

Myth and Reality in the 1895 Rugby Split

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Signs, symbols and artefacts play a central role in the creation and development of sporting culture, traditions and myths. Yet few artefacts have acquired such a comprehensive mythology around them as William Wollen's "The Roses Match", a depiction of the 1893 Yorkshire v Lancashire rugby match at Bradford's Park Avenue ground.

The original hangs at Twickenham and a reproduction of it takes pride of place in the club house of Otley RUFC - who incidentally played in the Northern Union for a number of years in the early 1900s.¹ It is famous - or notorious, depending on your point of view - because those players who later joined the Northern Union have been painted out. If you look in the top left hand corner of the painting it is possible to see the ghostly apparition of a player who turned professional and was subsequently painted over by the artist. More detailed examination will reveal other areas which have been changed to render future rugby league players "unpersons". In the same way that Stalin airbrushed Trotsky out of Soviet history, so too did the rugby union conspire to repaint the history of the rugby games.

Unfortunately, this neat and evocative story isn't true.

It is, however, widely believed, having been retold in both rugby league and rugby union folklore, reprinted in magazines and screened on TV. In November 1994 BBC North even screened a documentary in which someone was seen pointing to where the players had supposedly been painted out!

In fact, the painting was completed *before* rugby's split took place and was widely exhibited in Lancashire and Yorkshire in the autumn of 1895, just a couple of months after the split - when missing players would have been spotted immediately. More to the point, if Wollen had chosen to paint out all those players who joined the Northern Union he would have been left with two players on the field. The split literally decimated the ranks of northern rugby union. Five years before the schism there were about 240

rugby union clubs in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Five years after, there were about 22. Indeed by 1904, the Northern Union probably had more adult clubs affiliated to it than the RFU.² Almost to a man, the leading rugby players in Lancashire and Yorkshire joined the Northern Union, most with undisguised enthusiasm.

Yet this myth continues. For rugby union, the myth symbolises their self-confidence and institutional power over the league game. For league, the myth is believed because it fits with the pattern of discrimination by union against rugby league. But the myth also serves a broader purpose. It downplays the importance of the 1895 split, portraying it as a minor episode in the history of rugby union - after all, so the legend goes, it was only a few players who were painted out - rather than the devastating event which it was in reality. In fact, as we can see today by the contortions over the arrival of professionalism in union, 1895 was the defining moment, not only of rugby league, but also of rugby union. It codified amateurism as an ideology for a century and shaped rugby union in England as an overwhelmingly middle class sport.

My contention is that the Wollen painting symbolises the three key myths which shroud the events of 1895: the myth of amateurism, the myth of the North/South divide and the myth of the northern businessman, all of which serve to obscure the true nature and meaning of rugby's great schism.

The myth of amateurism

Historians of rugby have generally taken the RFU's claims to amateurism as good coin. I would contend that the RFU and its supporters did not object to players receiving money for playing the game - the key question was which players?

The growth of amateur ideology in the game dates from precisely the same period in which working class players started to make their influence felt in the 1870s and 1880s. Contrary to popular belief, the RFU itself had no rules on amateurism or professionalism until 1886. The earliest strictures against professionalism came from the Yorkshire committee in 1879, when, in response to the influx of working class players and their

expectations of payment following the start of the Yorkshire Cup in 1877, they adopted the MCC's regulations on amateurism. These rules made it clear that a "gentleman" who found himself out of pocket could legitimately claim expenses.

This contrasted sharply to the general attitude to working class players, about whom it was said, by Harry Garnett, a key leader of Yorkshire rugby, "if they cannot afford to play, they should go without the game."³ The most famous example of this double standard was Andrew Stoddart, England captain at both rugby and cricket, who went on Shaw and Shrewsbury's rugby tour of Australasia in 1888 for a payment of not less than £200.⁴ On a smaller scale William Bromet, Oxford University and Yorkshire, claimed £6/13s in expenses for playing in a county game at Yorkshire in 1895.⁵ Visits by southern sides to the north were taken as opportunities for indulgence by their players - Blackheath were paid almost £4 per player in expenses by Bradford for game in 1887. (Incidentally the Corinthians, the very embodiment of pristine amateurism and members of the RFU, charged opponents £150 a match.)⁶

Nor were the purveyors of the amateur ethic above "poaching" players from other clubs, a practice which, when carried out in the North, was condemned by the RFU leadership as almost being on a par with devil worship. The Middlesex county side miraculously drew on players throughout the British Isles for important matches and Blackheath's thirst for expenses was matched only by their appetite for other club's players. In 1890 alone, they signed players from Harlequins, Clapham Rovers, Marlborough Nomads and Old Cheltonians.

This is not to suggest that amateurism was merely a cynical manoeuvre. As a value system it had a high level of ideological autonomy, yet at bottom, those who espoused it were prepared to compromise its principles when faced with the need to be pragmatic about fellow members of their class. For example, the RFU took no action whatsoever against the returning 1888 tourists, despite publicly available evidence that they were being paid, in order to protect Stoddart. Likewise, in the Arthur Gould case of 1896 and 1897, when the Welsh captain was the recipient of a handsome testimonial from his supporters, and therefore a professional in the eyes of the RFU, the Rugby Union ultimately compromised because, in the words

of its secretary Rowland Hill, it “was a question of expediency”.⁷ Similar compromises were made during investigations into professionalism in the Midlands in the 1900s, resulting in the resignation of the RFU president Arnold Crane in 1909.

For the RFU it was not payments to players which were at issue, but payments to working class players. “Amateurism” as a concept developed as the ideological expression of middle class attempts to subordinate working class players to their leadership.

The myth of the North/South divide

I now want to move on to the question of the North/South divide, which traditional mythology has made central to the split.

Although regional rivalries and organisational jealousies had been apparent in the game from at least the late 1870s, until 1888 all sections of rugby, whether in the North or the South, were united in support of amateurism. Indeed, it was Yorkshire which introduced the first amateurism rules in 1879. It was Yorkshire and Lancashire representatives which formed the majority of the committee which drew up the RFU’s first amateurism rules in 1886. It was the Yorkshire committee which witchhunted “veiled professionals” in the game from 1886 to 1893. It was the Yorkshire committee which attacked the RFU leadership for its lack of zeal in not banning the 1888 Shaw and Shrewsbury tourists for professionalism. And it was the Yorkshire committee which attacked the Lancastrians for being soft on professionalism in 1890.

The leaders of Lancashire rugby were similarly virulent in their opposition to professionalism. The Lancashire committee refused to start a knock-out cup competition for fear of encouraging professionalism. And it was they who precipitated the “final battle” in 1894, by suspending Leigh, Salford and Wigan for professionalism, which led up to the split.

This should not be surprising. The leadership of northern rugby was first and foremost drawn from men who were part of the *national* ruling classes. In Lancashire the Liverpool/Manchester axis which led the game was

firmly based on former pupils of Rugby and Cheltenham, and to a lesser extent Eton and Harrow. The original leadership of Yorkshire rugby had been based on southern public school educated players. Even those who had attended public schools in the north, such as Leeds Grammar School, Manchester Grammar School, St Peter's in York or West Yorkshire's Bramham College, had been educated firmly in the national Arnoldian tradition, and many of them, such as Lancashire's JH Payne or Yorkshire's WE Bromet, had completed their education at Oxbridge. These men represented the northern bourgeoisie par excellence, coming from families which had made their money from industrial, particularly textiles, or mercantile capital. The backgrounds of three of the North's presidents of the RFU, and most determined fighters against professionalism, were impeccably industrial: HWT Garnett of Yorkshire was a paper manufacturer, William Cail of Northumberland was manager of a chemical works and JWH Thorp of Cheshire was a textile manufacturer. But while they may have delighted in their northern roots, they unequivocally shared the instincts, aspirations and philosophies of their colleagues living in the south.

In fact, 1895 was a split within northern rugby. Not simply between exclusively middle class clubs and open clubs but also within clubs: Castleford, Morley and Dewsbury to name three. Many other clubs which joined the Northern Union lost key administrators and players. The battle in rugby was therefore based not on geographical lines but on class lines, focused on differing attitudes towards working class players.

This truth of this can also be seen in the fact that during the same period trials of players for professionalism took place in virtually every area where rugby had a mass working class base - in the South West, the Midlands and South Wales. In the south west of England, Gloucester and clubs in Torquay were investigated in the 1890s and found guilty of violations of the amateur regulations. In the Midlands, there were investigations into payments for play throughout the 1900s involving the Leicester and Coventry clubs, one of which resulted in the aforementioned resignation of RFU president Arnold Crane in 1908 after he called for expulsion of the miscreants. Clubs in the Scottish borders, where working class players were in the majority, were suspected but never convicted of being more than generous with expenses payments to players. And of

course, Welsh rugby union was plagued with accusations of professionalism for almost as long as Lancashire and Yorkshire, eventually managing to partially suppress the contradiction by covertly legitimising informal payments to players. But the situation in the North of England differed because the sheer scale of working class involvement.

The reason why the split centred on Lancashire and Yorkshire was because the absolute preponderance of the working class player and the impossibility of controlling payments for play were perceived by the RFU as being a direct threat to their control of the game. The rapidity with which soccer had become dominated by the working class player following the FA's legalisation of professionalism was not a path down which the RFU and its supporters wished to follow.

The myth of the northern businessman

The third myth I want to consider is that of the motor force of the split itself. The dominant view is that the businessmen who led rugby in the North were fundamentally different from the leadership of the RFU and sought to split because of their relative autonomy and self-confidence.⁸ The opposite is the case. It was the RFU and its supporters which took a decision to drive out those clubs who supported payments for play - the northern clubs would have preferred to stay.

It was working class players who brought payment for play into the sport. Up until 1888 the northern businessman had no quarrel with the amateur regulations because these did not necessarily clash with business exigencies - in fact they helped to suppress the threat of wage inflation which hit soccer in the 1890s. It was only when the reality of clubs and players being banned for violations of the amateur regulations began to bite - with lucrative fixtures being cancelled and star players being banned - that sections of the northern clubs called for broken-time payments. The initial bourgeois consensus over amateurism therefore fractured when it became clear that, in order to impose amateurism, working class players had to be driven out of the game. In Lancashire and Yorkshire, this could not be done without wrecking rugby, as was pointed out in *The Yorkshireman* in 1891:

In the North the game is essentially dependent upon working men, both for its exposition and its support. It is a game by the masses for the masses. It is a cosmopolitan institution, in which all have an equal interest. ...To carry out such an abstract idea [amateurism] to its logical conclusion would be to depopularise the game and make it the selfish possession of the silver-spooned classes. Moreover, it would deprive the pastime of its ablest and most numerous exponents, who are essentially the working men of the North, and of its most enthusiastic supporters, who are undoubtedly the wage-earning classes.⁹

Given the sport's mass appeal and its importance to civic life, this was not an option open to most leaders of the game in the north. Nevertheless, unlike in soccer in 1884 when the northern sides threatened to split if professionalism wasn't recognised by the FA, the leaders of the senior rugby clubs by and large looked to compromise. Hence the call for broken-time and not full professionalism - they believed that they could safeguard the RFU and its amateur ethos by opposing open professionalism. It was only when the RFU announced that it would introduce anti-professional laws so draconian that there was no possibility of compromise that the leading northern clubs decided they had no choice but to split. Thus the Northern Union came into being as a defensive measure against the intransigent forces of middle class amateur exclusivity. Even after the split, in the 1900s, hopes were expressed by many in the NU that some form of rapprochement would take place with the RFU - in 1905 Hull proposed that the Northern Union seek unification talks with the RFU and in 1907 Bradford actually voted to rejoin the RFU.¹⁰

The northern bourgeois leadership of the game itself split in 1895 over the question of their attitude to working class players. For example, textiles manufacturers could be found equally on both sides. To a certain extent this mirrored the split between the Tory Party and the Liberal Party - those supporting the Northern Union who were political tended to be Liberals, such as Harry Waller, the first Northern Union president, and those who were opposed tended to be Conservatives, such as Baron Kilner of Wakefield. Crudely summarised, the split in northern rugby was between those who sought to bring some of the "equal rights" of the free market place to rugby and those who sought to preserve a system of patronage and rigid class stratification. It was only the intransigence of the latter which

forced the former to break away.

And in fact, within ten years of the split, many of the industrial bourgeois figures associated with Northern Union clubs had left the game. This haemorrhage meant that the leadership of the game largely fell into the hands of the more marginal elements of the northern middle classes - shop keepers, salesmen, music hall promoters, local government officials. The cross-class nature of rugby crowds in the 1880s disappeared too, as spectators became almost exclusively proletarian. This was repeated on the pitch - in contrast to rugby union in the region, no Cambridge University or Oxford University man ever played representative Northern Union (and I would guess that no university man of any description played county or international rugby league in at least the first fifty years of the sport's existence). Unlike rugby union, and also soccer in its pre-World War One phase, Northern Union became virtually entirely played and watched by the working class.

To sum up. Just as the myths surrounding the Wollen painting have become accepted as facts, so too have the partial and often misleading explanations for the split. These explanations - amateur versus professional, North versus South, sport versus business - have also served to marginalise the importance of the split and to lock rugby league out of the mainstream of British sport by presenting it as culturally aberrant. It is my contention that the real cause of the 1895 split was the coming of the working class player to rugby in the 1870s and 80s and the reluctance of the middle class leadership of rugby union to allow his participation in the sport on an equal footing. The debate in the game which preceded the split reflected the differing attitudes to the working class adopted by the middle class leaders of the game. In this, it echoed the debate in late Victorian society as a whole about what attitude to take towards an increasingly self-confident and assertive working class.

Notes:

1 Otley joined the Northern Union in 1900 and played in it for six seasons before disbanding. They were reformed as a rugby union club in 1907.

2 Details of rugby union membership are taken from the *Yorkshire Post* for the appropriate years. For the 1904 comparison, see the *Northern Union*

Official Guide 1904/05 (Manchester 1904) and OLD Oew, *The History of the RFU* (London: Playfair, 1955).

3 HWT Garnett speaking at the October 1886 RFU annual general meeting.

4 See the correspondence of Arthur Shrewsbury for more details. This is kept at Nottinghamshire CCC HQ at Trent Bridge.

5 Yorkshire Owl 18 November 1895.

6 See my “Noa Mutton, noa laaking, The origins of payment for play in rugby football” in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, volume 12, number 1 (April 1995), pp. 33-50.

7 G Rowland Hill speaking at the 1897 RFU annual general meeting.

8 For example, see Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p199, and Gareth Williams, “Rugby Union” in *Sport in Britain: a social history* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p313.

9 *The Yorkshireman* Football Number March 1891.

10 The vote was eventually overturned in favour of a switch to association football, the club joining the Southern League later that year.

Footnote: Just a few weeks after this paper was given, the *Yorkshire Post* (26 August 1995) reproduced the Wollen painting over an article by history lecturer Gary Firth. The painting’s caption solemnly proclaimed that “the faces of those players who turned professional were masked out, leaving only the true amateurs in view.” Like the holy relics of the middle ages, the myth of “The Roses match” is destined for a long life.