



The Lost Tribes of League

THE FATE OF AXED
AND MERGED CLUBS
AND THEIR FANS

Terry Williams



11th Annual Tom Brock Lecture

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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 State Library 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 \$5000.
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.

Details of the Tom Brock Bequest are located on the website of the Australian Society for Sports History: <http://www.sporthistory.org>

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CLUBS AND THEIR FANS



TERRYWILLIAMS is the author of *Out of the Blue: The History of Newtown RLFC* (1993) and founded the *Sydney League News* (1995) before spending a decade with the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) and Australian Rugby League (ARL), where he acted as communications manager and oversaw the establishment of the Jim Beam Cup, the ARL Hall of Fame and the Centenary Committee.

In 2007 he compiled the photographs for the official ARL history of the game publication and the National Museum's Centenary RL exhibition 'League of Legends'. In 2008 he compiled *Above All For Rugby League: 100 Years of the NSWRL Referees Association* and *Through Blue Eyes: A Pictorial History of Newtown RLFC*. He is currently working on a book on rugby league during World War I.

11th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2009,

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TO LOSE ONE CLUB, if I may bastardise the words of Oscar Wilde, is a tragedy. To lose any more than that is careless.

In its centenary year in 2008, rugby league in Australia presented a view of its own history that was all sweetness and light. Black-tie functions that celebrated the event across the game were marked by equal waves of nostalgia and beer. While there have been plenty of milestones worth celebrating throughout the last 101 years, there are a few tombstones that mark the journey.

There are several clubs who formerly took part in the highest level of club competition in Australia that no longer do so, although some of them continue to exist either at lower levels of the game or as partners in joint ventures.

Tonight we examine questions as to why those clubs started up, what led to their demise and what lessons can we learn from their dashed hopes and smashed dreams? We shall also look at how each of those casualties reflect the game at that particular stage of its development and how they are indicative of wider social trends in a local, national and global context.

With that, I might invite you to strap yourself in for a tour of Rugby League Rookwood. There's a lot of territory to cover as we examine those clubs that died with their boots on.

Late Starter, Early Finisher

Cumberland was a late starter in 1908. The New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) competition held its first round on 20 April 1908. That night a meeting was held at the Horse and Jockey Hotel at Homebush, chaired by J. J. Giltinan, and a new club was born.

Wearing blue and gold hoops, Cumberland was a failure on the field. The club won only one match — ironically against parent club Western Suburbs — in its only season, and struggled to attract crowds.

In its final fixture, Cumberland had to co-opt North Sydney officials Joe Hedge and Pat Boland to fill in for the match against the Shoremen. One can hardly imagine the two wanting to exert themselves to inflict an upset, but judging from the 45-0 scoreline in favour of Norths the other members of the team may have taken the same approach.

It came as no surprise when Cumberland voluntarily withdrew from the competition at the end of that season. As with the biblical parable of the mustard seed, not all of it fell on fertile soil.¹

The Novocastrians

The foundation Newcastle club was different. Even in those days it was rich footy territory and home to a thriving rugby union scene, as well as what we still classify as soccer. Giltinan got them up and running after a false start, and Newcastle was competitive from the word go.

Newcastle finished fifth in that inaugural season and produced internationals Pat Walsh and William 'Jerry' Bailey in their debut year. The boys from the Coalopolis also boasted the likes of Harold Nicholson (who would achieve international honours when he moved to Queensland the next year to play in the first Brisbane club competition), and Stan Carpenter, a largely forgotten figure who played for Australia against the New Zealand Maori in 1909 and went on to win a Military Medal during World War I.

Young local heroes provided the base for a second season that was even more successful. They downed premiers South Sydney to reach the semi-finals in 1909 and defeated the Maori team that toured Australia that year.

Growing local support for the code saw Newcastle withdraw from the NSWRL premiership for 1910 to establish a local competition. Newcastle continues to be a prolific breeding ground up to this day. Paul Harragon, Andrew Johns and Danny Buderus all lay claim to this Novocastrian lineage and legacy of excellence which has, since 1988, again been part of the story of the game at the highest level.

Newcastle's withdrawal from the competition was voluntary and was about growth, unlike any of the other clubs that later left rugby league's most elite club competition in Australia.

The Dales

Annandale took the place of Newcastle in the NSWRL premiership for the 1910 season. The club had played in the second grade of the Metropolitan Rugby Union, but was sick of producing players for Glebe's rugby union first grade, and wanted its own identity at the top level.

The Dales started promisingly enough in their first few years, and the 1911 Leichhardt team which won the League's third-grade competition showed that there was some local talent to call on.

They had some class players in their ranks over the eleven years of their existence. These included Ray, Rex and Roy Norman, Bob Stuart (a 1911–12 Kangaroo and Annandale's only international) and 1908 Kangaroo Charlie Hedley. Other pioneers included Lou D'Alpuget, Bob Graves and Artie Butler as well as Bill 'Fisho' Haddock, Harold 'Snowy' Corbett and the Pye brothers Jim and Jack, who were brothers-in-law of Sir William McKell. Annandale brought J. J. Giltinan into the



Annandale played in the NSWRL from 1910 to 1920.

fold as a club official after he had been dumped from the League's executive in 1909.

In spite of this illustrious roll call, Annandale was phenomenally unsuccessful during its time in the premiership. There are several reasons for this. Weaker clubs always struggle to keep their gifted youngsters, who can be lured away to more successful clubs in search of money, premierships or representative opportunities. This was the case throughout Annandale's brief tenure.

When Annandale recruited a player of the stature of Paddy McCue in 1913, Newtown promptly appealed that McCue was residentially ineligible to play with the Dales. The NSWRL ruled that McCue and his brother Jimmy must both return to Newtown. The League rubbed salt in the wound when further stipulating that long-serving Annandale hooker 'Fisho' Haddock also had play with the Bluebags.

That incident may explain why, when the Dan 'Laddo' Davies furore erupted in 1917, Annandale was so keen to see justice done. Davies was the Newcastle star who came to Sydney to play with Glebe, but resided with a relative in Annandale. When the two clubs met in the first round of 1917 it was the Dales who protested this time, and Glebe lost the points.

The biggest problem for Annandale, however, was the impact of World War I. The loss of men to the front, many of whom did not return, depleted their human resources without even considering the other effects on the local community or the social changes and dislocation brought about by the war. As a small club the effects of the war were felt more deeply at Annandale than by some of its larger, more powerful rivals.

It must be acknowledged that, by all accounts, the Dales did not help their own cause on the field. Their style of play hardly had the press singing their praises:

Annandale still continue on their dreary way and suffered a severe defeat by Wests.²

The *Sydney Sportsman* went straight for the jugular:

It is now up to Annandale to turn this game in for good. The side is no asset to the League when it is only out to spoil spectacular and effective football. By pursuing those methods they are laying themselves out to be wiped fair off the Rugby League map next season. Surely the team has had sufficient time in all the years it has been in existence to get some combination together to go for tries.³

Being unsuccessful spoilers did not make Annandale an attractive option for paying spectators. This had a detrimental impact on revenue at a time when clubs were reliant on gate receipts.

Sydney in 1920 was a very different place to what it had been in 1910 when it gave birth to the club. By that stage a University of Sydney team was a far more attractive proposition for the code, as we shall see shortly.

Consequently, not too many cried for the Dales when the axe fell and even the resistance of the club at the meeting that expelled them on 13 October was minimal. The best argument they put forward for their continued inclusion was that kicking them out would mean no bye: hardly grounds for sustaining a first-grade club.

The evolving and ever-changing demographics of metropolitan Sydney would ensure that the Dales would not be last club for whom the final bell would toll.

The Dirty Reds

Glebe was an early powerhouse with a touch of the North Sydneys: the first-grade team never seemed to be able to win the big matches. All league supporters know that Lady Luck can be a very cruel woman, but she seemed to be especially nasty to the Dirty Reds.



Chris McKivat, Glebe captain 1910-14 wearing the 'Dirty Reds' uniform.

Although they never won a first-grade premiership Glebe finished as runners-up on four occasions. They were minor premiers in 1911, won the 1913 City Cup and claimed five reserve-grade premierships and one in third grade. Glebe may have been only a suburb away from Annandale, but was a world away in on-field style and substance.

In 22 seasons the Glebos produced a glittering array of great players including Peter Moir and Alec Burdon (two names at the forefront of the game's founding), Chris McKivat, the Burge brothers, Darb Hickey and Bert Gray.

Hopefully Max Solling, who has led the way in research on Glebe, will be able to publish his long-awaited history of the club in the near future and tell its story in the detail it deserves. In his unpublished manuscript, he touches on the relationship between the club and its fans:

Rugby league attracted the interest of working class people because it could easily be translated into personal and

concrete terms. Chris McKivat and Frank Burge displayed qualities on the field they could respect and admire. But it was more than that, for the club was also an important part of the group life of Glebe. Rugby league was suburb against suburb. A victory over Balmain or Souths, Glebe's nearest neighbours, was especially satisfying, a triumph to be celebrated with friends over a beer at the local. The men who wore Red on the football field, representing your territory, often lived just down the street. If you didn't know the player personally, you certainly knew all about him and his football feats. Working class people from inner Sydney were rabid partisans with a deep emotional attachment to their

league club, rather than lovers of the game for its own sake. They came to see their own side win and did not have much patience with honourable defeat.⁴

The company line handed down through history regarding Glebe's expulsion — that Glebe was a club without a home ground, had a dwindling support base and relied on players that were ineligible residentially — does not, on its own, justify the treatment the club received.

The 1920s had been a difficult decade for a game that had boomed before World War I and then fought hard to keep going throughout the war years. Diminished crowds, the resurgence of other codes and the attraction and availability of such alternative pursuits as motion pictures and automobiles all made this a depressed decade for league in Sydney before the Wall Street crash. Consequently, the NSWRL was looking to do something to invigorate the code but the best it came up with was culling one of its own.

During 1929 a change to the League constitution⁵ meant that, rather than needing a three-fifths majority for voting matters, anything greater than 50 per cent was now enough. That change was moved by Balmain secretary Bob Savage.

Robert Emmett Savage, who had been associated with the Balmain Fitzroys junior club before the First World War, was assistant secretary for the Sewerage Employees Association, a most suitable qualification for any league official. In 1931 he became a Labor member of the Legislative Council, a position he held until his death in 1959, and was co-manager of the 1937 Kangaroo tour. His work with the Water Board would undoubtedly have brought him in close contact with Harold Jersey Flegg, who in 1929 had taken over from the deceased Fred Flowers as NSWRL president.⁶

A review of the residential boundaries was the trigger used to blow Glebe away at the end of the season. At the meeting on 11 November a vote was taken that Glebe be eliminated and was successful 13-12. This suggests that someone had crunched the numbers before the change to the League's constitution.⁷

There were protests and representations from local politicians such as mayor Bill Walsh, state member Tommy Keegan and federal member Jack Beasley, as reported in the *Sun*:

Mr Keegan said they were not at the meeting representing their own opinions but those of the electors who followed the game. The matter of the elimination of the club had been a big topic of discussion and he

had been approached to put his weight behind any agitation organised in protest. It was surprising that a club like Glebe which had had so much to do with the stabilisation of the league code should receive such scant consideration. Naturally, the club had its ups and downs like others. There had been industrial depression in the district and that must necessarily have its effect on any game. The action of the League would reduce the status of the district and electorate in general.⁸

With their backs to the wall, the Reds were indeed dirty and they tried to fight back. A public meeting in protest was held and reported in the *Daily Telegraph*:

**Glebe District Annoyed
Rugby League Team Wanted
(By 'Lock')**

Residents of Glebe, filled with righteous indignation, crowded into the Glebe Town Hall last night and recorded a vigorous protest against the elimination of the district from Rugby League grade football.

Men and women, old and young, turned up and in the vanguard of the attack were great internationals like Frank Burge and Bert Gray.

Several speakers declared that Glebe had been victimised because it was a workers district, though the League game was held up by its officials as the most democratic of all codes.

Other speakers mentioned ulterior motives, and the influence of 'gate receipts upon the ill-considered judgement of the special committee.⁹

The decision certainly divided opinion across the game. The Newcastle Rugby League wrote to the head body deploring the loss of the bye and consequent effect on country football and the Sydney clubs were split over the issue. When the rescission motion was put forward by St George's Jack Mostyn, supported by a petition with 4000 signatures calling for the club to be reinstated, the vote was 12-12, evidence of the divide but not enough to overturn the expulsion.

Mostyn then went so far as to table a motion that Balmain should be renamed Glebe, which brought forth the reply from Savage: 'You would!' Wests delegate Charlie Elliott suggested that the decision had

been set up months before, and one suspects he was not too far from the truth.

It was opportunism and bastardry to rival anything done to other clubs later. A reading of the papers of the day and the League's minutes shows that Balmain, led by the aptly-named Savage, was the club behind the move, but Souths, Easts and Newtown were all complicit.

The members of the League's management committee — S. G. Ball, John Quinlan, Jack Chaseling and Savage, as well as new President Flegg, who were effectively the powerbrokers of the game — were all on the record as speaking in favour of Glebe's elimination.

The League had responsibility for negotiating the lease of Wentworth Park with the trust, and its own clumsy and miserly handling of the issue had seen the Reds deprived of a home ground. This was then used against Glebe but by 1929 the club was back there. This issue was scarcely the cause of their demise.

The demographics in the Glebe district were changing, but where were they not and when are they not?

Likewise, the accusation that Glebe used players ineligible under the residential rule is open to question. There is no evidence that Glebe was rorting the rule more than any other club. They all did!

Perhaps the lack of continuity with officials told against Glebe. The club had had three different secretaries since 1920 whilst Quinlan at Easts, Ball at Souths and Chaseling at Newtown had all been in office since before World War I. Glebe was clearly not part of what Kris Corcoran has identified as the cartel that ran the game.¹⁰

Maybe we should have got the message then that tradition could not resist underhanded deals and backroom politics. When it comes to drama and intrigue, Phillip Street can match anything you may find in Macquarie Street or even on *Coronation Street*.

Suffering Students

The entry of Sydney University RLFC into the competition for 1920 was a triumph for the League and proof, it boasted,¹¹ that rugby league was a game for all classes.

Having cracked the upper-class citadel and broken out of its working-class confines, there was now speculation that the game would soon spread to the GPS schools. We're still waiting for that bastion to fall.

As an aside it is interesting to note that although rugby union has now been professional for over a decade, it is easier for kids at GPS schools to play union, soccer or even Aussie Rules than it is for them to play the still-scorned league. St Ignatius Riverview has been one

exception to the rule, but the traditions and cultural baggage of the member schools still seem to deem that rugby league is too plebeian for those with loftier social ambitions.

University had bucketloads of experience, but only in their coaching ranks. The likes of Sandy Pearce, Paddy McCue, Billy Kelly and later Bob 'Botsy' Williams provided coaching wisdom and guidance. On the field they relied overwhelmingly on youth, with the only established first graders to play with them being Paddy Conaghan, the great Jimmy Craig, and George Cummins.

In spite of the challenges, by 1926 things were starting to come together for the Students. That year they made it all the way to the final, before turning in a nervous performance that saw Souths take the title 11-5.

They struggled thereafter but it was always going to be difficult when reliant on players all under 25 years of age. They didn't have the match hardness, muscle or experience to match it with seasoned professionals from other teams.

The large turnover of players is evidenced in Sammy Ogg, the demon tackler, being the only person to reach 100 first-grade games with the club. The fact that the players all competed as amateurs, too, made it easy picking when the other clubs turned predatory and began poaching their stars such as Ross McKinnon, who went on to play for Australia, Frank O'Rourke — a cousin of Les Darcy — and Rod O'Loan.

The story of their only Kangaroo, Ray Morris, is a tragic one worthy of its own midday movie. A big, burly three-quarter, he rose through the ranks of the Western Suburbs juniors to play for the Magpies from 1927 until 1932. In that time he played in their first premiership winning side in 1930 and made his debut for New South Wales in 1931.

In 1933 Morris switched to University and was selected from the Students for the Kangaroo tour that year. On board the ship taking them to England the team did what exercise it could to stay in shape, and boxing was a popular choice. Unfortunately Morris damaged an ear drum in such a workout, and when they went swimming in the polluted waters at Ceylon his ear became infected. Back on board the infection worsened to such an extent that he had to be put ashore at Malta and hospitalised. Things didn't improve and he developed meningitis, which proved fatal on 10 August 1933.

When I worked at the Australian Rugby League (ARL), I was involved in the process of allocating numbers to all Australian representatives since 1908, with the criterion being anyone who had

played at least one game for Australia on home soil or on tour. Even though he didn't meet that requirement, I battled long and hard for Morris to be included. I was overruled, which I still think is a bit harsh.

At the end of 1937 Sydney University made a voluntary decision to withdraw from the NSWRL premiership, having come to the realisation that it couldn't compete. The club was sick of getting belted by bigger blokes in attack, defence and on the scoreboard. The Students had won only one game in their final three seasons, and the gap between them and the other clubs was clearly getting bigger with each passing year.

Their legacy is the University Shield which continues to be a coveted rugby league trophy and symbol of excellence for state schools in New South Wales.

When the NSWRL started the inter-district competition in 1963, later becoming the Second Division, Sydney University was a member club and made two grand finals. Reforms under the Whitlam government expanded the tertiary sector enough to allow the establishment of the University Cup, now the Tertiary League.

The Battling Bluebags

It was nearly 50 years before another club left the competition, and in that time six new clubs joined: Manly and Parramatta in 1947, Cronulla and Penrith in 1967 and Illawarra and Canberra in 1982. The inclusion of the latter two showed the spectacular growth of the game, which had now spread beyond its harbourside origins and the Sydney metropolitan area.

By the 1983 season the game was also facing new challenges closer to home. The introduction of colour television in the 1970s and growth of sponsorship were balanced by the poor administrative models and business practices of some clubs which threatened their very existence.

The times they were a-changing when NSWRL president Kevin Humphreys resigned in May 1983, and the League underwent a structural review that led to a major overhaul. If there was any remaining doubt that the game was now a business, the Scott report¹² ended those illusions and gave the new administration an opportunity to initiate change, some of which involved pruning.

At the end of that year the NSWRL general committee voted to expel Western Suburbs and to suspend Newtown.

Australia's oldest club, the Jets (Newtown's nickname from 1973, replacing the Bluebags) faced financial difficulties and were trying to relocate to Campbelltown.



Although Newtown had only won three first-grade premierships, its contribution to the game and place in its folklore could not be measured by mere trophies. Mentioning a 1-0 or a nil-all scoreline, or the names of Manfred Moore, Warren Ryan, Tommy Raudonikis, Bowden and Broadhurst or 'Chicka' Ferguson needs no further explanation. All those names and games were from the years 1973–83.

After John Marsden buggered, for want of a better term, their move to Campbelltown, Newtown was suspended from the 1984 premiership to give them time to sell their licensed premises at Stanmore, pay their players and get their house in order. Then, it was promised, they would be reborn in 1985 as the Newtown-Campbelltown Jets.

What the players were supposed to do for twelve months seems to have been overlooked by the League, and when the licensed club was still unsold at the end of 1984 the suspension was extended indefinitely.

However Newtown refused to die. Like rugby league's answer to Monty Python's *Black Knight*, to Newtown its suspension was a mere flesh wound. The club ultimately paid all its players and eight years later reappeared, albeit at a lower level.

The Jets joined the Metropolitan Cup in 1991 and claimed the 1992 premiership backed by a fine side and a tide of best wishes and goodwill. Under the inspired lunacy of coach Col Murphy they went on to snare a hat-trick of premierships in seasons 1995, 1996 and 1997 before seeking fresh fields of challenge and stepping up to what is currently known as the NSW Cup.

These days they serve as feeders to the club formerly known as Eastern Suburbs, a mutually agreeable arrangement whereby the Roosters save a considerable amount of money and Newtown has access to a stream of quality players that would not otherwise be available. Having made two of the last three grand finals in that grade, the partnership has obviously been a success. If only we could find someone to kick field goals on grand final day!

Incidentally, the regeneration and rejuvenation of Newtown as a suburb underlines the ephemeral nature of Sydney's urban demographics. The Jets have, through their own sweat and footslogging efforts, reconnected with their local community to the extent that these days at Henson Park there is a veritable human smorgasbord, with the old Bluebag rump equally at home alongside

the punks, the goths, the gays and the greys in the crowd of 8972.¹³

Western Suburbs fought the League in court and won a stay of execution for 1984, so at the end of that season the NSWRL promptly tried to do it again. Once more the Magpies took the League to court and, because the case and appeal would not be settled before the start of 1985, the NSWRL relented and allowed Wests to remain; momentarily at least.

Expansion and Reduction

After the tribulations of Newtown and Wests, new clubs Newcastle, Brisbane and the Gold Coast were added to the premiership for season 1988. Within a decade they had been joined by clubs from further afield. By 1995 there was a 20-team national premiership that stretched from Perth all the way to Auckland.

That growth coincided with the introduction of pay television into Australia. Rugby league's strength became an important bargaining chip for rival media forces as they ripped the game apart to try to gain control of the lucrative market on Australia's eastern seaboard.

With News Limited and the disaffected Broncos and Raiders officials leading the way, a breakaway competition was first floated and then created in spite of Phillip Street waving the Annandale and Glebe stick at the rebel clubs. Whether that disaffection was justified is for others to determine. My focus here is on the impact the war had on the clubs and their fans.

After a two-year stand-off the rival competition became a reality for season 1997 and rugby league was, as Abraham Lincoln might have said, 'a house divided against itself'.¹⁴ What Rowe and Lawrence have called the 'globalisation and mediatisation' of sport became a reality and gave us Super League and 'the vision'.¹⁵

The rebel organisation added new clubs the Adelaide Rams and the Hunter Mariners, with the latter having some success despite being despised in their own backyard. The Mariners introduced many talented young players into News Limited's version of elite rugby league, but after 12 months divided an armistice was reached.

The peace deal that ended the schism saw the birth of the National Rugby League (NRL), which was charged with reducing the number of teams from 22 — or 23 if you include the new Melbourne franchise — down to fourteen.

It came as no surprise when the Mariners, regardless of having reached the final of the inappropriately-named World Club Challenge in their only year, were cut when the game was glued back together at the end of 1997.

The reunification process saw a number of other casualties.

Launched with high hopes, the South Queensland Crushers were up against it from the start. Not only did they have the powerhouse Brisbane Broncos as hostile neighbours, they came into being at the most fractious moment in the game's history.

Although the Crushers attracted crowds of 21,000 in their debut year the lack of success for their top team gave little encouragement to their fans. They won the under-20s' premiership in 1996, and in spite of the efforts of the late Dick 'Tosser' Turner they were death-ridden by the News Limited press who were out to restore the Broncos' monopoly on the Brisbane market.

Sean Fagan, in his summary of the club in his book *The Premiership Clubs*, hits the nail on the head:

The Crushers were undoubtedly victims of circumstance notwithstanding their lack-lustre premiership results — the Super League war had sent player payments rocketing skyward while the game's fans began to turn their back on Rugby League.¹⁶

When the ARL withdrew its funding from the club at the end of the 1997 season, the Crushers were crushed out of existence.

Perth had a rugby league history that stretched back to the end of World War II, thanks to the pioneering work of the likes of Ken Allen and former Newtown hooker Arthur 'Snowy' Folwell. In the 1960s Sydney club sides had travelled to Western Australia to take on its representative team as an end-of-season excursion.

When the Western Reds entered the premiership in 1995, they were backed by a burgeoning local league. The Super League war, though, meant they never had the chance to settle down despite combining veterans such as Mick Potter, Mark Geyer and Brad Mackay alongside rising talents of the calibre of Rodney Howe and Matt Geyer.

When News Limited turned off the financial oxygen needed to keep them alive at the top level, it forced the demise of the Reds (then known as the Perth Reds) at the end of 1997. However, it is pleasing to note that the game there has refused to die. For the past two seasons, a team named the Western Australian Reds has competed in the NSWRL Bundy Red Shield competition. This is the first step in the Western Australian Rugby League's plan to have an NRL team of its own eventually, and one must admire its resilience.

At the end of the first reunified season in 1998 there were fresh graves for the Adelaide Rams and the Gold Coast Chargers, thereby somewhat undermining the validity of the first letter of the NRL.

Given the spectacular success of the Gold Coast Titans since entering the competition, one has to ponder what went wrong with the Gold Coast incarnations: the Giants, the Seagulls, the Gladiators and the Chargers. Was it too early? Was it the wrong model or wrong time? Did they not have enough time or was it simply poor management? Perhaps it was a bit of each.

Sadly, in the Gold Coast's final incarnation as the Chargers, they made the finals in the split year of 1997. They managed to turn a profit of over \$1million in 1998, something no other club achieved.¹⁷

It was to no avail but the lessons learned then by the likes of Paul Broughton and Michael Searle have obviously served the Titans well.

The Adelaide Rams got a start in Super League when the South Australian Rugby League signed with News Limited in 1995. In contrast, the Victorian Rugby League remained loyal to the ARL and thus thwarted the rebels' plans for Melbourne. The Rams were put together at short notice in 1997, and performed credibly in the alternative competition under coach Rod Reddy.

The Rams survived into 1998 but suffered second season syndrome and finished seventeenth in the 20-team NRL competition. They were still preparing themselves for the season ahead when, in December 1998, News Limited suddenly withdrew financial support and they were forced out of NRL. That this was done in haste is shown by the fact that coach Dean Lance and the Rams players were away at a training camp when the news broke.

The Urge to Merge

The fervent commitment to establish a fourteen-team competition also resulted in shotgun marriages for several Sydney clubs, with the NRL offering dowries of \$8 million. The fact that all of the clubs forced to merge had been aligned with the ARL during the fractured years was, no doubt, pure coincidence.

There was something cruel, illogical and inherently wrong in the way the clubs that had built the game were sideswiped. History and tradition were blindsided by the imposed will of a media conglomerate. A series of strange partnerships followed, almost like a rugby league version of *Perfect Match*.

St George and Illawarra went to the altar, and a year later Wests and Balmain — having rejected other suitors — jumped into bed together. So did Manly and North Sydney, though the latter union degenerated into a domestic dispute that ultimately led to an ugly divorce.

The process involved in each was based on criteria that were, according to general opinion, equally malleable and questionable.

The fact that there was no measurement of the contribution clubs had made to the game over 90 years, or the bonds they had built up with their respective communities seemed immoral, as one South Sydney fan pointed out after its exclusion:

A resigned Beverly Wedderburn, 61, of Ermington, one of hundreds of Souths supporters who cheered Piggins when he entered the club's packed first-floor bar, lamented the loss of traditional clubs at the expense of News Ltd-funded franchises such as Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and North Queensland.

'They've taken our lives away from us,' she said. 'You do the right thing all your life and this is what you get.

'My husband, Jim, sold doubles for the club and our youngest girl, Kylie, was Reggie the Rabbit (the club mascot). We've followed Souths for 45 years, brought our two girls to marching practice twice a week and taught them to mix with Souths people because we said they represented all of society'.¹⁸

The timetable for rationalisation meant that clubs made their decisions under threat of extinction.

Steel Dragons

St George was arguably the most famous football club in Australian sport, with an unrivalled record of eleven successive premierships and a list of internationals that read like a Who's Who of Rugby League.

The club that boasted Norm Provan, Ken Kearney, Reg Gasnier and John Raper — let alone later legends such as Reddy, Young and Coyne — deserved better, but as chairman Doug McClelland wrote in the club's annual report:

We realised that five or six of the eleven existing Sydney teams would go by the year 2000. We also became aware that whilst we could possibly survive for another two years on a stand-alone basis, the economics thereafter were most uncertain and that to put beyond doubt the very survival of the most famous rugby league club in the world we had to do something about it. It was a tough decision to take but we knew after examination of all the facts it was a matter of necessity.¹⁹

The Illawarra district had always been a rich source of players, but the Illawarra Steelers' seventeen seasons in the premiership saw them struggle to compete financially with the richer clubs. Their on-field

highlights include the 1989 midweek cup final, and a stellar 1992 season when they went within a whisker of making the grand final.

There were plenty of good players to wear the scarlet and white, headlined by their four internationals: Alan McIndoe, Bob Lindner, Rod Wishart and Paul McGregor. There were plenty of other good players down in the 'Gong too.

Given the compatibility of their colours and the fact many Dragons — such as the great Graeme 'Changa' Langlands — had come from the south coast, the St George-Illawarra marriage was a more natural fit than the other forced unions. There were elements of each club that fought to remain separate, and many now consider it more of a takeover by St George than a merger.

In rationalising their position, Steelers chairman Peter Newell offered the following:

It was always the board's first option to stand alone. However, a thorough investigation revealed that for this to be achieved the club needed to generate an extra \$2 million revenue every year. After reviewing its options, the board was satisfied that this was an impossible hurdle.

The Steelers company had a level of debt. To field a depleted team next year and then bow out of the league, would leave the club at risk of being unable to service that debt. New financial arrangements as part of the joint venture agreement largely address this problem and place the club on a sound financial footing.

The board never considered 'bowing out gracefully' as some had suggested. The Steelers charter is to bring world class rugby league to Wollongong, and we will do all in our power to see that ideal upheld.

We produce great juniors in this world class nursery, and we want to be able to keep them. As things stood, we were a sitting duck for every club with a fat chequebook who wanted to lure our kids away.

I am convinced that unless we successfully negotiated this joint venture, there would be no Illawarra presence in the NRL come 2000 when we are certain the number of teams will be reduced to 14. Under this arrangement, our juniors will have the opportunity to strive for one of the strongest NRL teams; a team with an undeniable premiership chance each year.²⁰

St George-Illawarra made the NRL grand final in 1999, in its first year as a joint venture. This helped salve any lingering wounds between the two parties, even though they were beaten. Fans in both Kogarah and Corrimal still await premiership glory.

The Tigers Go West

The Balmain Tigers had won eleven premierships, and could lay claim to any number of wonderful players throughout their history, with the likes of 'Chook' Fraser, Reg 'Whip' Latta, Sid Goodwin, Joe Jorgensen, Keith 'Golden Boots' Barnes, Peter Provan and Arthur Beetson all heroes to the Tiger faithful.

In the 1980s they threatened for the title several times. The Tigers made two grand finals with a team that boasted the likes of Wayne Pearce, Benny Elias, Paul Sironen, Steve Roach and Garry Jack.

A few lean years on the field, however, and some poor business options off it had them on their knees by the late 1990s. The decisions to change their name to the Sydney Tigers, change their jersey to include some snazzy purple and relocate to Parramatta Stadium must rank amongst the most ill-advised of any club.

In assessing the merger with Western Suburbs, Balmain chairman John Chalk wrote in the club's annual report:

Well, 1999 was a year when rugby league changed forever. We all have an opinion whether that was good or bad for the game, but it is a fact of life.

We have to put our foot on the accelerator and continue to be at the forefront of rugby league in Australia. It is no good living in fear of the past or future, life goes on, so lets get behind our investment in the Wests Tigers football team with the same intensity as we have, and will continue to give the Balmain Tigers, for it is the Members club, they own it.²¹

The mighty Western Suburbs Magpies had seemingly had a target on their forehead for about 20 years before they were ultimately forced into bed with the Tigers.

This would have been inconceivable in the early 1960s, when Wests were tagged the Millionaires. Things had undeniably changed since those days of Holman, Dimond and Kelly. Even the great Fibro days of the late 1970s under Roy Masters — headlined by Tommy Raudonikis, 'Dallas' Donnelly, Les Boyd and Bruce 'Sloth' Gibbs — seemed a long time ago. Having relocated to Campbelltown, Wests had already taken their medicine and had one of Sydney's most prolific nurseries as their

new backyard. Although struggling financially, they were holding their own and were redeveloping their licensed premises.

Chairman Jim Marsden rationalised the merger thus in Wests' annual report:

It is true that Balmain and Wests were forced into this position by the Rugby League war and members on both sides accepted the joint venture only as a last resort and an option which was preferable to eventual extinction. It was also the only financial option open to both clubs.²²



The Wests Tigers scored a fairytale premiership win in 2005. This helped cement the relationship but, as one old Magpie friend of mine puts it, 'They're Wests when they win and Tigers when they lose'.

The Northern Eagles Experiment

The Manly-Warringah Sea Eagles might have been unloved by all but their own fans, but we had a right to hate them on their own. We hated their glamour, their wealth and resultant ability to recruit just about anyone they wanted.

There may have been a touch of jealousy in the vitriol the rest of Sydney directed towards the men from the northern beaches, but having been premiers on six occasions and runners-up on another nine, and having produced 59 internationals the club seemed to thrive on it.

The Sea Eagles had, by 1999, been in three of the last five grand finals. That wasn't enough to guarantee their long-term security, as chairman Ed Whiley lamented in their annual report:

Whilst our Club met all requirements of the Basic and Qualifying Criteria, and was invited to compete as a stand alone club, it was obvious that for the long-term financial security and competitive viability of the club, this Joint Venture should take place.

Your Board did not make this decision without considerable discussion and angst. However they felt that with the prospective sponsorship opportunities and increased crowd figures, presented by a potentially stronger football team, the decision was in the best interests of our club.²³

The Sea Eagles were surgically joined to neighbours and rivals North Sydney, but it was the Bears who would be stitched up. It was

cruelly and perhaps typically ironic that North Sydney should be forced to merge after enjoying the best decade in its history.

As with Newtown, Norths might not have boasted the biggest trophy cabinet in the game but had been a vibrant and colourful contributor to the game's rich tapestry since 1908.

In names like Blinkhorn, Horder, Thompson, the McKinnons, Carlson, Irvine, Ambrum, Larson and Fairleigh they had their own pantheon of greats. That didn't help them when the leagues club and football club had a major split, and the weather conspired to undermine their planned move to the Central Coast.

Although the Northern Eagles marriage lasted two years, old scars refused to heal and North Sydney's ongoing financial woes saw them divorced at the end of the 2001 season.

Under the guidance of local favourite Greg Florimo the Bears have now put their house well in order and are planning to return to the NRL based at Gosford, something all league traditionalists would like to see.

Manly, once again a stand-alone club, has shown that it is viable by making the last two grand finals.

Rabbitohs Take It to the Streets

If Sydney was indeed the heart of rugby league as the late great Alex Buzo argued in his 2001 Tom Brock lecture,²⁴ then News Limited would perhaps have been more aptly personified by Dr Mengele or Jack the Ripper rather than by Christiaan Barnard.

This seemed especially so when South Sydney was excluded from the competition at the end of season 1999. This event brought forth much protest, weeping and gnashing of teeth. One letter writer to the *Sydney Morning Herald* even saw it as the death of a part of Australia:

South Sydney's demise is a metaphor for the destruction of a once proud egalitarian society. It is linked to the latest drive to abandon the concept of equal educational opportunity. It is reflected in the provision of Olympic tickets for members of an exclusive men's club.

It is perhaps the final gasp of those believe that monetary value does not necessarily equal spiritual value. It is a victory for all those whose only concern is the bottom line.

It finally abandons the principles our parents and grandparents gave their lives for in two world wars. This is no longer a society where mateship is a cornerstone, and a fair go for all is a foundation. The average punter can no

longer stand beside the toff and share the spirit of a brave new world.

The new millennium ushers in exclusivity as our standard bearer where once we dreamed of fraternity and equality.

And what a tragedy that is.²⁵

It certainly touched a nerve across a broad spectrum of Australian society with all-comers, including eminent psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg who penned a letter to the *Herald* to voice a sense of injustice that was felt all the way from Maroubra to Moree.

Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 20 October 1999, respected journalist Caroline Jones — were it others the term respected journalist would be an oxymoron — penned an open letter to Lachlan Murdoch explaining why clubs like South Sydney meant so much to so many:

Dear Lachlan,

I haven't met you or your father but I admire your grandmother and that's why I'm writing. Being a relative newcomer, you must be puzzled by all the fuss over your decision to drop South Sydney from the National Rugby League competition.

It might help if I explain a few things about Australians, so you can understand why people are saying they hope you rot in hell.

Strong words but, you see, you've trampled on a thing that matters to people. We can hardly find words for it but it's something to do with meaning and a sense of belonging. It's deep and it's real, something we know in our guts. Nothing could ever change it, and we wouldn't want it to either.²⁶

When an estimated 50,000 — or 20,000 if you read the *Daily Telegraph* — marched through the streets to support South Sydney's right to be in the competition they sent an overwhelming message to the NRL that a sense of community ownership remains a salient issue. And there weren't just Souths jerseys on display. There were plenty of fans from other clubs who also voted with their feet, as Ray Chesterton wrote:

Souths were a living symbol for not just themselves but for the disenfranchised, the disillusioned and the dispirited who found the game's development too reckless and radical.²⁷

In assessing why so many people rallied to Souths' cause and produced such militancy, James Connor says:

It was also a fight that could be had. What I mean by that is your average Australian may see what is going on in their community, the decline of tradition and connection to place and lament quietly as there was little they could actually do. This was a fight they could be part of that did deal with their concerns for society and their feelings about loss of control tradition and folklore.²⁸

In the end, people power prevailed. The NRL realised that it needed South Sydney nearly as much as South Sydney needed the NRL, and the Bunnies were readmitted in 2002.

Perhaps our best reference to those years is the English rugby league experience of the mid-1990s, where similar forces threatened the very fabric of the game. One ludicrous idea was to merge Featherstone Rovers, Castleford and Wakefield Trinity, and to expel clubs such as Batley altogether.

Andrew Moore, in the inaugural Tom Brock lecture,²⁹ observed the symmetry between Sydney and northern England. The sentiments in the following stories from the book *Merging on the Ridiculous* articulate the sense of ownership and betrayal that was felt by supporters in Lancashire and Yorkshire when they were threatened with mergers:

Part of the local air we breathe is about to be taken away. Rugby League in Featherstone, Oldham and Doncaster could vanish overnight. This is a tragedy for supporters. But the effects will be felt by many who don't take an active interest in the game. Rugby League is part of our local identity, it helps to make this corner of Yorkshire that bit different from its neighbours. In an age where all high streets begin to look the same, we need to keep hold of the richness of diversity.³⁰

The sense of loss was palpable to this Halifax fan:

My story's probably no different from thousands of others throughout Lancashire and Yorkshire, only the team's specific. In my case the team was Halifax. The past tense is chosen deliberately.

Throughout my childhood I went to all home games with my dad but not the Championship Final against St Helens at Swinton. He died the previous month.

I miss him, he was a good man and a socialist, both

qualities now sadly out of fashion. He didn't think people with money should be able to ride roughshod over other people's lives. I'm sorry he died and I'm sorry we didn't spend more time on the terrace together. But I'm not sorry he hasn't seen the events of the last four weeks.³¹

Lastly, one fan could at least see one positive out of the whole sorry mess:

The first team I ever watched, Batley, has the motto 'Pride and Heritage'. Some people will soon have no team to be proud of and no sporting heritage left, all sold out to the Australian Bloefield. Shame, shame, shame.

Finally, I've heard Lindsay and the chairmen described as Judases, but I recall Judas hanged himself after he realised the depth of his betrayal. At least we've got something to look forward to then.³²

Since I took the liberty of twisting Oscar Wilde's words, I might also do so with English metaphysical poet John Donne: no sport is an island, complete unto itself.

Rugby league has not been the only sport to endure its share of murders and mergers, deaths and deletions. As we have just seen it has happened in other centres of the game, and there are examples closer to home in the demise of clubs like Valleys, Wests and Brothers in Brisbane, and it has happened in other sports both in Australia and overseas.

The Australian Football League has had the merger of the Brisbane Bears and Fitzroy. Soccer in Australia has seen the death of the old National Soccer League, while English clubs such as Accrington, Wimbledon and Luton Town all had dramatic falls from grace.

The transportability of franchises in American sports produces multiple examples of teams relocating, or being renamed and re-branded. The Brooklyn Dodgers in baseball and American football's Los Angeles Rams are two of the more shining examples of how fans can have that connection with their club severed in the most brutal fashion.

Certainly the nature of the relationship between club and community has changed since 1908, to say nothing of the way clubs are constituted and administered. Technological advances and social changes over the last 100 years have impacted enough on the game so that men in expensive suits, with sideburns and gel in their hair, can now refer to rugby league as a product and to clubs as franchises. They sometimes forget that fans are not just consumers and that the

product won't last long without their support. One gets the impression that many of those now charged with administering the sport don't, for all the university degrees, have any great emotional attachment to the game.

The two South Sydney marches through the streets of Sydney demonstrated that people still affiliate with their districts and with their teams. There remain some quintessential differences that distinguish the teams within Sydney — without even considering the regional differences of those outside — but we don't have time to examine the subtle social nuances of suburban Sydney. Tribalism and tradition are part of what makes this Friday night's upcoming grand final qualifier between Parramatta and Canterbury so delicious in anticipation.

Recent calls in elements of the Sydney media for further rationalisation show that the axe may yet be sharpened and wielded again. Cronulla, the Balmain half of the Wests Tigers and Manly have all had much-publicised difficulties in the last twelve months. The global financial crisis has had its own implications, as have the reduced stream of revenue from licensed clubs and the challenge of finding new sources of income.

And yet that there have also been accompanying calls for further expansion, with legitimate claims all being made by the likes of Perth, Central Queensland and the Sunshine Coast. Adelaide would certainly love to have a team again. In addition it is worth considering a team from Papua New Guinea and a second New Zealand side. I believe there is widespread consensus that first cab off the rank should be the rightful reinstatement of North Sydney, based on the Central Coast, into the NRL.

In concluding, if I sound like some rugby league Grim Reaper or footy's answer to Doris Stokes it is certainly not intentional. Rather than see it is some sort of morbid curiosity, I've always approached league history from a more reverent avenue. There are many reasons why people follow teams. Be it geography, genetics, culture or colours that draw them in, the stories of the men and moments that make each club what they are have an endless fascination for me.

I also acknowledge that some may not agree with my perception of each club's perils and pitfalls but I do not pretend to speak *ex cathedra*, and merely offer my humble praise and appraisal of those who dug the well from which we drink.

The effort involved in establishing a club at the highest level, the good days on the field and sense of pride generated in a jersey and throughout a wider community of people are all achievements worth

chronicling and reflect their times and those that sustain them, whether that be for one or a hundred years.

No one can predict what challenges await rugby league in the future. My only hope is that our code can remain the game of the people, by the people and for the people.³³

NOTES

- 1 Parable of the mustard seed: Luke 13: 18–19.
- 2 *Rugby League News*, 7 August 1920, p. 7.
- 3 *Sydney Sportsman*, 21 July 1920, p. 2.
- 4 Max Solling, History of Glebe RLFC, unpublished manuscript in author's possession.
- 5 NSWRL minutes, 9 September 1929, NSWRL.
- 6 *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online*, <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/>, accessed 20 June 2009.
- 7 NSWRL minutes, 11 November 1929, NSWRL.
- 8 *Sun*, 12 November 1929.
- 9 *Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 1929.
- 10 Kristine Corcoran, 'The Business of Rugby League: Some Social and Economic Aspects in the Sydney Metropolitan Area 1908–52', MA (Hons) thesis, UNSW, 1997.
- 11 *Rugby League News*, 23 April 1921, p. 15.
- 12 Report of firm W. D. Scott, management consultants, commissioned by the NSWRL that recommended a restructure of the League, its incorporation, and adoption of business principles. *Big League*, 3–9 August 1983, p. 3.
- 13 This figure has been announced as the attendance at all Newtown home matches over the past decade, and has now spawned its own line of t-shirts and stubby holders.
- 14 From a speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln to the Republican State Convention, Illinois, 16 June 1858. Lincoln paraphrased a quote from the Gospel of Matthew 12: 25. Quoted in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1953, vol. 2, p. 461.
- 15 Geoffrey Lawrence and David Rowe, 'Framing a Critical Sports Sociology in the Age of Globalization', in David Rowe and Geoffrey Lawrence (eds), *Tourism, Leisure, Sport: Critical Perspectives*, Hodder Education, Rydalmere, 1998, pp. 159–69.
- 16 Sean Fagan, *The Premiership Clubs*, RL1908, Sydney, 2004, p. 133.
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- 23 Manly-Warringah RLFC, *Annual Report*, 1999, p. 2.
- 24 Alex Buzo, *Sydney: Heart of Rugby League*, Tom Brock Bequest Committee/Australian Society for Sports History, Sydney, 2002.
- 25 Letter to the editor by Ned Manning, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1999.
- 26 Caroline Jones, 'A Murrurundi Girl's Note to a Murdoch', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 October 1999.
- 27 Ray Chesterton, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 2001, p. 7, quoted in James Connor, 'South Sydney's Fight To Play: A Clash of Old and New', in Andy Carr and Andrew Moore (eds), *Centenary Reflections: 100 Years of Rugby League in Australia*, Australian Society for Sports History, Melbourne, 2008, p. 115.
- 28 Connor, 'South Sydney's Fight To Play', p. 115.
- 29 Andrew Moore, *Jimmy Devereux's Yorkshire Pudding: Reflections on the Origins of Rugby League in New South Wales and Queensland*, Tom Brock Bequest Committee/Australian Society for Sports History, Sydney, 2000.
- 30 Ian Clayton et al. (eds), *Merging on the Ridiculous: The Fans Response to the Super League*, Yorkshire Art Circus, 1995, p. 25.
- 31 Clayton, *Merging on the Ridiculous*, p. 29.
- 32 Clayton, *Merging on the Ridiculous*, p. 31.
- 33 Abraham Lincoln, 'Gettysburg Address', in Basler, *The Collected Works*, vol. 7, p. 22.



THE 11TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE was delivered by Mr Terry Williams on 23 September 2009. The Lecture was entitled *The Lost Tribes of League: The fate of axed and merged clubs and their fans.*

Since 1908, twelve clubs from the top level of club competition — in what is now the National Rugby League — have departed. Some died of natural causes, some were kicked out and some of them continue to exist in merged entities.



Why did they each start up? What factors led to their demise? What lessons can we learn from their dashed hopes and smashed dreams? How do those casualties reflect the game at that particular stage of its development and wider social trends in a local and national context?

In this publication, Terry Williams skilfully examines the reasons for the rise and fall of 'The Lost Tribes of League'.

Published by the Tom Brock Bequest Committee on behalf of the Australian Society for Sports History.

