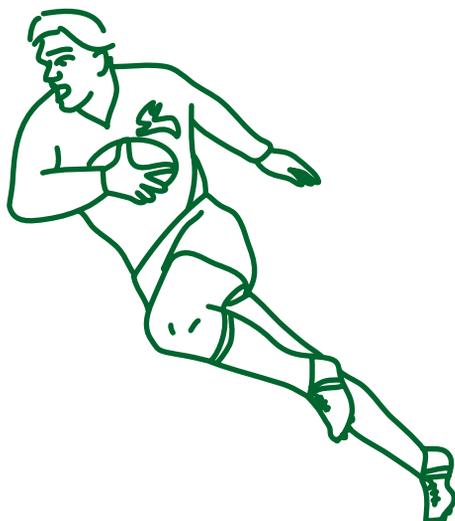


3RD ANNUAL LECTURE

TOM BROCK LECTURE

UNSW, 20 September 2001

Sydney: Heart of Rugby League



Mr Alex Buzo
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:

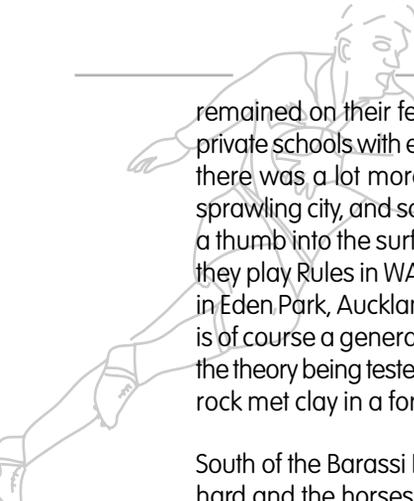
Courtesy of David Bromley, Ralph Henderson, Ward O'Neill

As the only major city in the world where rugby league is the dominant sport, Sydney can claim to be unique. Rome is a soccer city, but then so are many others. New York is a baseball city, but then so are Boston and Philadelphia. Rugby league is played in Leeds and Auckland, but is not accorded the religious status given to other codes. In Melbourne, despite being awarded a premiership in 1999, the game is still called 'cross-country wrestling'.

Is Sydney the heart of rugby league or is rugby league the heart of Sydney? Either way or neither way, there is a relationship between the game and the city, a history and folklore, that has nourished, inspired and entertained many generations. As a writer, I have always seen it as part of my job to record — with a modest degree of interpretation — the landscape and idiom of the immediate environment. Having been born about a kilometre from North Sydney Oval, I have inevitably taken an interest in what they still call 'the greatest game of all', and would like to express gratitude that the Tom Brock Bequest aims at preserving this part of the social history of the oldest city in Australasia.

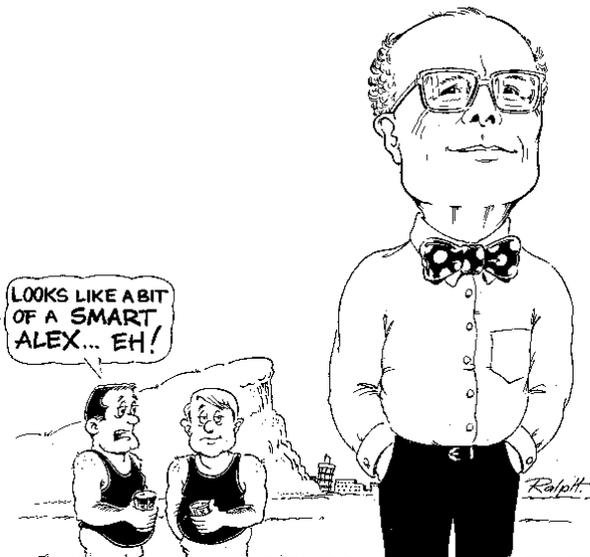
According to Melbourne historian Robert Pascoe, rugby took hold in Sydney because it is linked to eighteenth century notions about the defence of property. Perhaps in this case 'an appropriation of property' should be added, not in reference to the city's convict origins especially, but because nothing plagues the modern game more than the ball-stripping rule. The relationship between the north of England and New South Wales has been well documented by Andrew Moore in the first Tom Brock Lecture, and I was reminded of it when reviewing four books on the Olympic City for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1999. Geoffrey Moorhouse's portrait of Sydney had insights not normally found in the work of outsiders, and it was obvious that because he came from a rugby league background in the north of England he had a special entree into the character and drama of what he found here.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of immigrants to Sydney came from a soccer background and the question has often been raised about the low popularity of that code in what should have been a natural habitat. Foxes and rabbits had no trouble adapting, so why not the round-ball game? It is, after all, the great love of the English working classes who formed so much of the character of old Sydney. Rugby philosopher V.J. Carroll has put forward the view that in the cobblestoned streets of London and Birmingham it was necessary to play a game in which the players used their feet and



remained on their feet, and that tackling sports were the province of rich private schools with extensive and well-maintained playing fields. In Sydney there was a lot more space and soft landings on the green fields of the sprawling city, and so all classes took to rugby. Those who have tried to sink a thumb into the surface of the WACA in Perth and broken a nail will know they play Rules in WA, just as those who have sunk a thumb up to the wrist in Eden Park, Auckland, realise instinctively they are in a rugby country. This is of course a general view and it should be noted that there is no record of the theory being tested at North Sydney Oval, where until the 1987 renovation, rock met clay in a form of cement.

South of the Barassi Line, in Victoria, where the grass is grey, the ground is hard and the horses run anti-clockwise, it was a different story. Australian Rules is a nineteenth century game, more open, free-flowing and egalitarian, in which the players mostly stay on their feet, and belongs, according to Robert Pascoe, to the more modern and democratic society to be found down there in the Land of the Long White Posts. He cites the greater numbers of women who are interested in the game as evidence of this, saying that they were greater participants in the political movements of the day, and puts forward the view that Rules was more multi-cultural. This ignores the significant interest Sydney women have in rugby league, and particularly in the St George club during the unbroken premiership years. Some of them looked like Elizabeth Taylor, some like Ken Kearney, but all knew their football



Queenslanders and the southern media.

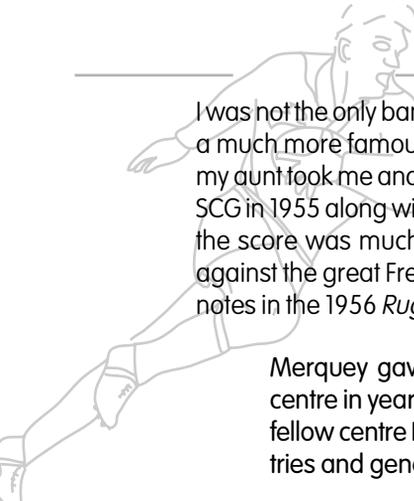
and were not afraid of speaking their minds. Who could forget that pre-season game at Henson Park in the sixties when Elton Rasmussen, not long down from Queensland, took a breather? A large woman with a voice like Tugboat Annie was sitting in the grandstand and called out 'Rasmussen, Rasmussen, stop bludging on the blind'. He did it again, but only once again.

In Sydney at the turn of the century all classes played rugby and the democratic movements that swept Victoria were not unknown here. As former Australian rugby union captain Herbert 'Paddy' Moran says in his classic memoir *Viewless Winds*:

In 1904, Amateur Rugby was still a game for all the classes — just as it is today in Wales. There were no social distinctions, nor any systematic professionalism ... Those who later become professionals changed their status, not as a rule from any dire necessity, but out of a desire to gain their living more pleasantly. It was they themselves who created a social discrimination in Australian Rugby.

However the creation of the rugby league in 1908 is interpreted, it was an act that was decisive in the history and education of Sydney. It involved twentieth century notions of insurance, workers' compensation for injury and loss of earnings, had political echoes, and was influenced by commercialism to the degree that the first premiership was won by forfeit following a dispute on potential gate receipts. It also had the effect of tying the game into the inner city heart, while rugby union became more the province of the quieter suburbs which were blue-ribbon anti-Labor seats. Some would doubtless say thus began the beanies/leather patches social divide. The rule changes — dropping two players, no line-outs, and above all retaining the ball in the tackle — were designed to make the game more attractive to the spectator, but they had the bonus of making it easier for beginners, and within five years rugby league had become a school sport and subsequently a lifelong interest for many Sydney-siders.

On a grey day in the weathershed at my primary school in 1954 we boys were addressed by Arthur Folwell, chairman of selectors for the Australian Rugby League, and he was a very impressive figure with a green and gold coat of arms on both his blazer and hatband. He told us what a great game league was and hoped we would all play it and send a good team to the schools carnival. In 1955 I made the firsts — or should I say 'the onlys' — and we played in the carnival, being duly weighed, stamped, given a pie and then saw ourselves beaten in the semi-final by the toss of a coin after a nil-all draw.



I was not the only bandy-legged winger running around in 1955; there was a much more famous one called Don Adams and it was a big thrill when my aunt took me and a friend to see France versus New South Wales at the SCG in 1955 along with 50,445 others on a bright Saturday afternoon. Here the score was much higher than nil-all; it was 29-24 for the home side against the great French team led by Jackie Merquey. As E.E. Christensen notes in the 1956 *Rugby League Year Book*

Merquey gave one of the classiest displays seen from a centre in years. He drew the defence perfectly and gave his fellow centre Rey ample opportunities. Merquey scored two tries and generally his play was most inspiring.

The 1951 side had beaten Australia 2-1, led by their explosive players Puig-Aubert and the second-rowers Brousse and Ponsinet, described by one careless authority as 'Brussenay and Ponce'. The 1955 tourists were of course called 'the unpredictable Frenchmen', but under the strong leadership of Jackie Merquey they won the series by the same margin and made many friends with their open play and multi-cultural infusion, which included shooting ducks with a shanghai at Kippax Lake and serving up the result as caneton roti à l'orange. The hotel where they stayed, the 1909 yellow-tile Olympic in Paddington, is now classified by the National Trust and looks a lot better than it did in the fifties, unlike, alas, the current French side.

In 1955 there was no television and the 1950s did not represent the high point in the Australian film industry — with all respect to 'The Siege of Pinchgut'. The Sydney Cricket Ground offered drama in the afternoon and we saw the star performers of the day — 'Bandy' Adams heading for the corner with the crowd on its feet as soon as he touched the ball, the Frenchman Jean Dop who did the opposite and ran in circles that left defenders with dizzy spells and the crowd with delirium, and above all, Clive Churchill Superstar. When you looked at a football field with 26 players on it you looked to Churchill first, just to get a bearing and to feel the sense that something was about to happen. With a high surf of black hair, rolled up sleeves and shortish left-foot kick, there was no trouble locating him as he drifted across to set up his wingers, the locomotive-like Adams and, when available, the finely tuned Ian Moir. Like Wally Lewis he carried an invisible force field that seemed to say 'Don't tackle me. Hold off until I do something that will really damage you.'

Today's running fullback like David Peachey is a Churchill legacy, although one curious link is the Aboriginality — unacknowledged in CC's case, bruted

by Peachey in a changed Sydney — of both players. Outkicked by Puig-Aubert in 1951, Churchill developed the running game and the linking with wingers as a counter, and the defence never knew where he would emerge. It was not until the pivotal year of 1962, however, that Frank Drake became the first fullback to score a Test match try. Peachey's ability to pick the moment and score plenty of tries has taken him to the top in grade football but not into the test match arena.

Despite his flair for publicity and innovation, Churchill was every inch the egalitarian Sydney version of the star, however, and in his autobiography *They Called Me the Little Master*, he recalls a great moment from 1950:

One evening, a week before the Australian team for the First Test was selected, I happened to be in my new home at Mascot, tacking down the carpets. One of my friends, Billy Winspear, knocked on the door. 'Clive', he said, 'I have just heard over the air you have been selected in the Test team. I've also heard you have been appointed Test captain.'

They don't write dialogue like that any more! In fact, this book is subtitled 'Clive Churchill's Colourful Story as told to Jim Mathers' and it ranks with *10 for 66 and All That* by Waterloo-born cricketer Arthur Mailey as both a sports classic and an unforgettable social record of Sydney. The 'as-told-to' man Jim Mathers was a tabloid journalist and a master of the idiom of rugby league in the days when Sydney streets were alive with the shouts of the fruit barrow boys and its legendary newspaper sellers. Many of us remember the bustling, spindly woman with the floppy hat and pointed chin working the cars at the beginning of Victoria Road in Balmain, or Wynyard's Quick-Draw McGraw in brown horn-rims and a grey dust-coat, who could get a *Sun* or *Mirror* under your arm in .005 seconds. The most inspiring character was the newsboy at the Quay who wore a pork-pie hat and had thigh stumps for legs, and who alternated between cheery banter with his regulars or periods of yelling out 'Getya Sunamirror here!' He did not wear a UCLA tank top or turn into Captain Marvel Junior; he wore a football jersey. It had to be a league one and it had to be Souths, and it said to all tourists: 'This is Sydney'.

In television terms, the battle between the *Sun* and the *Mirror*, between the *Herald* and the *Telegraph*, resolved itself into the long-running war, Channel Seven's Controversy Corner up against 'The World of Sport' on Nine. I was entranced by these spielers and blarney merchants, the direct descendants of salesmen, auctioneers, politicians, scrap metal collectors, bottle-ohs

and rabbits, who had a licence not to be laconic, and I wrote a play, *The Roy Murphy Show*, about this phenomenon of the rugby league television panel. The central three characters, the garrulous host, the crusty veteran and the smart young journalist were called Roy Murphy, Clarrie Maloney and Mike Conolly, and they represented three forces in the game which have waxed and waned in different ways—showbiz, tradition and independent analysis.



In *Rugby League Week*, on 23 July 1971, the Nimrod Theatre production of *The Roy Murphy Show* became the first play to be reviewed by that distinguished organ. Under the headline 'Stand Up the Weal Wan Casey', Mike Woollcott speculated on the identity of the central character in these terms:

Roy Murphy — how it stretches the imagination that a man with such a fine Irish name or with the initials R.M. could be a pontificator on Greater Sydney's national game — has as his antagonist Clarrie Maloney, who, Roy tells us, is heard on another medium and who has antiquated views. (*RLW*, p.5)

I'm sure that after exactly thirty years it can be revealed that the critic who wrote that, Mike Woollcott, was a pseudonym for one of Australia's hardest-working and most authoritative journalists, Mike Pollak, and that the real Ron Casey did come to see the play and had three double whiskies straight afterwards.

The Case, as he was known, had a distinctive voice, including an 'R' deficiency, but he walked the tightrope as a sports commentator all through that era when harness racing was known as 'the trots'. Roy Murphy's antagonist, Clarrie Maloney, was a great supporter of the City-Country game, but Roy felt Sydney was the once-and-future citadel of the game and that the 'annual farce' should be abandoned. As Casey notes in his autobiography *Confessions of a Larrikin*:



L-R Mike Gibson, Rex Mossop and Norman May.

The Saturday and Sunday football panels on Channels Nine and Seven were part of Sydney folklore in the 70s ... If Nine's panel, with me as host, has cast lingering memories, it must be because of the on-camera slanging matches between myself and fellow Irishman Frank Hyde. (COAL, p. 92)

As commentator for 2SM, the 'other medium' that rankled with The Case, Frank Hyde was the nice guy of rugby league and a target for all larrikins, confessional or otherwise. In the last round of 1961, North Sydney's valiant fullback Brian Carlson — occasionally accused of being too low-key — played all over the field like three men in a 33-13 loss to St George which meant no semi-final

berth for the Bears and another minor premiership for the Saints. 'For his outstanding display here today', said Frank Hyde over the new transistor radios of a hundred fans, 'I picked Brian Carlson as the best and fairest'. The reply from a St George fan walking in front of me was loud and immediate: 'You couldn't pick your nose, Frank'. The unhurried Carlson had been the epitome of Fifties Cool, a running contrast to the hot leadership of Clive Churchill, and he had created almost as many tries for Ken Irvine as The Little Master did for Ian Moir, but by 1962 both of these great full-backs had retired and, sadly, did not survive the 1980s to be become Grand Old Men. Frank Hyde's tribute was appreciated in some quarters, and certainly in retrospect.



Tautologist in the dock.

Hyde's equivalent on Channel Seven was everybody's favourite uncle Ferris Ashton, who played the veteran role to Rex Mossop in the lead, with Alan Clarkson as the smart journalist. This central dynamic has since disappeared from sports programs in the era of the Footy Show's all-player panel, plus pies and frocks, but all over Sydney in the seventies people made jokes about Controversy Corner's avowal to air 'pertinent league matters' and during the passing competition speculated on what was causing the tormented cries of the Commonwealth Bank elephant. We now know the answer: the Commonwealth Bank. But those were more innocent days, where Saturday morning meant a hangover, poached eggs and 'Wan' in black and white.



The Nimrod production of the play had been an excellent one, with John Clayton, John Wood and Martin Harris as the central trio and Jacki Weaver in the role of the generous hostess; just as Sydney had become the university of rugby league, so it was becoming the place where actors came to hone their skills under pressure. Outside Sydney *The Roy Murphy Show* suffered from mixed perceptions. It has never been performed in the Adelaide-Melbourne-Hobart triangle, partly because the characters were seen as Woolloomooloo Yankees, and partly because the idea of satire in the football context is a very tricky issue. In Melbourne it is possible to be irreverent about Australian Rules, but the irreverence must be reverential. It was also impossible to dramatise the overkill inherent in their panel shows; in Sydney the magic number of panellists was five, whereas eight was the norm down south. They put 36 players on the field and need three commentators and two umpires to handle all the traffic. Victorians also use 15 percent more words to express a thought, and those who accused Frank Hyde of blarneyfication do not know the half of it. To make things even more confusing Victoria's Channel 7 had its own Ron Casey, who hosted the the World of Sport but did not have a lisp and did not answer to 'Wan'.

Membership of Melburnian Keith Dunstan's Anti-Football League was never audited, but the figure is believed to have always been less than two, which gives some idea of the religious fervour attached to the southern game; the convivial scepticism of the Sydney league fan is simply not part of the landscape. I had several interesting and at times hilarious discussions with theatre managements in Melbourne about presenting *The Roy Murphy Show* either as it was, or adapted to the local scene, but it was agreed that the first alternative would induce revulsion and the second was impossible.

In Newcastle the production included John Cootes, making his debut in the entertainment industry as the footballer of the week Brian 'Chicka' Armstrong, but the box office return was disappointing. It was only in Perth and Brisbane, on a double bill with Jack Hibberd's *Les Darcy* play that *The Roy Murphy Show*, played as straight comedy, ran for a good long season. When the play was produced in London by Steve Jacobs and Helen Philipp in 1983 almost every critic saw it as a satire on the Australian obsession with sport. Australian! How little do they know of those subtle differences that percolate down through history and all the way from Redfern to Jolimont.



Marcus Cooney as Chicka, Martin Harris as Clarrie, Jacki Weaver as Sharon and John Clayton as Roy Murphy, Nimrod Street Theatre production, 1971. Photo: Robert Walker

People started sending me commentary and spectator gems after the play had been on and I became a kind of recorder of the more bizarre outreaches of rugby league literature, giving the spoken word a rough permanence. I was even rung by panellists from 'The World of Sport' and 'Controversy Corner', who were not averse to shopping their colleagues. When Rex Mossop turned from ball distribution to word distribution and, in this era before whistle blower legislation came in, began calling the games on television the trickle of items became a torrent of rhetoric. Commentators have always had signature phrases, such as American baseball caller Mel Allen's home run shout 'Open the window, Aunt Minnie!' With King Rex you knew a try was coming when he bellowed 'Shut the gate, the horse has bolted'. Neither phrase will stand up to any kind of logical explanation, but

were part of the light verbiage of sport. No one knew at that stage just how important the media were to become.

Channel Seven won the rights to telecast league in 1974 and with the advent of colour television in 1975, plus an equally colourful commentator, the game became a mass entertainment on what we never called 'Freda Ware'. Who was this strange woman Freda Ware? It was not for 20 years that the terms 'pay television' and 'free-to-air' were to cause the biggest impact on the game since 1908, but the ball started rolling in 1975, especially in the area of personality and commentary that reached beyond the hard-core fan. In the days of *SMH* journalist Tom Goodman, master of the style without style, action was conveyed to the reader's mind with a minimum of well-chosen, single-duty words and phrases. On Channel Seven we got the action, plus the description, plus the style that some called Double Bunger.

From 1977 to 1983 I ran a tautology tournament in the *The National Times* which was open to all comers from sport, politics, science, the arts, industry, anywhere. All contestants had to do was come up with a piece of tautology like 'free gift', 'added bonus', 'strict disciplinarian' or 'forward progress'. Rex Mossop won every year, and that was what the fans wanted, however much I tried to boost the claims of Bob Hawke, Ita Buttrose or Norman May. They were just crazy for Rex, even south of the Barassi Line, even in the Croweater Capital, and when I signed copies of the book in Perth people presented me with lists of their favourite tauts, with many Mossopisms among them. His language of league became catch-phrases in general society and people took great delight in saying 'Give him a verbal tongue-lashing, let me recapitulate back to what happened previously, he seems to have suffered a groin injury at the top of his leg, they're going laterally across field, that kick had both height and elevation, I've never seen him live in the flesh, there he is, hopping on one leg, what a pity — he's been a positive asset, they've been going on about it ad nauseam — that means forever, I've had to switch my



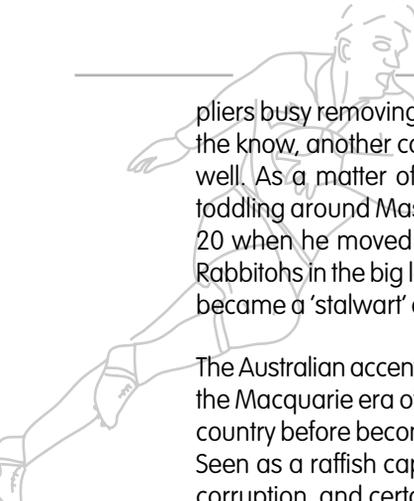
Rex Mossop wins the 1977 Pennant.

mental thinking, I'm sick and tired of all this violence-bashing, that referee's got glaucoma of the eyes, I don't want to pre-empt what I've already said, I don't want to sound incredulous but I can't believe it.'

The Moose did not deserve his nick-name as he did not charge straight ahead in his playing days, but rather introduced English-style ball-playing skills to a bash-and-barge ethos. He was not thanked. I remember the tall, dark figure at Brookvale Oval with his sleeves rolled even higher than Churchill's, above the elbow, suggesting a lair working on his sun tan rather than a worker, and running at gaps before passing the ball. Some elements in the crowd booed when he did this, believing it was more macho to run at an opponent and die with the ball, but Australia paid the price in 1962 when the great distributor Brian McTigue put on a master class in geometry and Great Britain won the series 2-1. Australia's dominance in world league began in 1963 with Billy Wilson and then Ian Walsh helping out by doing something of a McTigue up front and Johnny Raper keeping the kettle boiling for a very fast set of backs. They defeated Great Britain 28-2 in the First Test and 50-12 in the Second. Of course, then it was a case of 'Tha won't win third, lad', and so it proved, but those 78 points in two matches were the watershed. From now on, players would regard Sydney as the headquarters of rugby league.

When Sixty Minutes was making a profile of Rex Mossop for their national audience they asked me to come on camera with a copy of The Rexicon. I replied that there was no such thing, that it was just a name for a certain kind of tautological idiom, that it was an abstract concept. 'We don't do abstract on "Sixty Minutes"', was the forthright answer and they got me to mock up a ledger containing all of Thesaurus Rex's linguistic sins and then confront him with it on camera. As television entertainment this Rexicon business was the equivalent of watching a dentist at work. Rex Mossop was an innovative ball player and a grand showman whom Noel Kelly has described as living one of the great Australian lives. It was a pity his drab and querulous autobiography, *The Moose that Roared*, is at not at the same end of the scale of rugby league literature as Kelly's own *Hard Man*, or the benchmark, *They Called Me the Little Master*, with its wonderful evocation of Sydney in 1950.

Chapter Twenty of this masterpiece of its kind begins when Clive Churchill drives his parents to the SCG gates and escorts them to the queue for the First Test against England at 6 a.m., wearing his pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers, and ends with a delirious and mud-caked mob surrounding him after the Third Test Ashes victory, including one spectator with a pair of



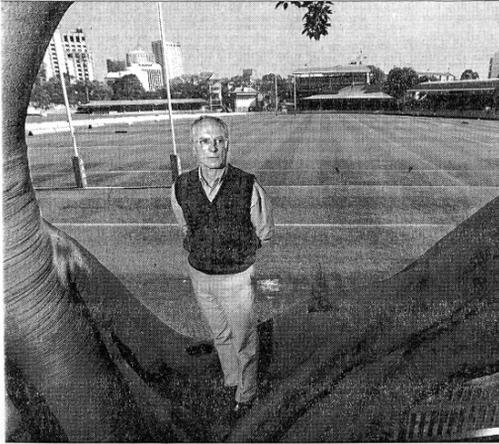
pliers busy removing a stud from his boot. In the great tradition of being in the know, another came up to his mother and said 'I know Clive Churchill well. As a matter of fact I knew him when he was only two years old, toddling around Mascot.' The Little Master was not a big man, but he was 20 when he moved from Newcastle to Mascot to toddle around for the Rabbitohs in the big league (*LM*, pp. 118f). Along with Jack Rayner he quickly became a 'stalwart' at the team they called 'Souse'.

The Australian accent began in old Sydney among the Currency Lads during the Macquarie era of the early nineteenth century and spread out over the country before becoming regionalised, and then consciously non-Sydney. Seen as a raffish capital with rather too much in the way of violence and corruption, and certainly way too many raffs, poor old El Syd began to be looked at rather askance by the rest of the country, and its dominant sport was called 'Thugby League'. This was a pity, as the escalation in ball skills and pace of play in the 1990s was making this one of the greatest tests of athleticism, courage, deception, fitness and vision on offer in world sport.

The game reached its high-water mark in 1994, according to Ken Arthurson, and I recall a typically glorious David Peachey try in the Cronulla-Newcastle semi-final that involved a giant sweeping movement, decoy runners and long passing against an equally determined and fanned-out defence, leaving chess, Vince Lombardi and basketball in the shade, and inspiring a standing, cheering crowd, including a friend from south of the Barassi Line. 'That's about as good as ball play can get, I think', I said and he readily agreed, despite having reservations about both rugby league and the Coathanger Capital that has nurtured it. Teddy Roosevelt said of America 'I fear we shall never be loved', and the same could be said of Sydney and its culture, especially those attached to the league, that ancient outdoor drama of defending and appropriating property, of punishment and reward, of paying homage to skill and theft and the exhilaration that goes beyond all logical bounds.

Despite the negatives, the pace of the city and its achievements attracted players from all over the world and they were made to feel welcome in the traditional democratic ways. Johnny Fifita came from Fiji to play for St George and when the Dragons were playing North Sydney at the SCG in 1989 a couple of the opposition fans were sitting in front of me and, as usual with Saints followers, disagreeing with the radio commentary. 'I wonder if Johnny Fifita grew up in one of those thatched-roof bures,' speculated Peter Peters on 2GB. The St George couple exploded. 'Give him a go!' said one directly to the radio, 'The boongs don't live in tents over there.'

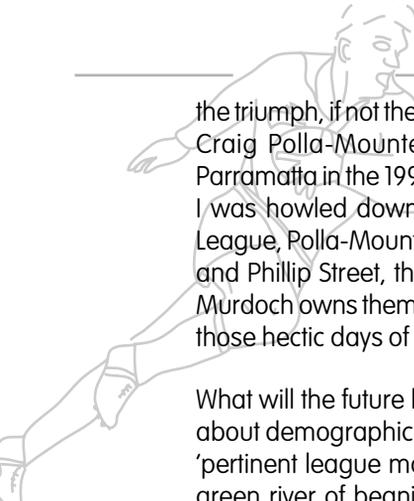
Another cry from the heart at Grizzle Park



'Where have all the Bears gone?' asks the author at an empty North Sydney Oval.

While the natural predators of league looked to be the perennial 'sleeping giant' of soccer and the somewhat flighty Sydney Swans, no one seemed to notice what was happening with the amateurish rugby union fraternity, which since the democratic days of Paddy Moran had come to be called 'the rah rahs', a term from America's Ivy League, according to Professor Gerry Wilkes, derived from the 'hurrah hurrah' sounds made by those keen young Preppies at the Yale-Harvard game. It took a long while to sink in, but taking their cue from the events of 1908, rugby union reduced the teams, made the balls easier to retain, the game easier to teach beginners, paid the players (enabling them to 'gain their living more pleasantly'), favoured coaches and even fullbacks with the running game, persuaded referees to go easy on the whistle, encouraged tribal support and came up with the Super 12 format.

In the best-selling novel of the 1990s, *The Ya-Ya Sisterhood* made their name by disrupting a beauty contest with stink bombs, and the impact of the new breed of Rah-Rah Brotherhood has had a similar effect on Sydney's long-running love affair with rugby league with their huge crowds for the Bledisloe Cup, where nations at war seems to occupy a bigger canvas than suburbs at war having a punch-up. There are increasing signs of strain and embattlement all round the game of league, in ways that did not exist during the happy monopoly of only a few years ago. North Sydney's greatest victory, 15-14 over the Brisbane Broncos in the 1994 finals series, was set on its way by Greg Florimo with his refusal to be overawed and the early try he scored in typically impatient style. Everyone loved Flo and they rejoiced in



the triumph, if not the eventual success, of the Bears. When I remarked that Craig Polla-Mounter's heroic performance for the Bulldogs against Parramatta in the 1998 finals was in the same class for spirit and will to win, I was howled down by league traditionalists. 'Canterbury were Super-League, Polla-Mounter's from Queensland, he ratted on both the rah-rahs and Phillip Street, they probably didn't even want to be on Freda Ware, Murdoch owns them, remember Pearl Harbour' and so on. What a wedge those hectic days of the 1995 pay-television war have driven!

What will the future bring for Sydney and rugby league? People mumble about demographic change and say the taxi drivers no longer talk about 'pertinent league matters', but still it holds on, and there was a red and green river of beanies overrunning the wigs in Macquarie Street when Souths went to court fighting to keep the people's game alive. Sydney is the only place in the world where rugby league has inspired political street marches, but could it happen elsewhere? The only other million-plus city in the world where league remains the dominant code lies to our north. Perhaps we can look forward to a spirited and well argued 'Brisbane: Heart of Rugby League' at a future Tom Brock Lecture. It would be a case of stripping the ball, but at least this time it would be one on one.

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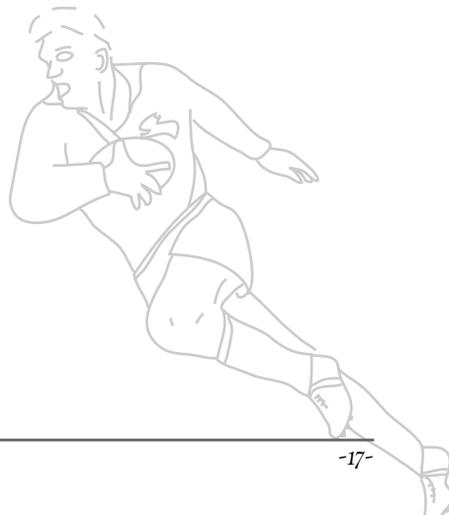
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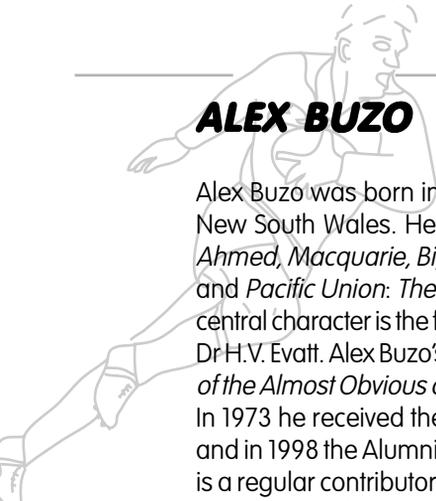
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ALEX BUZO

Alex Buzo was born in Sydney in 1944 and educated at The University of New South Wales. He is the author of many plays, including *Norm and Ahmed*, *Macquarie*, *Big River*, *Makassar Reef*, *Coralie Lansdowne Says No* and *Pacific Union: The Story of the San Francisco Forty-Fivers*, in which the central character is the former Patron of the New South Wales Rugby League, Dr H.V. Evatt. Alex Buzo's books include *Kiwese*, *Prue Flies North*, *A Dictionary of the Almost Obvious* and *The Longest Game* (co-edited with Jamie Grant). In 1973 he received the Gold Medal from the Australian Literature Society and in 1998 the Alumni Award from The University of New South Wales. He is a regular contributor to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age* and *Wisden Australia*. *Sydney: Heart of Rugby League* has also been published in *overland* 166 (autumn 2002).

