

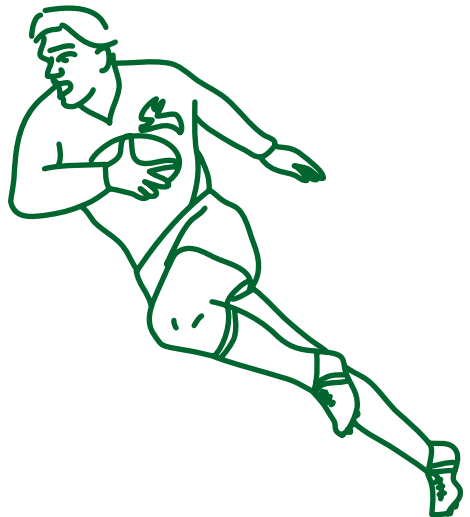
2ND ANNUAL LECTURE

TOM BROCK LECTURE

UNSW, 30 November 2000

Gang-Gangs at one o'clock ... and other flights of fancy

A personal journey through rugby league



Mr Ian Heads
Sydney

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TOM BROCK BEQUEST

The Tom Brock Bequest, given to the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) in 1997, consists of the Tom Brock Collection supported by an ongoing bequest. The Collection, housed at The University of New South Wales, includes manuscript material, newspaper clippings, books, photographs and videos on rugby league in particular and Australian sport in general. It represents the finest collection of rugby league material in Australia. ASSH has appointed a Committee to oversee the Bequest and to organise appropriate activities to support the Collection from its ongoing funds.

Objectives:

1. To maintain the Tom Brock Collection.
2. To organise an annual scholarly lecture on the history of Australian rugby league.
3. To award an annual Tom Brock Scholarship to the value of \$5,000.
4. To undertake any other activities which may advance the serious study of rugby league.
5. To publicise the above activities.

Activities:

1. The Tom Brock Lecture.
2. The Tom Brock Scholarship
3. Updating the Collection with new material published on rugby league.
4. Reporting to ASSH on an annual basis.

Illustrations:

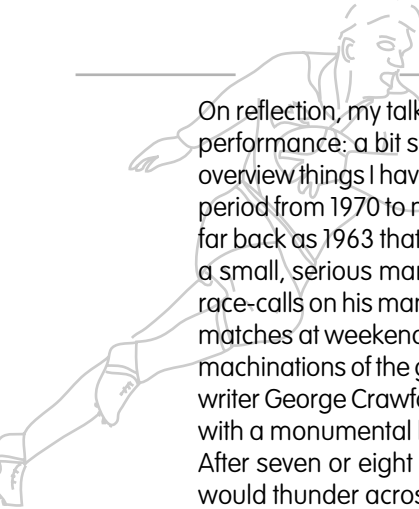
Courtesy of Ian Heads Pty Ltd.

It's a great pleasure and an honour to be here tonight in the name of Tom Brock — a man I so much respected and admired.

It occurred to me as I sat down to prepare my talk that the wheel had turned exactly 360 degrees when it came to the question of my career — something I lurched into 35 years or so ago — a career observing and writing about the game of rugby league ... and some other sports. It was precisely 30 years ago in fact that I made my first overseas trip to cover a rugby league tournament for the *Daily & Sunday Telegraphs*. And as it was this November 2000, that too was for a World Cup in England — though it was a small and select and genuine rugby league 'world' back then — of Australia, Britain, France and New Zealand — and a Cup fiercely contested at a high level and ending in the infamous Battle of Leeds final in which Australia somehow pinched it away from the 'Brits' amidst the mayhem and fury of a late-autumn afternoon at Headingley. It was one of the two most brutal games I ever covered as a journalist — the 1973 grand final, Cronulla versus Manly, being the other.

After that game in 1970 there were no trumped-up calls that this team or that was the greatest-ever — just delight at a victory unexpectedly won and head-banging frustration for a British team who had already proved themselves superior to us that year — but who had let it slip on the day.

My suspicion is that the 'best ever' tag loosely cast in the direction of this current (2000) side is no more or less than something contrived by today's spin doctors to create an 'image' in a sadly devalued game so desperately searching for positives on which to build a reasonable future — although Fittler's men no doubt rank as a very talented and professional football team ... as they rightly should be as full-time, highly-paid athletes and the best in their business. I remember one of the National Rugby League (NRL) publicity people telling me not long ago that his job in the game was 'to 'create heroes'. 'Create' seemed to me very much the operative word of that message — i.e., if the 'heroes' don't genuinely exist ... well, let's pump it up and contrive it anyway ... not such a difficult task when half the game or more is owned by a media giant, and ALL the strings are pulled by that same company. So it is, I suspect with the Australian team of 2000, and the rating so casually afforded them. It is also in line with the NRL's approach to releasing crowd figures for season 2000 — to trumpet 'record' average crowds while neglecting to mention in any way that aggregate crowds were substantially down on the previous year's figures.



On reflection, my talk tonight is something akin to an early Steve Mortimer performance: a bit skittish and all over the place. It comprises in its wider overview things I have learned, been told, understood and observed in that period from 1970 to now — and in reality from a little earlier too, it being as far back as 1963 that the sporting editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, Gerry Pynt, a small, serious man who conducted his affairs with an ear glued to the race-calls on his mantle radio, first threw me the ball to cover rugby league matches at weekends and before long the task too of keeping up with the machinations of the game itself during the week as support to chief league writer George Crawford — a rather strange and testy character, but a man with a monumental love for the game and an equivalent knowledge of it. After seven or eight beers at the King's Head at tea time, George's voice would thunder across the small sports room as he rang Frank Facer and Acker Forbes and Bill Beaver and the other club secretaries of the time, chasing tomorrow's news.

'That you Spag?' was a particularly familiar cry — 'Spag' being Spencer O'Neill, secretary of Parramatta and a drinking mate of George's — and old George being something of a Parramatta fan.

My guiding lights for tonight's exercise are two in number — with the admirable Tom Brock, whose name adorns this evening, the first of them. In the course of the search-and-gather process which made him a genuinely great historian of the game — Tom loved the 'bits' of rugby league ... the quieter by-ways and alleys, the tiny details that often told so much about an individual or a moment. For example we had a shared interest in an eccentric character of the game's early years, Ernest Edmund 'Bustler' Quinsey. Among other things 'Bustler' was a winger, a bookie's runner and a wharfie. He was also a rabbitoh who would walk the street with a brace or two of rabbits slung over his shoulder. He pretty much pre-dated Souths, being a rugby union player from earlier days — but grew to love the Rabbitohs anyway and was with them through the 1920s. Digging deep, Tom uncovered many intriguing snippets about Buster:

The wonderful story of him tricking the university (rugby union) defence one day by passing the old brown hat he wore in matches, instead of the ball — before racing on to score a try.

The likelihood that he most often played in bare feet.

The colourful story of Quinsey being tripped by a spectator wielding an iron bar as he made a sideline dash one day ... this not being regarded as a major hazard in football today.

Tom was fascinated by Bustler and now and then my phone would ring and he would excitedly relate some small further tidbit he had uncovered.

I suspect Tom Brock would have much liked John Aubrey — the other inspiration for the theme of my talk. I was awakened to Aubrey, the seventeenth century London diarist, by Roy Dotrice's wonderful portrait of him on the Sydney stage (in 'Brief Lives') fifteen or so years ago. John Aubrey was probably English literature's greatest collector of gossip, anecdotes and personal trivia.

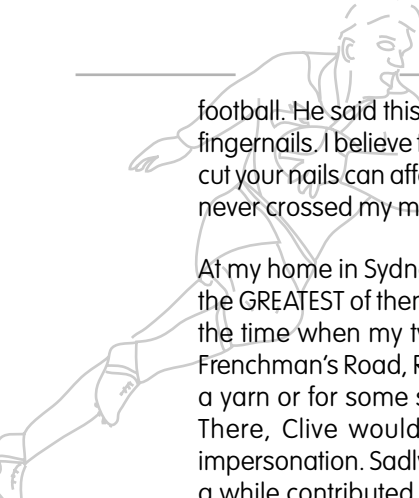


Harry Wells, an admirer of Gang-Gang Cockatoos

He was the pre-eminent compiler of the doings and sayings of the major and minor figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and a significant tittle tat. He lived through difficult times — including the English Civil War, featuring the downfall and execution of Charles 1. Having witnessed the downfall and virtual execution of the game of rugby league in the years 1995–2000 I feel comfortable enough about evoking his style tonight. Aubrey wrote 420 of his 'Lives' — and described them as 'like fragments of a shipwreck'. Again the parallel with rugby league is unavoidable. So, if what

follows now is somewhat jagged and jumpy in style and content, please blame Tom Brock ... and John Aubrey.

Sometimes the very tiniest of insights can provide a jolt of illumination. An example: I remember one infinitesimal corner of a conversation I had with the legendary five eighth Vic Hey many years ago. A pal in London, Harvey Davis, who saw almost every game of Hey's English career, continues to assure me beyond question that he was the greatest five eighth of them all. In conversation in Sydney one day, Hey talked about getting ready for



football. He said this: 'The one thing I never do before as match is cut my fingernails. I believe the slight change in the "feel" of your hands when you cut your nails can affect handling.' I must admit, it was something that had never crossed my mind.

At my home in Sydney, another one of the greatest of players — maybe the GREATEST of them all — Clive Churchill, is remembered unusually. At the time when my twin children were tiny, Clive had the bottle shop at Frenchman's Road, Randwick, and I would occasionally visit him there for a yarn or for some supplies ... for medicinal purposes only, of course. There, Clive would entertain my kids with a brilliant Donald Duck impersonation. Sadly that same bottle shop which was his working life for a while contributed to Clive's early demise; he never seemed the same man after the brutal pistol-whipping he took from some villains there one night. But at my place he is remembered affectionately ... as a funny little bloke in a grog shop who could impersonate Donald Duck to a tee. More senior members of the gathering tonight, which includes an old Churchill school pal Alan Clarkson and a journo who toured England and France with him in 1948, Phil Tresidder, undoubtedly remember him for very different reasons.

Churchill's old sparring partner from 1951 Puig-Aubert of Carcassonne, remembered Clive with something approaching love, I suspect. I recall a highly enjoyable afternoon at Lang Park years ago when over several games of pool and several glasses of port, Puig Aubert talked of his battles with Churchill and of the 1951 side — smoke issuing from the ever-present Gitane, arms and cue waving to illustrate. 'Ahhh Churcheel ... he would be here and I would kick THERE ... and he would be there ... and I would kick HERE. Churcheel ... he is my friend.' Although slightly more gruffly, Clive saw it that way too. The mutual respect and affection between the two of them was very real.

In the course of my working life in league, many small treasures have come my way, sometimes unexpectedly, and I will share just a few of those with you this evening. Some years ago, the great winger Brian Bevan came home quietly to Sydney, guest of the Rothman's company for a Rothman's Medal. On a beautiful Sydney day I chauffeured Brian and his wife around the eastern suburbs — taking him back to old haunts ... absolutely thrilled to meet this rather strange, remote figure with a try-scoring record and a career almost too remarkable to believe. I found him a shy, pleasant man — and there was much enjoyment as we cruised around ... to Bondi Beach Public where he went to school ... up to Waverley Oval where he

first played rugby league ... on and down to Neilsen Park where he played and swam as a kid.

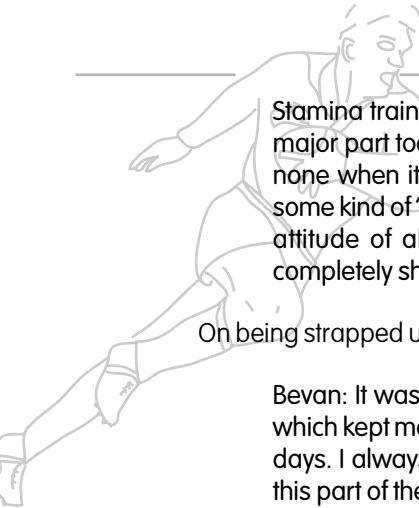
A year or so later, a package arrived in the mail. Brian Bevan had written his memoirs and wondered in his modest way whether any publisher in Sydney might be vaguely interested in producing them in book form. I hawked the manuscript around the city — and the answer to that was, sadly, no. 'Wouldn't sell a copy' one publisher told me brusquely. I tried the Rugby League itself. No, they were not in the publishing business — although sympathetic and interested in the fact that the manuscript existed. Eventually, reluctantly, I packaged the couple of hundred pages up and sent them back to Brian in England where, no doubt, they rest to this day with his widow. Encouraged by Brian Bevan's quiet encouragement to 'take anything I wished' from the pages, I copied some of it and will share here with you a brief excerpt or two, unpublished insights into an extraordinary footballer:

Firstly, on the famous sidestep which swept him to so many tries:

Bevan: The long hours spent perfecting my sidestep in Australia stood me in good stead. It's one of the greatest attributes a player can possess, yet I rarely see it used today ... in general players tend to begrudge the time necessary to master it. For my part it was a schoolboy phobia for racing the crowds out of the Sydney Cricket Ground; it all began with my desire to get home early after big games. The way out of the ground was down a long pathway with concrete posts set along each side of it. Awkwardly at first, I would try to weave my way between spectators and posts in a bid to get to the front. It became a habit, and with growing exuberance and proficiency I developed the knack of dodging all obstacles. My father helped me perfect the sidestep even further by taking me to the local park and encouraging me to run at top speed at posts placed five or six yards apart.

On how he managed to last so long in the game, and to score so many tries:

Bevan: I was often asked these questions. My answer always was that I loved the game. Fitness was my first priority, followed by a perseverance in speed and sprint training, a routine I adhered to doggedly through my career. I also had a kind of mania for running spikes — and the use of these in sprint training helped me retain my speed season after season.



Stamina training and plenty of physical exercises played a major part too. I found that shadow boxing was second to none when it came to stamina building. I also developed some kind of 'killer instinct' on the field — in plainer terms an attitude of almost hating the opposition, so much so I completely shut myself off from a lot of things.

On being strapped up like an Egyptian mummy for matches:

Bevan: It was a precaution that I made a ritual of and one which kept me free of any serious injuries during my playing days. I always made sure of both knees being padded as this part of the body is most vulnerable of all to injuries. The only bad knocks I sustained during my whole career were a knee ligament injury (absent for six weeks) and a broken jaw (off for two months).

It is worth noting here that Bevan played 783 games of football in sixteen seasons in England, and scored 824 tries. The mind tends to boggle.

In Sydney a couple of years ago Vince Karalius told me a story which I'm sure got close to a Bevan secret — his tremendous competitiveness. Karalius recalled playing in a charity game with Bevan — when the old wingman was 50 years of age. Whippet-thin and still fast, Bevan had run in four tries in a match featuring the best players in the land. Karalius told the story this way: 'I was sat in the bath with Bev after the game and I patted him on the back and said "you've not lost your touch old pal". He didn't smile. He just looked at me and said: "I should have had six"'.

On another day a few years after the Bevan visit, I received another bulky package from an old pal in the game, Peter Corcoran. It seemed that years before, probably around 1975, one of the game's most influential and interesting figures — the half back wizard of early days Duncan Thompson, known as the 'Downs Fox' had penned an autobiography. It had been sent around the traps, failed to find a publisher — and the one surviving copy had finished up forgotten in a dusty cupboard, with some other league



Duncan Thompson

papers. Peter had rescued it, and passed it on. Like the Bevan story, it is in its own way a mini-masterpiece — throwing fresh light on the life and beliefs of a famous, forgotten league man.

Again, a brief extract or two. On 'contract' football which was Thompson's lifetime evangelical mission:

Thompson: Contract football is flowing football. It has no relation to the present bash and barge stuff. It is what rugby league is all about — or is supposed to be. The player does not die with the ball. It moves on and on. Ideally no ball carrier is so smothered that he must play the ball.

In preaching the case for intelligence in football Thompson tells the story of a day in which a New Zealand centre named Iffersen gave Australian ace Les Cubitt what he described as 'a hell of a day'. He wrote:

So severe was Iffersen's tackling that Cubitt finally lost his head. He tucked the ball under his arm and tried to barge through the Kiwi. Of course he came to grief. In the end Iffersen played all over him. But I have always admired Les for what he said to me after that match: 'Never sacrifice science son'.

On the 'social' side of the 1922-22 Kangaroo tour:

Thompson: Of the 26 players, thirteen were drinkers and thirteen were non-drinkers. There was no animosity between the two groups; we were, by large, a very happy team. But we were clearly two factions. Traveling by train in England, each group would sit in different compartments. In the dining room on the ship that took us to England, we sat at different tables. Nothing was thought of it.

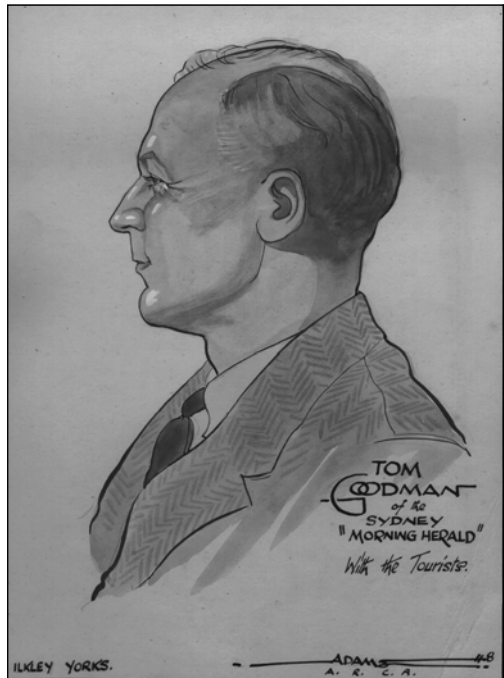


Les Cubitt, in his early days and in 1922

On the theory that tour misbehaviour is a new phenomenon:

Thompson: The first tour crisis (of the 1921-22 campaign) occurred the night before we decked in San Francisco. The thirteen drinkers had a binge — a pretty riotous one from all accounts in which a lot of glasses were broken. The one blamed for most of the damage was young George Carstairs, a teenager on his first tour. The captain of the ship was understandably furious and read the riot act to the tour managers. It was decided that Carstairs would be sent home. I promptly called a meeting of the non-drinkers and we agreed that if Carstairs went home, we went home with him. We told skipper Cubitt of this and the management had no option but to let Carstairs continue the tour.

A third treasured document I hold exists in the form of crumpled single-sheet copy paper from 50 years ago, pinned with a rusty clip — a story written by the distinguished recorder of both league and cricket's cavalcade, Thomas Lyall Goodman — Tom Goodman — who was pretty much my mentor in journalism and in sportswriting — even though he worked for the *Herald* and I worked for the *Telegraph*. Tom was a graceful, charming, gentle man. If he ever criticised in print — and he did, sparingly — well, you knew for sure the criticism was warranted. But in a career in which he covered the life and times of Bradman in its entirety and rugby league tests and premierships beyond counting ... his favourite memory had nothing to do with sport.



It concerned instead, a brief meeting he had with Mahatma Gandhi — which came during Tom's two-year stint as a war correspondent in south-east Asia for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In the story Tom told how he had tried for days to gain an audience with Gandhi. Finally, a note came:

'Gandhi will see you on Sunday for two minutes. But no politics.'

The pair met in a large house of a wealthy Indian industrialist. Goodman recalled how Gandhi emerged in characteristic shining white garb. He wrote:

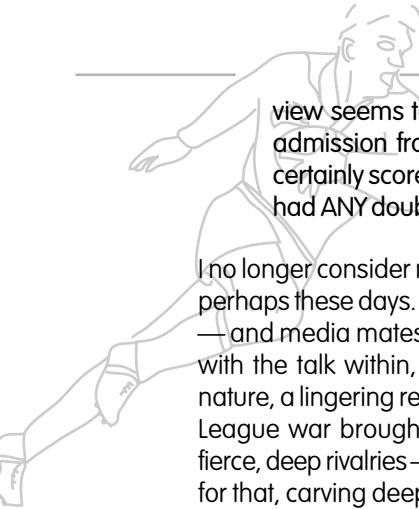
A few cautious questions, and then I enquired of Gandhi's health. He responded. 'It is not very bad. I want to keep well — I want to achieve our great objective.'

Was it a trap, Goodman, mused. I'll never know. But when I asked what that objective was — the little man shook a bony finger in my face and snapped: 'Ah! Two minutes and no politics! And now you must go!' I murmured an apology, and stood there embarrassed.

Gandhi closed the door behind him. The Hindu leaders had been listening through the half-open door. As Mahatma closed it behind him there came a gale of laughter. Above all I could hear (and still do) the 'Tee-hee-hee' — the high cackle of Mr. Gandhi. The Mahatma, it seemed, had had his little joke.

A fourth, brief correspondence, arriving unexpectedly, and written almost 60 years after the event, provides an intriguing last view on one of league's great 'mysteries' — did Joe Chimpy Busch score a fair try against Great Britain in the deciding Test match of the 1929-30 series? The letter arrived not long after Chimpy's death in mid 1999 — from William A. Anderson of Parbold, Lancashire whose grandmother Elizabeth Webster was the brother of Albert Webster the touch judge who infamously disallowed the Busch try in the Test at Swinton. Sending his condolences to the Busch family, Mr Anderson noted the following:

Joe Busch is almost part of our family history — and his name is well respected here. We never knew Albert Webster, and therefore could never question him on the 'try'. But I have thoroughly researched the newspapers of the time and the



view seems to be that it was a fair try . So there it is — an admission from a family at the heart of it that Joe almost certainly scored after all. The man himself incidentally, never had ANY doubt.

I no longer consider myself a rugby league writer. An occasional observer, perhaps these days. It is a fair while now since I have gone into a press box — and media mates tell me they're often better left well alone anyway — with the talk within, I'm told, too often being of a mocking and cynical nature, a lingering residue very likely of the unpleasant edge that the Super League war brought into the game. Within the media there developed fierce, deep rivalries — hatred even ... the Super League division the catalyst for that, carving deep scars that will perhaps never heal. I MUCH prefer to remember the great camaraderie of my own, admittedly imperfect, years within the game, when blokes like E.E. Ernie Christensen, Bill Mordey, big Jim Connolly, Alan Clarkson and I competed vigorously for stories — but so thoroughly enjoyed being in each other's company and enjoyed the shared experience of the Kangaroo and World Cup tours ... and never hesitated to help each other out if we could.

And I remember the league gentlemen like the *Sun's* W.F. Bill Corbett and the Herald's Tom Goodman who were so good and generous to young reporters — and such shrewd, wise observers of the games they covered. In gathering some material for tonight I stumbled across Kenneth Slessor's assessment of perhaps the greatest of all league writers Claude Corbett, Bill's brother. On Corbett's death. Slessor wrote: 'Throughout his career as a critic and recorder of sport, his one principle was to encourage ... not to knock. He tried to make his commentary constructive and suggestive, and especially to give the obscure struggler a chance.'

Oh, for some more of that today. Instead, among some of the shrillest and most influential media voices in today's game there is a quality of pumped-up self-importance, an unpleasantness, a derisory rebuttal of anyone who dares to disagree. I suspect some of them could do with a regular dose of the cutting words of Emmy Cosell, widow of the late, loud US sportscaster Howard Cosell. Journalist William Nack tells the story of Cosell at a party 'fondling his ninth vodka martini'. He wrote:

And suddenly there he was across the room, hovering over one table, scolding and sarcastic, loud and bombastic — the familiar cigar jabbing the air, the voice growing louder as the Havana grew shorter. Howard was Coselling again, speaking of sports, of broadcasting, of anything that came to mind.

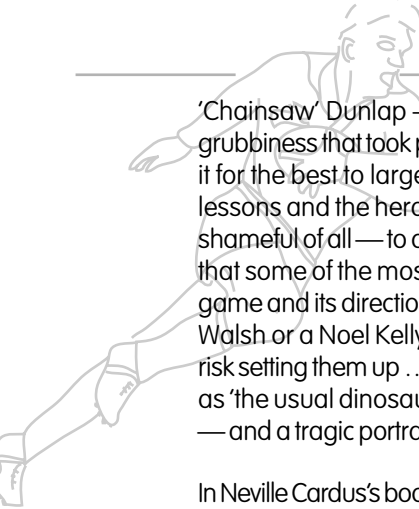
Finally the rest of the room fell silent, and all to be heard was the voice of Howard, America's voice. During the lull, Howard's wife, Emmy, sitting across the room, summoned her husband back to earth with a voice that went boom in the night. 'Howard, shut up! Nobody cares.'

And so it is, I suspect with some of today's commentators.

At such a positive gathering as tonight's I have no wish to depress you all by delving too far into what rugby league has become today. Suffice to say that while accepting the reality that things change in life, and must, I deplore much of what has happened to the game, deplore the way it has been done — deplore the fact of the game's denial of its history and tradition in the name of such things as 'unanswerable economic logic' and 'moving forward' ... that numbingly over-worked phrase. Rugby league's story in the years 1995-2000 is surely the ugliest and dumbest — with equal emphasis on both words — in all Australian sport's 200 years.

The central theme of Simon Kliner's book *To Jerusalem and Back* nails the \$64 question: 'is the globalisation of the sport worth the price that has to be paid if that price is the death of clubs with years of history, tradition and cultural involvement in their communities?' When a fundamental part of our heritage is at stake — as is the way with South Sydney — the answer, of course, is no. It's a matter of great and deep personal regret too that a tough, essentially honest (although flawed) game could have been so deeply infected in recent times by, shallow, self-serving, disloyal, largely-untalented men, reeking of hubris and peddling phony visions ... so infected by them in fact ... that its very future must be considered in some doubt, notwithstanding the fact that rugby league long ago proved itself a tough and resilient critter ... and notwithstanding those good men who have thankfully hung on. Of too many of the others ... and I'm sure you can recite the litany of names ... I am inevitably reminded of Steve Edge's immortal words at a luncheon a couple of years ago: 'You don't have to have a long neck to be a goose!'

One noticeable tactic along the way of these recent seasons — pushed along by those who chose as their career path to be purveyors of News Limited dogma (or dollars) or adherents to some expedient, fingers-crossed belief — which has little to do with reality — in a football 'New Age' — is a betrayal and denial of history. All of us here, I'm sure grew up on the stories of Australia's sporting past — linking the famous people and matches of earlier days seamlessly with the present. Cricket has always done it so well — for example, the current focus on the Australia-West Indies tied Test. But adopting the philosophy of a corporate hard man such as Al



'Chainsaw' Dunlap — rugby league's new leaders in the midst of all the grubbiness that took place in those early years of the 'war', obviously decided it for the best to largely 'cut clean' — to turn their backs on the stories, the lessons and the heroes of the past, and especially — and worst and most shameful of all — to adopt a tactic of completely ignoring the deep concerns that some of the most respected of its men have so often voiced about the game and its directions. As I have found out, to quote a Frank Hyde or an Ian Walsh or a Noel Kelly ... or a Wally O'Connell ... or plenty of others ... is to risk setting them up ... and having them knocked down publicly and derided as 'the usual dinosaurs being trotted out'. It is disgusting and disrespectful — and a tragic portrayal of what rugby league has allowed itself to become.

In Neville Cardus's book *Second Innings*, Cardus quotes Desmond MacCarthy's essay on Henry James in which MacCarthy describes a passage written by James as: 'the most pathetically beautiful tribute in an age of lost elegancies, subtleties and courteous ironic attitudes'. He writes how James was: 'horrified by the brutality and rushing confusion of the world, where the dead are forgotten, old ties cynically snapped, and old associations disregarded ... and where one generation tramples on the other'. To its eternal discredit ... so it has been with rugby league, a game brutally divided in early 1995 and in no way re-joined just yet if I read the signs rights.

The method of the game's downfall in those early years of the war was, incidentally positively biblical in foundation:

Every Kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation;
and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.
(Matthew 12:25).

The Romans had a maxim which covered it too. 'Divide et impera'. Divide and rule.

The outcome has been division ... for sure ... although with not so much left to rule.

But enough of that, I reckon ...

On the morning of Friday 8 October last year I wrote and filed a story for the *Sunday Telegraph* which began this way:

Older than the club itself, Albert Cliff of Mascot will be in the vanguard when the South Sydney Rabbitohs take to Sydney's streets today to begin their fight for life. The rally-march

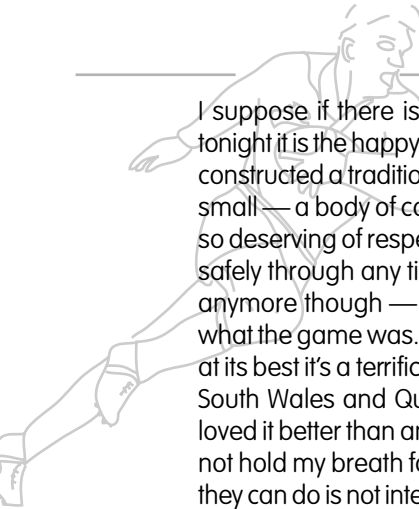
beginning at Souths Leagues Club at 11 am and culminating in and around the Town Hall looms as potentially the largest and most emotional protest event in the history of Australian sport.

The story that followed was spiked. It did not run in the *Sunday Telegraph*, and neither did anything else about the rally. The *Saturday Telegraph* of 9 October also chose to ignore totally the upcoming protest. On the Monday morning, after an evening on which TV channels had led their evening news bulletins on the rally and the vast crowd that had turned up, the *Telegraph* buried the coverage way back in the paper. The next day I resigned from the *Sunday Telegraph* and News Limited in response to what I could only judge as the seriously slanted approach that had been taken to a significant news story — and also at the disrespect shown to a club like Souths, whose story had filled the sports pages of newspapers for 90 years, and which no doubt had sold countless millions of newspapers through the telling of the club's brilliant deeds. Obviously, there was an in-house agenda involved ... not to publicise Souths, and their fight. Right there in flashing red lights, I suggest, was the danger of a media organisation 'owning' a sport. That was pretty much the end for me as a 'hands on' rugby league journalist — although I battled on in 2000, fulfilling contracted obligations in a minor role with *Rugby League Week*.

The truth of it is that the rugby league world has changed forever. I see no point wallowing in nostalgia — although recalling great sport and any deep, happy memory remains a significant pleasure for us all, I'm sure. As Henry Miller once observed — the purpose of life is to remember ... and I must say that my earliest rugby league days spent on the Sydney Sports Ground Hill watching blokes like Terry Fearnley and Jack Gibson run around in the red, white and blue provide especially enduring memories for me to this day.

A reading of Francis Thompson's wonderful old cricket poem — 'At Lord's' — can always evoke that feeling, with Thompson reaching back poignantly to recall the two mighty Lancashire opening batsmen from the last century, A.N. 'Monkey' Hornby and R. G. Barlow who he had watched so many times in his youth. The last verse is this:

For the field is full of shades as I near the shadowy coast,
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,
And I look through my tears at a soundless-clapping host
As the run-stealers flicker to and fro,
To and fro:
Oh my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!



I suppose if there is any message from the bob and weave of my talk tonight it is the happy one that rugby league over the seasons has endlessly constructed a tradition of great characters and notable stories — large and small — a body of colourful deeds, tales of courage and famous contests so deserving of respect to be strong enough to underpin any sport, carry it safely through any tidal wave, you would imagine. I'm not so sure of that anymore though — so profound and shocking has the assault been on what the game was. Only two things now will get it through — the fact that at its best it's a terrific game ... and the further truth that the people of New South Wales and Queensland, at least, showed over 90 years that they loved it better than anything else sporting winters could throw at them. I do not hold my breath for officialdom to weave any magic. I suggest the best they can do is not interfere too much — just present it the way the game has been and is ... hard and plain.

League's passing parade of the last five years, grabbing the headlines, has been of the likes of John Ribot, Porky Morgan, Maurice Lindsay, Graham Carden, Ian Frykberg, Neil Whittaker ... of suited and faceless News Limited numbers men coming and going, of player-managers springing up like mushrooms after rain, of journalists choosing to skirt the code of ethics that guides their professional, of battalions of legal types sweeping into yet another court to fight yet another case. Between them all they managed to create a brand new word that became the mantra for rugby league: 'Badwill'. Because that's exactly what the legacy of it all is to the people who once so faithfully followed the game ...

But these will not be MY images of the game ... I much prefer to bring to mind in conclusion tonight something like the simple scene that provided the title for tonight's talk. It's grand final day on a bush field, years ago and the big bloke in the centres makes a break near halfway, creating an overlap — and sends his winger into clear ground. As he does, he hears a noise overhead. He stops and gazes up — to the sight of a flock of pink and grey gang-gang cockatoos crossing directly overhead, the air punctuated by their squeaky-door calls. He stands transfixed as the play sweeps down the right touch line, and the winger scores in the corner.

Amid the celebrating and the congratulating, teammates look back upfield — to their captain-coach — the great, now ageing Harry Wells, centre partner to Gasnier. Harry is still on the halfway line, head turned skywards, the fact being that although he liked football ... he liked birds even more ... and especially parrots ... and for god's sake there were gang-gangs passing and that was reason enough to stop whatever it was you were doing ...

What an image that conjures up — of a big, tough, decent honest bloke who played his football for not too much money and enjoyed it greatly and the mateship too — and who just fitted it unfussed into the other things in his life. League was like that once.

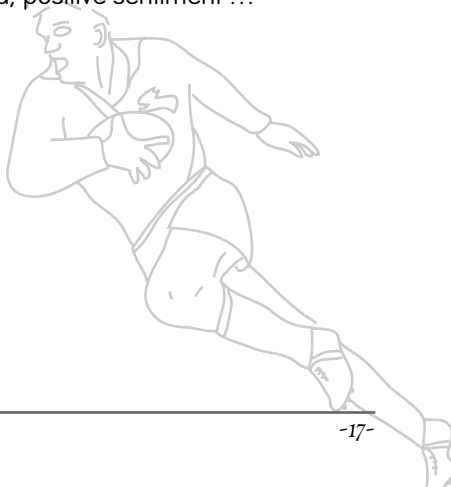
Many years ago at the funeral of a pal — I think it was Ring Lardner — the peerless American sportswriter Red Smith delivered brief, unforgettable words to begin his eulogy.

‘Dying is no big deal’, he began. ‘The least of us can manage that. Living is the trick.’

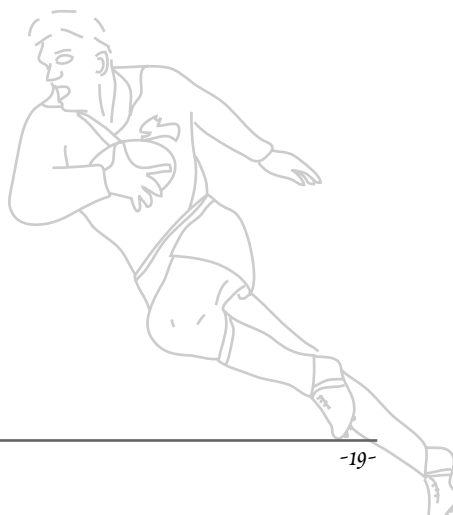
I would suggest tonight that Rugby league in its decline since 1995 has gone a pretty fair way towards supporting the truth of the first part of the equation. Whether at the turn of the millennium, the game can somehow muster the will, the commonsense and the quality of leadership required to fulfill Red Smith’s second, positive sentiment ... ‘well, the jury remains well and truly out on that’.



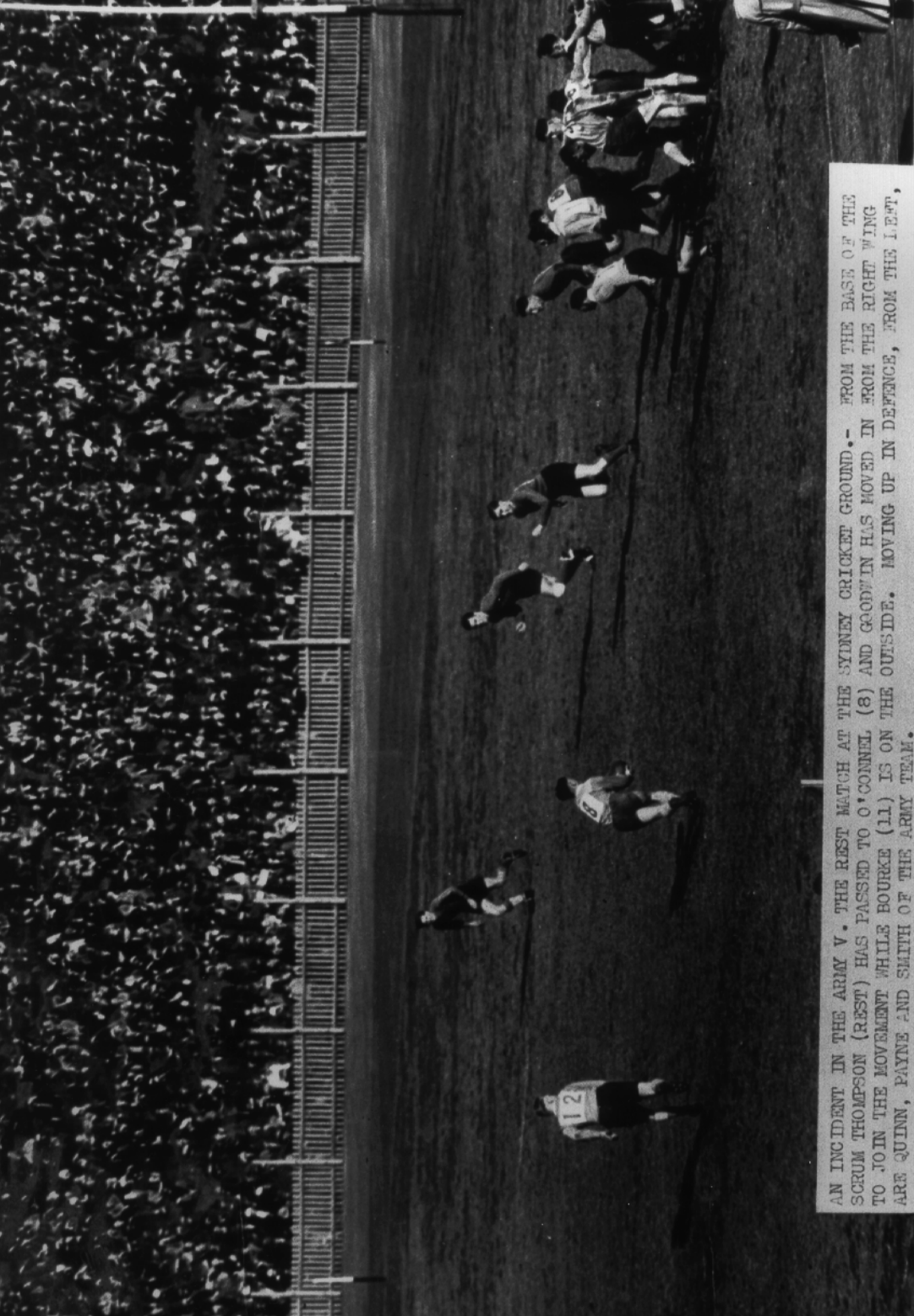
Harry Wells, the Birdman, in full flight against the old enemy, Britain. Wells played Seven Tests against the British and 21 in all, and featured in Three World Cups, 1954, 1957 and 1960.











AN INCIDENT IN THE ARMY V. THE REST MATCH AT THE SYDNEY CRICKET GROUND.- FROM THE BASE OF THE SCRUM THOMPSON (REST) HAS PASSED TO O'CONNEL (8) AND GOODWIN HAS MOVED IN FROM THE RIGHT WING TO JOIN THE MOVEMENT WHILE BOURKE (11) IS ON THE OUTSIDE. MOVING UP IN DEFENCE, FROM THE LEFT, ARE QUINN, PAYNE AND SMITH OF THE ARMY TEAM.