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CLASS, CONFLICT AND THE
CLASH OF CODES
THE INTRODUCTION OF RUGBY LEAGUE
TO NEW ZEALAND: 1908-1920

A Thesis
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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.

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