Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
CLASS, CONFLICT AND THE CLASH OF CODES
THE INTRODUCTION OF RUGBY LEAGUE TO NEW ZEALAND: 1908-1920

A Thesis presented in part fulfilment of the requirements for a PhD in History at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

William Greenwood
2008
ABSTRACT

Rugby league was introduced to New Zealand in 1908 by players desirous of playing a game generally considered to be faster and more skillful than rugby union. Even before its introduction, there were fears within the rugby union community that league would replace union unless steps were taken to make that game more attractive to both play and watch. In the early years of the twentieth century disputes within the New Zealand Rugby Union as to whether to introduce rule changes to make the game more attractive, or to stay with the status quo, had led to division and disharmony. This situation led the promoters of rugby league to be optimistic that their game, once introduced, would quickly replace rugby union as New Zealand’s premier winter sport, but they greatly underestimated the hostility they would encounter from rugby union authorities, and this never happened.

Investigated in this thesis are the reasons why the high hopes of rugby league’s promoters were not fulfilled but how, nevertheless, in the years 1908 to 1920, the game did become established as a working-class sport in parts of the country, particularly the cities of Auckland and Christchurch. Newspapers of the period are used to show where and when league was introduced, where it was, and was not, successful, and to provide evidence of the efforts of rugby union authorities to brand league a professional sport, to threaten its players with banishment from rugby union, to deny league the use of Council owned playing fields, and to deny schoolboys the right to play rugby league at school. Occupations of league players and officials, found from electoral rolls, are used to show that league was an overwhelmingly working-class sport, shunned by the middle-class. The difficulties of establishing the game in small New Zealand towns are related to the geographic and demographic features of the country, and finally, the recovery from the effects of the Great War, which forced most leagues into recess, is shown to owe much to the highly successful postwar tours by international teams from Britain and Australia.

Five periods in the development of rugby league are postulated; its introduction in 1908, its near collapse in 1909 and 1910, its expansion during the years 1911 to 1914, the difficulties experienced in the war years 1915 to 1918, and its post-war recovery in 1919 and 1920. The Great War put paid to the real possibility that league would rival union as New Zealand’s premier winter team sport, but by 1920 it had recovered sufficiently to become firmly established on the New Zealand sporting scene with its own constituency of players and supporters.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Geoffrey Watson and Dr James Watson, for their unfailing encouragement, help and support during the writing of this thesis. I also wish to thank Donna Todd, Wanganui District Library reference librarian, for her help in sourcing the many microfilms I needed to consult, and to Massey Library staff for allowing me to borrow microfilms for viewing in Wanganui. I am grateful to the Tom Brock Bequest Committee of the Australian Society for Sports History for awarding me the Tom Brock Scholarship for 2004/05 to support my research. I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to Tony Collins and Bruce Montgomerie for their help in locating difficult to track down information. The staff of the New Zealand Rugby Museum in Palmerston North were very helpful in allowing me access to out of print material in their collection. Finally my thanks to my wife, Irene, without whose support over the past few years this thesis would never have been written.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Abstract** 

**Acknowledgements** 

**List of Maps, Illustrations and Tables** 

**INTRODUCTION** 

**CHAPTER ONE. 1908: RUGBY LEAGUE COMES TO NEW ZEALAND** 

- Who Started the Game? 
- Why People Wanted to Play Rugby League 
- Who Took Up the Game of Rugby League 
- Deterrents to Playing Rugby League 
- Conclusion 

**CHAPTER TWO. 1909-1910: THE NEAR COLLAPSE OF RUGBY LEAGUE** 

- Introduction 
- Collapse in the South and Central Provinces 
- The Importance of Representative Football 
- The New Zealand and Maori Tours to Australia - 1909 
- The British Northern Union Tourists - 1910 
- Auckland's Southern Tour - 1910 
- Difficulties Forming Clubs 
- Auckland Rugby League - 1909 
- Auckland Rugby Union's 'Crisis' Year - 1909 
- Auckland Provincial Rugby Leagues 
- Rugby League's Success in Auckland - 1910 
- Who Took Up Rugby League with the Auckland Clubs 
- Conclusion 

**CHAPTER THREE. 1911-1914: THE EXPANSION YEARS PART ONE - METROPOLITAN CENTRES** 

- Rugby League and Other Sports 
- Establishing Clubs and Survival 
- Representative Games and Crowds 
- Players and Administrators 
- Growth in Public Support - Auckland 
- Ground Problems 
- Rugby Union Opposition and 'Professionalism' 
- Preparing for War 
- Conclusion 

**CHAPTER FOUR. 1911-1914: THE EXPANSION YEARS PART TWO - LARGE AND SMALL TOWNS** 

- Auckland Province 
- The Central Provinces and the South 
- A Working Class Sport
MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Newspaper advertisement for Baskerville Benefit Match 38
Map of New Zealand Provinces 1852-1876 193
Map of North Island Railways 1910 219
League and Union advertisements in *New Zealand Herald* - 1917 301

TABLES

Table 1. Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury
      Winter Sports Teams All Codes 129
Table 2. Auckland Representative Rugby League Matches 1911-1914 143
Table 3. Wellington and Canterbury
      Representative Rugby League Matches 1912-1914 145
Table 4. Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch
      Players and Officials Occupations 157
Table 5. Rugby League Clubs 1911-1914 207
Table 6. Rugby League Players’ Occupations 1911-1914 213
Table 7. Rugby League Officials’ Occupations 1911-1914 215
Table 8. Auckland District Leagues’
      Representative Matches 1910-1914 223
Table 9. Player’s Appearances per Season - Selected Clubs 253
Table 10. Auckland Winter Sports Teams All Codes 1908-1920 283
Table 11. Canterbury Winter Sports Teams All Codes 1912-1920 285
Table 12. New Zealand Rugby Leagues 1908-1920 319