculine intensity and singlemindedness are seen also to apply to one’s attitude to the opposing team. For eighty minutes on the field (and in the mental and physical preparation off it) the opponents are to be conceived as the ultimate Other - even hatred of them is not discouraged. Thus, in the final lament, the parents are seen to goad their children to “kill” the opposition players - the earliest signal boys receive from their parents is that rugby is a game to be played in deadly earnest. Showing sympathy with injured opposing players is obviously not part of the team’s masculine armoury. Like Ken’s fit of dizziness, it might be seen to pass for girlish (and therefore highly unacceptable) behaviour.

If this list of the elements of the accepted construction of masculinity sounds ultimately uninviting, it should be noted that McGee has offered, in Foreskin, an alternative and more appealing construction. This character’s tendency towards verbal smartness and sarcasm makes him not a figure to be unduly idealised, and thus he is one to whom the reader/viewer can safely relate. Although by comparison with the forwards he is lacking in brawn, his manner on the field evidently belies his relatively slight frame. At fullback he would sometimes be tackling forwards with the robust frames of Clean or Irish, and although certain aspects of his play come under criticism, these don’t include the effectiveness of his tackles or his ability to take the high ball. Outside the rugby grounds, caution about the physical size of his potential adversary, Clean, does not deter him from pursuing him with insinuations about Clean’s rugby footwork, which ultimately brings him to the edge of an all-out brawl with his foe. His interest in his other teammates (as we note in his concern expressed to and about Ken) is not blunted by the imperative to hold back on

one's feelings or by the outright nonchalance or indifference displayed by the others. This same sensitivity, the acuteness of and alertness to his feelings, is conveyed to Moira and evidently to his other women friends with whom he is having sexual successes that any more macho-seeming male might envy.

About Foreskin's manner there seems nothing that is calculatedly macho, and yet he seems never less than masculine - indeed, he seems decidedly more at home in his masculinity/sexuality than several of the other players. As part of the team he could be safely described as being a "man" among "men".

Thus McGee seems to be saying that although most of the Waitaki rugby team comply with a fairly unvarying code of rules in order to assert and preserve their masculinity on the rugby field, in a person already possessed of self-confidence and enough individuality to dare express it compliance with such a code is not necessary.

Foreskin, while pursuing the goal of fullness of being, demonstrates a comprehensive sense of the practical side of masculinity when he uses the fear that he might lose his testicles to a player's sprigs in a match on the following day to justify an amorous tryst the preceding evening.

While at university Foreskin has explored a culture of writers and thinkers which, judging from the way he, as absorbed and internalised their language, he has found to be intellectually stimulating. From an emotional point of view however, he has found the milieu unsustaining. He has felt constrained to adopt the idiolects of the formulators of fashionable ideas, mainly American, rather than feeling himself able to articulate ideas in his own terms, or in terms that are authentic for his own native country. This alienating aspect of university culture has the effect of driving him back to his own roots in order to seek more vital companionship and authenticity. Rather than play his rugby at the university (which might seem the more obvious option) he takes the trouble to travel back to Waitaki three times a week, for practices and the Saturday game.

The seeking of comradeship amongst supposedly good, honest football-playing Kiwis (as opposed to the more ethereal relationships of the university coteries) must, by the play's end, be labelled a disaster. Foreskin looked for mythical qualities in the land and people

of the provincial hinterland but he finds instead, self-interest, and, in Clean, a quality which in the fifteen years since this play was written has become so rife and pervasive that it might hardly now seem to warrant a comment - callously ruthless individualism.

Foreskin's dashed expectations can be seen as opening a wider perspective in the changing nature of that society which accommodates and subsumes the rugby culture. Rugby teams in the past might well have preserved a sense of community, granted the members a certain commonness of purpose, and egalitarian status. The advent of the semi-anarchic individualists like Clean and the cold-blooded economic (and therefore social) restructuring of the last decade can be seen as having shattered the fabric of kinship, and as rendering Foreskin's cry "My earth" seem almost naively antediluvian.

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