

People, Meaning and Stories in Rugby League



John Harms



16th Annual Tom Brock Lecture

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99 On York
Sydney NSW
8 October 2014



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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 at www.tombrock.com.au/

People, Meaning and Stories in Rugby League

Born in Chinchilla in Queensland, JOHN HARMS spent his formative years in Oakey on the Darling Downs. One of four brothers, he grew up competing in cricket, rugby league, tennis, golf, athletics — anything that was going. After attending the University of Queensland, he became a secondary teacher before returning to postgraduate study. When he had almost completed his PhD in Australian history he started writing for newspapers and magazines, and soon published three books: *Confessions of a Thirteenth Man*, *Memoirs of a Mug Punter* and *Loose Men Everywhere*. In 2005, he published the biography of Steve Renouf, *The Pearl: Steve Renouf's Story*. He established Malarkey Publications, which produces *The Footy Almanac*, an annual of Australian footy writing. Malarkey also published *The Rugby League Almanac* in 2012. In 2009, he launched footyalmanac.com.au for sports writing. It has published over 12,000 pieces from around 1000 writers. John Harms appears on ABC-TV's *Offsiders* and can be heard here, there and everywhere on ABC Radio. He lives in Melbourne with his wife Susan and their three young children.

16th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2014,
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Thank you. I am honoured to be presenting this Annual Tom Brock Lecture.

Especially at this time, just a few days after South Sydney has won the 2014 National Rugby League (NRL) grand final, their first premiership in 43 years. It's rather fortunate that a lecture — which considers, however speculatively, the meaning contained in rugby league, in its people and in its stories — should take place when the notion that the game means so much to so many people is totally and completely observable. The Rabbitoh world is in a state of utter jubilation and the members of the Rabbitoh tribe have put their lives on hold to express their great joy at the victory. There is just no need to go to work.

Days later, and news services continue to show people in the streets. The party does not look like ending soon. It's still not yet time to return home, to resume the grind of day-to-day existence.

What a remarkable build-up to the grand final it was! The Rabbitohs, who have always stood for something, became the vessel which embodied hope, embodied belief in community, embodied people power, embodied the prospect of victory in the face of obliteration, embodied life (over death), embodied history and tradition, embodied the prospects of the little man, embodied people power.

Glory to South Sydney

And then, on Sunday night, what a fierce slog that grand final was. It was the sort of fight which tests the physical and mental strength of the combatants, until the victor triumphs, and the opponent is defeated. Not just beaten on the scoreboard, but left with nothing more to give.

And the drama! It seems one of the better ways of becoming part of the folklore of rugby league is to have parts of your body rearranged by a rampaging opponent early in a match of consequence, and for you to stay out there to continue — bravely, truly, heroically — to lead your side in battle. Sam Burgess is part of rugby league mythology now.

And what a celebration! In the final minutes of the match itself when Souths tore the game open, and then the outpouring of emotion in the immediate post-match at the ground, and wherever people were watching.

The satisfaction grows deeper and deeper as time goes by.

I could imagine people in Redfern, in pubs and clubs around Australia, in far-off places around the world, smiling at the success of this historic club, whether Rabbitohs fans or just followers of rugby

league. And the Rabbitohs themselves going off. ‘Glory! Glory!’

The unbridled emotional outpouring of Bunnies fans shows unequivocally that South Sydney means a mighty lot to many, many people — and the game of rugby league does as well. Rugby league has its own quiddity, its own character, its own essence which is not arbitrary. It shares some of the elements of other sports, and of the other codes of football — the sense of common purpose, the sense of striving for the victory cup (or shield), the call to action, the hope — but it has its own particular and peculiar elements as well.

The Rabbitohs certainly meant a great deal to Tom Brock. But Tom, it seems to me, went way beyond the parochial. The game of rugby league meant a lot to Tom Brock. He loved the game; he respected the game; and he showed great commitment to rugby league as a result of that affection. Indeed Tom Brock’s generous bequest, the scholarship funds, and this very lecture, show how important the game was to him, and also how important discussion, debate and the gathering of stories about the game continue to be.

I am the sixteenth Tom Brock lecturer. I felt a little daunted as I read *Tales from Coathanger City*, which really is a fantastic collection of the lectures of the past decade, from those who like to think about rugby league: whether they be academics, historians, journalists or writers. It’s a real honour to be in the company of Roy Masters, Tom Kenneally, John Fahey, Tony Collins, Andrew Moore, David Rowe, Sean Fagan, Ian Heads, and the late Alex Buzo, Lex Marinis and the others.

An Unlikely Lecturer

In a way, I’m an unlikely Tom Brock lecturer. While I love and appreciate rugby league, and while I am drawn to write about the game, I have never worked as a staff journalist (only ever as an occasional contributor), and I have never held an academic position at a university, other than being a sessional teacher from time to time.

I come from the midst of the game, and other games. From inside it. From experiencing it. Much of my contemplation about all matters sporting has occurred from on the field itself (in producing my own litany of sporting disappointments) or from the outer, often beer in hand, in the company of ordinary everyday people. I have been a spectator at sporting contests because I love going to them, because they mean something to me, because they mean something to the group I am with, and to the thousands of people who have come through the turnstiles.

So I have travelled Australia and the world, observing. Feeling. Being. Definitely being.

Definitely being one of the many actors — however miniscule our roles — in it all. I am not the first person to argue that spectators are actually players at a sporting event.

As a thinker then, I am, by comparison to other lecturers, loose. Unstructured. Anecdotal.

But I have spent time with thousands of sports lovers and I have tried to describe them faithfully in my writing.

So, if there are two ends of the Annual Tom Brock Lecture spectrum, I am not at the Tony Collins end, I am at the Lex Marinos end, and that's not just because I worked for a number of years in George Florentzos's Cecil Café Oakey on Queensland's Darling Downs. (Lex, I loved your lecture. The opening riff about Wagga Wagga and Woy Woy and Fui Fui Moi Moi is wonderful.)

Ian Heads sits somewhere in the middle. I agree with him wholeheartedly when, in his 2000 Annual Tom Brock Lecture, he said:

Over the seasons rugby league has constructed a tradition of great characters and notable stories — a body of colourful deeds, tales of courage and famous contests so deserving of respect to be strong enough to underpin any sport.¹

I am also not the only one to argue that rugby league has gone through a period of change, where the commerce of the game has become a driving force in all aspects of the game, particularly at the elite level. While this commercialisation is common across professional sport, the change in rugby league has been quite stark, and there are those who have exploited it.

Tonight, as always, my thoughts are speculative, based on my own experience and developed within the context of my reading of Australian sports writing, and tested and honed in long and happy conversations: sometimes earnest, often playful, with a keen sense of the absurd. For what is crazier than grown men running around in the mud on a winter's afternoon, trying to advance a pig leather filled with air?

I Am A Queenslander

I should also mention that I am a Queenslander. I suspect I am the first Queenslander to give this lecture, a fact which may add some weight to those truths that Queenslanders hold about the south. We have every reason to be suspicious!

I have never lived in Sydney, I have never been to an NRL grand final, and as I learnt over the past few weeks in preparing this lecture, my reading around the topic of rugby league has many gaps. But the game has always meant something to me, and people are surprised to learn that in my book about being a football fan, *Loose Men Everywhere*, much of my childhood memoir is about rugby league in country Queensland.

I grew up in a manse, the son of a sports-loving Lutheran minister and a Lutheran minister's wife (a full-time role in itself). In our house, people mattered. Philosophy mattered. Education mattered. Thinking mattered. Music mattered.

I have three brothers. We grew up with sport. It's what we did. Indeed sport was life! So sport mattered.



Grandpa Was A Sportsman

I was born in Chinchilla in Queensland. Dad was from Burrumbuttock in the Riverina. He was a cricketer and a tennis player. He wore quite thick glasses so did not play footy, but he was a mad Geelong fan. My mother grew up on a potato and watermelon farm at Tent Hill in the Lockyer Valley. Her father, my Grandpa Logan, was a sportsman. He played on the wing for Gatton in the 1930s and I still remember the woollen under-vests he donned every day. He had worn them on the football field. He was very short, but he was quick. And he was a community man, always involved in organising school sport at Upper Tent Hill Primary, and helping in the district.

I spent my own early primary school years in Victoria. When I was ten we moved back to Queensland, to the country town of Oakey. We arrived in the week Australia won the Fifth Test at The Oval in 1972, when we sat around the warm oven of the gas stove on a frosty Downs night as Rod Marsh and Paul Sheahan knocked off the runs.

It was difficult to follow the Victorian Football League (VFL) from anywhere in Queensland in those days, let alone the Darling Downs, but we were in a new place making new friends and we just slotted in to the local culture. We played rugby league because that's what you did if you were a boy in Oakey.

I knew nothing of the game when I arrived there. Why would you run flat out at big kids who were just going to knock you over, and possibly out? How did you tackle those blokes when they ran at you?

I started playing rugby league at primary school, barefoot, on

the ka-kee weed, a pesky prickle that tested your mental strength. I also played in the under-12s of the Oakey Bears Junior Rugby League Football Club (RLFC). We played so much touch football at school and at home after school that it didn't take long to pick up the attacking elements of the game. Because I could catch, I could pass, I could run and I could kick — there's a chance I introduced the Peter McKenna drop punt to the Darling Downs — I was put at fullback.

But I couldn't tackle. This seemed a barbaric action to me.

I was learning that rugby league had the element of play, but it also had the element of brutality and conflict. Hence it had the elements of skill and the fun of running in the clear and setting up a teammate, but it also had the element of physical violence, however legitimised by the rules, and with that violence came a sense of fear: for all but the very toughest.

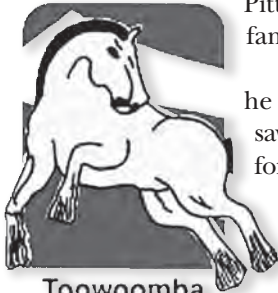
I had to overcome my fear.

We played against the teams of Toowoomba and the neighbouring towns. The giants of Millmerran — Mark Murray's home town — included David Uebergang, known as David Chubergang or Chubo. The farm boys of Pittsworth. The Catholic kids of All Whites. The talented kids from Valleys.

I knew nothing of the tradition and history of rugby league.

Old 'Steiney'

Over the years I came to appreciate who Old Steiney was, and the place of Toowoomba and the Clydesdales in Australian rugby league history. Herb Steinohrt was born at Springside, near Pittsworth, Queensland, 1897. He was one of ten kids in a family of German heritage.



Toowoomba
CLYDESDALES

After spending his early work years in his home district, he moved to Toowoomba in 1922. Here he worked in a sawmill and played football for Valleys. He was a versatile forward.

He played most of his football in the front row, but could play second row or lock.

He was part of the famous Toowoomba side, the Galloping Clydesdales side which beat all-comers in 1924. As unlikely as it seems, Toowoomba, some 100km from Brisbane, was the rugby league capital of Australia in the 1920s. The team featured stars like Duncan Thompson, E. S. Brown, Vic Armbruster and Herb. At one time more than half the Australian side was from Toowoomba: as many as eight players.

Herb Steinhart was captain of Queensland in 1931, and Australian captain for the 1932 series against England. The Australians lost the first Test in Sydney. The second Test was a bruising, injury-ridden clash which became known as 'The Battle of Brisbane'. Australia won 15-6. England won the third Test and the series.

Herb also skippered Valleys in Toowoomba for a decade and his love of the club, and of rugby league, never waned at all. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* paints a colourful picture of Herb:

Known as 'Steiney', he was dubbed by the press 'the tall, rangy woodcutter'. He stood about 6 ft 2 ins (188 cm) and weighed around 14 stone (89 kg), was ramrod straight ('six feet of whip cord') and was described as 'hard as a tall redwood' even into old age. He was known for his big hands. Regarded as Australia's greatest forward, he was a smart tactician who 'never played the same game twice'. He never lost his temper; he was neither cautioned nor sent from the field, but played hard: 'once you go through the gates, you've got no mates', he would say. Off-field, he was a thorough gentleman.²

'One Lung' Thompson

Duncan Thompson was another legend of the region. He was born in 1895 at Warwick on the southern Darling Downs, later the home of Wayne Bennett. Thompson worked in a bank in Ipswich, another stronghold of rugby league. He represented Combined Country in 1913 and Queensland in 1915.

He enlisted in Sydney in 1916, sailed for Europe on the *HMAS Ayrshire* and saw action on the Western Front. He was lucky to survive. Shot through the lung at Dernancourt in 1916, it was thought he would never play football again. Thompson was having nothing of it and returned to the game. He became known as 'One Lung' or 'The Wizard'.

Through his bank, Thompson initiated a move to New South Wales where he played for Wests in Newcastle, then North Sydney which won league premierships in 1921 and 1922. Having been a member of the 1920 Australian team in the second and third Tests against Harold Wagstaff's Englishmen, Thompson toured England in 1921-22, scoring 107



Duncan 'One Lung' Thompson was shot through the chest at Dernancourt but went on to be a champion Toowoomba and Australian half back.

points from 49 goals and 3 tries. In 1920–23 he captained New South Wales. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* records the rest of his career in this way:

In March 1923 Thompson resigned from the bank to set up a sports store. He represented Australia in two Tests in 1924, and played for Queensland (1924–25) and for Toowoomba for three years (at £400 a year) when that city was known as the Rugby League capital of the world. In this period Toowoomba's 'Galloping Clydesdales' defeated England, New South Wales, Victoria, South Sydney, Ipswich and Brisbane. Not a noted tackler, though one of the finest running half-backs in the history of the game, Thompson was lightly built and 'played with his eyes and brain'.³

Retiring from football at the end of 1925, he represented Queensland in tennis, had a handicap of three in golf and played bowls for Toowoomba in later life. In the early 1950s Thompson (the 'Downs Fox') coached Toowoomba to six State victories. A great theorist of the game, he became an administrator, Australian selector and patron of the Queensland Rugby League. He died in 1980.

These men were in our midst when I was growing up, but I had no idea of what they had done. During the 1970s, Family Harms bought sports equipment from Duncan Thompson's: my Duncan Hall high-cut boots, a Shaw and Shrewsbury cricket bat (with linseed oil), Oliver tennis racquets and Slazenger tennis balls.

But I had not heard of the 'Downs Fox'. Then, later in my senior high schooling, I spotted a reference in the Toowoomba *Chronicle* which sparked my interest. I think it was when Great Britain played a tour match at the Athletic Oval in Toowoomba and John Gray (who eventually played in the New South Wales Rugby League) kicked about a dozen goals with a unique round-the-corner soccer-style kicking action. ('That'll never take off,' they said.) There may have been a reference to Toowoomba's remarkable victory 23-20 over Great Britain in 1924 in the *Chronicle*. I had little concept of Toowoomba's rich rugby league history.

This is why today, schools — at least in the Toowoomba area, if not beyond — need to have books such as Nat Chandler's story of the 'Galloping Clydesdales'⁴ in their libraries, and teachers who are also aware of the local history.

There was so much I didn't know.



The mighty and undefeated Clydesdales of 1924. Their record for the season is listed in the margins. They beat England 23-20 and New South Wales 16-nil.

We were not a horse-racing family either — so I was completely unaware of Oakey’s most famous son, Bernborough, until a statue of the champion was erected in the main street in the late 1970s.

‘You’re coming home like Bernborough,’ Noel Leahy once said to me when playing snooker on the full-sized table at the back of Joe Jurd’s barber shop next to the Western Line Hotel opposite the Oakey Railway Station.

‘Who’s Bernborough?’ I asked through Sunday School eyes.

Noel Leahy was from a different world: the pub and racing and punting and rugby league world. The Oakey sporting fraternity. Noel’s dad Cornelius (Con) and mum Shirley — terrific people — had the Commercial Hotel, one of about seven watering holes in a town of 2000 people. Con was a mate of Artie Beetson, having grown up with him in western Queensland. He raced horses, which were stabled behind the pub including Mekezza which won in Brisbane at about 20/1, making the town happy for weeks. A lot of the winnings went back over the bar.

Noel went on to be a jockey. He was tiny then. A lot of us were. Which was one of our problems when it came to playing rugby league. We just couldn't compete with the size of most of the other kids. We didn't help ourselves by the fact that some of the team had not been blessed with the skills of concentration. They mucked up at training, they'd give you a dead leg as you were getting onto the bus, or a Chinese burn or crow-knuckle up the back, and then you'd limp out with them an hour later. One year we only had seven in the dressing shed. The other eight were up in the market garden at Valleys eating carrots.

So we learnt to lose. We won just one game in four seasons: against the other easybeats Allora-Clifton, the junior side of Wattles, where Greg and Lew Platz and the Hancocks played in the A-grade.

To give you an indication of our lack of size, many of us were still playing under-7 stone football in Grade 10! We went through that season undefeated. So we won on Wednesday and got thrashed on Saturdays. Weight football remains a good idea.

The Oakey Bears Ball Boy

While I was learning to play, and to overcome my fear, I began to become a genuine barracker for the Oakey Bears A-grade. And a ball boy or sand boy.

It was a struggle to be selected in one of these plum roles. Church was at 10am. The under-16s started at 11am. I would duck out of church during the benediction, race down the street (no time to get out of my Sunday best), across the railway line, and through the ANZAC memorial gates of the rugby league ground: all of 200m away. I may have been one of the few ball-boys in Queensland fulfilling his duties in purple flairs and purple and white velour jumper.

Walking up and down the sideline, I could hear the crunching tackles, the whimpers and the sighs, and I could see the grimaces.

After a couple of seasons I graduated to the grandstand from where I genuinely wanted Oakey to win. This was *my team*. They were *my boys*.

I would be caught in the theatre of it:

'Put 'em onside.'

'Don't ask your linesman, ask your guide dog.'

'That's high you Valleys mongrel.'

'You're a dog, 13.'

The crowd was friendly, and it was all a bit of fun if things were going the right way. But perceived injustice could create a sense of

menace among the supporters and it could get pretty volatile.

Mostly it was happy crowd; the crowd of play.

There were some real characters. Ratbags and larrikins. Free of spirit. Anti-authoritarian.

In later years, when I went to uni, and found my natural habitat on the Gabba Hill at Test cricket, the crowd had the same sensibility.

I Can Be There Next Wednesday

The Gabba was a wonderful place to be. Friday morning. First day of the Test. The opening bowler's hardly marked out his run-up but there's blokes on their third beer already. Some tradie's mobile phone would ring and a classic Gabba conversation would follow: 'No mate. No. Not today. No chance today, mate. Too flat out today, mate. I can be there next Wednesday'.

At the Oakey ground the licensed area was marked out by four star pickets hammered into the grass and some baling twine draped from picket to picket.

This was a new world for a churchgoing boy with a scholarly disposition who was already interested in the history of Australian sport. The sense of play, and the sense of good fun, could disappear pretty quickly. It could get willing. One father never put up with any roughhouse tactics against his boys, and he was known to march out onto the field to settle the score with the aggressor. One of his sons went on to play for Wynnum Manly in Brisbane, the team I barracked for.

That same son was part of the reign of terror which existed at the local high school. We Grade 8s lived in constant fear of that time-honoured Australian ritual, the flushing. Getting changed for PE was a nightmare.

One incident was illustrative. I loved tennis and despite being tiny I was in the school's senior tennis team which was to play in a tournament in Toowoomba. I had to wear my whites to school that day. Before school I was standing near the oval when this Grade 10 absolutely barrellled with a full-on tackle which upended me and then slid me along in the dirt. Apart from the grazes all over me my whites were a fetching shade of orange-brown, which is how I played that day. Nothing was ever said.

Football and footballers had that edge.

The Oakey Bears side certainly had it. They were tough, strong men. They were also highly skilful. In 1975 Oakey was one of the top sides. They had a champion second-rower in Peter Connell, and big Sel Murphy, a prop from Tara.

*Swarmed by admirers,
Oakey Bears' brilliant
five-eighth Dicky Rose
holds the 1975 Toowoomba
Rugby League premiership
cup aloft at Athletic Oval.*



The back-line was just magnificent. They were so quick, and so good with their hands. I have a vivid memory of them, lined out as a scrum is packed down, in the winter sunshine.

Denis 'Spike' Wiemers at half-back worked in the local tyre service.

Dicky Rose, an Indigenous man and brilliant five-eighth.

Terry Arnold, the reliable bustling centre from out west whose jock strap always sagged at the back of his shorts.

Neven Tate, quick and creative.

Willie Weatherall, the Aboriginal winger who was just lightning.

Mal Muirhead, who could chime in from full-back and cut a defence to pieces.

They played such entertaining football.

I saw almost no away games, but I would listen on 4WK or 4GR while doing my maths homework or an assignment on the causes of World War I.

The Fraternity

There was a strong rugby league culture in Oakey. The football fraternity was also the drinking fraternity. They always gathered at the Western Line for a few on a Friday after work, and a few more post-match beers on a Sunday evening, especially if the Oakey Bears had won.

This was the experience of towns all over Queensland. And from what I could gather driving down the Newell Highway from time to time, of New South Wales country towns as well.

The country was distinctly country back then. Brisbane was a faraway place in the 1970s. Three hours away in the car, longer if you got caught behind a truck down the Toowoomba Range or at Minden: a trip that takes about 90 minutes now.

It was also a faraway place because it had different TV and radio, its own newspapers, and different rugby league.

I watched the Brisbane Rugby League on ABC-TV and read the results in the *Australian*. I supported Wynnum Manly, before they were any good.

ABC Regional Radio covered the Brisbane games. Peter Meares, who grew up in country New South Wales, and Cyril Connell did the call. Cyril had known Queensland when it was still a small place, and he made it sound like a small place. He had been a classroom teacher in the bush, and a principal, and was by then a deputy director of the education department. He seemed to know every single one of his teachers from Charleville to Cloncurry, Cooktown to Coolangatta. He had them all spotting rugby league talent.

The Big League

ABC-TV showed *The Big League* on Saturday and Sunday nights. Arthur Denovan called the match of the day from Lang Park which was as Queensland as the Gabba.

It was a terrific competition which included Fortitude Valleys (the Diehards), Brothers, Norths, Wests, Easts from Stones Corner and Langlands Park, Souths at Davies Park, Wynnum Manly down on the bay, and Redcliffe (the Dolphins). Again, I had little understanding of the competition's history. I now understand what a rich culture it was. I have read the works of historians like Greg Mallory, a former Tom Brock scholar himself. But, again, it is the stories I have heard from people over a few beers, which have helped create my understanding.

In those days, I had become a Queenslander — again.

Our Queensland was holidays at Caloundra and Palm Beach;

it was mangos and pineapples and the Weis's fruit bar (made in Toowoomba).

It was boiled peanuts and Joh Bjelke-Petersen, XXXX beer and timber houses on stilts. It was Lang Park and the Gabba (we went to the occasional day of Test cricket).

There was an even more distant world, beyond the Tweed: New South Wales. They had their own rugby league down there and we watched (late) Sunday night replays from those classic suburban grounds of Sydney.

Interstate matches were sad affairs at a time when we didn't really appreciate the crazy system which had Queensland recruits playing for the Blues and beating their own.

Then there was the Amco Cup, which was an antidote to the drudgery of the school week.

I was a keen student at school, and a reader. I started to crave sports books. I was drawn to the fascinating world of sport's past, its records and statistics, its stories. But there weren't many history books in the school library. And there was nothing on rugby league nor the history of the game.

At home we had a few cricket books by Jack Fingleton and R. S. Whittington on our shelves and I had been given a copy of *Football the Australian Way* for a birthday and I think we had the *Ampol Book of Sporting Records*.

But not rugby league. So my knowledge of the game was experiential. I lived in the rugby league present.

That present took a new direction in 1980. I was in my first year of what turned into a history and maths degree at the University of Queensland.

At Union College I knocked around with Dick Tobiano. He was a graduate of Aquinas College on the Gold Coast, where he had played prop forward and wing for the school side. In 1980, Dick announced, 'I played school footy with a bloke who will play for Australia'.

We all laughed at him.

The bloke was Bob Lindner who, by coincidence, came to college the following year and was studying optometry.

In 1980, Queensland lost the first interstate match, played under the normal selection conditions. The match went by with little public acknowledgement. There was no hype. It was just another sporting in the routine of the year.



The Birth of Origin

When the State of Origin concept was suggested, it was evidence that the traditional interstate format was dead. But the idea of playing for the state of your birth, or first junior football, was also a southern concept, from Western Australia and Victoria, and by Queensland definition, that meant it probably wasn't much good.

It was scheduled for 8 July. I had a holiday job in a timber yard at the Gold Coast not far from Dick Tobiano's place. I rang him the day before the match. 'Do you reckon it will be worth driving up to Brisbane for this state of origin thing?' I asked.

'Dunno,' he said. 'Could be a fizzer. Could be alright'.

'We should have a look,' I said.

So up we went. The rest is history. It was a superb night of intense feeling, a memorable game of football when Arthur Beetson led our boys and Mal Meninga kicked seven from seven on his 20th birthday.

I remember those early Origin matches in the days of the old Lang Park. On winter's evenings when, across the top of the southern terrace, the silhouetted figures of the drinkers in front of the golden, western sky, reminded you of that famous old World War I photograph. I recall the flash-flash-flash-unflash of the XXXX factory. And the baying crowd.

I saw all of the State of Origin matches at Lang Park in the first five years, like the 1981 fixture when we were 15-0 down, and won 22-15. The characters who played in them became household names Wally, Mal, and Geno. They were (and are still) known by one name, like Brazilian soccer players, only in a Queensland way. Many moments were etched in to the public memory.

These have become festival days in Queensland. State of Origin symbolised the shared experience of being a Queenslanders.

And so it wasn't long before commercial organisations took full advantage of the heightened state of Queenslandness that accompanies the Origin season.

I remember some of the classic ads:

Fish are jumpin' waves are pumpin'

Steak is sizzlin' this is livin'

An ocean as blue as the sky up above us

We love it up here.

We don't just like it — we love it:

The people, the places,

The mates, the faces,
The XXXX mate,
We love it up here.

Six Nations

The ongoing success of the Origin concept has state identity at its core. Some — like writer David Malouf — would say that such regional identity is more important than any constructed sense of nation. He argues that Australia is made up of six nations,⁵ and the response to State of Origin is compelling evidence.

The old Lang Park was a sacred site of an old Queensland. The terrace — and the terraces with their rails here are there took up much of the venue — were a pretty wild place on Origin nights. Everyone standing. People would have travelled from everywhere – busloads from Wondai suitably primed by their four-hour trip, and parties from Bundaberg. An atmosphere of freedom, of carnival, of celebration, of Queenslandness. The waft of weed drifting across. Everyone was, what can only possibly be termed ‘on the piss’. Men and women. The few children there were mostly tucked safely into their grandstand seats.

I was at the last-ever game at the old Lang Park, before it was demolished for re-development. It was game 1 of the 2001 series. Queensland were rank outsiders. At the time I was writing a profile of Darren Lockyer and was close to events. Lockyer told me he thought his side was no chance. ‘We were running out,’ he said, ‘and I spotted [prop forward] John Buttigieg jogging along and I thought to meself, “Look at the guts on that!”’

Queensland dominated the game and won.

The rooms afterwards were alive. Everyone was welcome. The situation was utterly unpretentious. Completely unmanaged. Totally joyous. I didn’t know ‘Choppy’ Close, the boy from the South Burnett who had nearly beheaded a NSW player in pushing him away from a play the ball in 1981, but he embraced me and said, ‘How good was that!’

Wayne Bennett, another country lad from the Warwick area, was leaning against the wall, thrilled for his players. He was happy to chat. He was clearly moved by the win.

That series the decider was held at QEII Stadium: another important site for Queenslanders, having been home of the 1982 Commonwealth Games. (It now seems so small and unsophisticated, like an athletics track among the custard apple orchards; which it just about was.)

The Little Champion

It was the game when Wayne Bennett called Alfie Langer back from England. He received a hero's welcome, and then played like the little champion he was. The Maroons got up.

The Origin tradition is now enormous. It is such a part of Queenslandness.

Actor and writer William McInnes is a favourite son of the Sunshine State. In his brilliant memoir *A Man's Got to Have a Hobby*, he captures a Queensland childhood in the 1970s.⁶ He grew up barracking for the Redcliffe RLFC. During the week he went to Humpybong Primary School. His favourite player was Bevan Bleakley but he loved them all: great Dolphins like Peter Leis and Tony Obst and the late Bunny Pearce. These days he lives in Melbourne and continues to follow rugby league. McInnes wrote one of the forewords in the *Rugby League Almanac* (2012):



Why do people get fussed over the New South Wales bias in the Channel Nine coverage of the State of Origin series? I love it. I love that the commentators are so one-eyed; that discretions made by the Blues are just not shown, or even referred to; that any cheap shot or behind-the-play incident is ignored.

It adds to the glorious retro idea that Queensland is forever under the pump and, in some way, not in the same league as The Cockroaches. I love how these wise old men cling to their old-world belief.

In days gone by New South Wales was that mythical other Queensland; the place that had things we Queenslander's never had. Important things like double-decker trains and political corruption (none of that in Queensland) and even a prince of the Church, Cardinal Norman Gilroy, whom my father always referred to as Our Man Norm because he was a Labor supporter. New South Wales also had that curse of all league lovers in the '70s: the poker machines. Glittering avenues of them created so much wealth for the league clubs down there that they could lure and poach Queensland's best League talent with big money ...

Today there is no reason for anybody in Queensland to

feel envious about one thing in New South Wales ...

With seven years of Origin rule, surely we have earned the right to bring some of our cultural light to the philistine world of the south.⁷

In that same edition I wrote about the State of Origin match which was played in Melbourne during that 2012 season. On my way into Etihad Stadium I met some classic Queenslanders (on tour):

I am on the 112 tram, heading down Brunswick St, Fitzroy. That would be Fitzroy the first suburb of Melbourne; the suburb immediately north of the CBD; the once working class suburb situated between Collingwood and Carlton; the suburb of the great Maroons, indeed the first Maroons, who dominated the VFL before rugby league was invented. Yes, Melbourne: State of Origin rugby league is back in Melbourne Town. Near the Brunswick Street Oval a trio of visiting (bescarfed) Queenslanders jump on (with a six-pack).

“Them cameras work mate?” says the young bloke nodding at the big-brother domes in the roof.

“I reckon they would be,” I say.

He cracks open a stubby. And points at the camera, “Cheers!”

And they all laugh the laugh of the free.

More rugby league fans get on along Brunswick Street and especially along Collins Street as we head towards Docklands. A Kiwi Queensland contingent (“Hey bro, you fuckin’ got no colour on bro. What’s fuckin’ wrong with you bro?” “I got maroon jocks on bro.”) jump on. And more and more, including some blue. But a lot of maroon.

“Cane toads and cockroaches off hear,” says the driver before the tram turns left to South Melbourne.

The throng is full of boys on tour, and families on tour, and expats and (I suppose) a few locals. There’s some rough heads among them all too. Looks like every second bastard has been a prop forward and spent time in the tattoo parlour. There’s an Ormeau jumper. And a Townsville track suit.⁸

Queensland were too good on the night in a match which lacked



Steve Thomas (right) and the author before driving in the 1969 Torana to Brisbane for the First Test against Great Britain at Lang Park in June 1979. We painted the banner before the Test. It was pretty close to right. Australia won 35-0. Near the end of the match the banner was paraded in front of the terrace and received massive cheers.

Origin's customary sparkle. The Queenslanders didn't care. They left ready to party.

While I was at uni in the 1980s, things began to change in the world of sport and in the game of rugby league. Those who administered the game were courted by those who could see tremendous commercial advantage in being associated with, and involved in, the game. The initiatives in America and Europe showed how quickly the economy of professional sports could grow.

Professional sport worked out that ordinary everyday folk found such meaning in sport, and the concomitant loyalty it produced could be exploited. We fans drink and smoke, we are enthralled by the Colonel's secret recipe, we buy cars and insure them.

Once the money men had hold things began to change. Different understandings affected decision-making and hence the direction of the game.

The formation of the Broncos is a classic case in point. It worked well for what was to become a national competition. It worked well for media and sponsors, and it worked well for salaried rugby league administrators. It did not work in the interests of the traditional Brisbane grade competition, nor — it can be argued — for grass roots rugby league in Queensland generally.

After a quarter of a century, media outlets — TV, radio and print — are really stakeholders in the game. They are a key part of the economic system which has a will to grow, to maximise revenues and profits. Hence, there is a never-ending quest for new eyeballs — sometimes using an approach which relies on notions of celebrity, a quest for controversy, and a tone of sensationalism (almost to the point of parody) — at the expense of the coverage of *the game* and *the game itself*. This is not unique to rugby league.

Super League

The Super League years were a classic expression of the way in which a grass roots sport, involving a significant proportion of the population (however peripherally) could be commandeered to suit the commercial aspirations of a few.

Like many, my love of rugby league took a fair whack during those years. Even though its trajectory was in the direction, rugby league took on a whole new range of meanings for me. Fans were treated as consumers, rather than members of a club, and a fraternity of supporters of rugby league.

My understanding of these matters is much clearer now of course. While working as a secondary school teacher, and then involved in postgraduate research, much of which was in the area of sports history and sociology, I was drawn into the world of ideas. While no great scholar, I had started to read more and more history: especially Australian history.

I read Manning Clark, and I could relate to the colourful Australian literary figure. My yearning to understand had been awakened. Like Manning, I wanted to be there when all was revealed. Manning was also interesting to me because he loved sport. He was a first-class cricketer and mad Carlton supporter in the VFL. Indeed, he seemed to me to be a frustrated sportswriter: so many references to cricket and football.

I read Brian Matthews, Gary Hutchinson, and Martin Flanagan. A significant book came out: *The Greatest Game*.⁹ I think it is a very important book. Essays and poems by Australian writers and thinkers and academics on Australian football. I was encouraged

to discover I was not the only person to think about sport in the way I did. It made me feel sport was a worthy topic for analysis and discussion. It was meaningful.

I went back to uni to do a Masters in Australian Studies, and became involved in sports history and began to read more and more. Some of those books were written by people here tonight.

I received my Masters degree for a thesis on the 1899 and 1989 cricket tours of England. But while working towards my PhD in another Australian history topic, I abandoned the academy for a life as a freelance writer.

I was interested in the fan. I was a sports nut, and rather than pursue my interests within the constraints of the academic approach, I wanted to find stories and tell stories.

The question I realise I was now asking, in the context of sport broadly, but also specifically with reference to particular sports — especially cricket, horse-racing, and the football codes — is why do we continue to show such passion for these sporting pursuits.

I argued that we would tire of these sports if they lacked meaning. If they did nothing more than fill time, they would become tedious.

So that is the path of exploration I've been on.

Indigenous Players

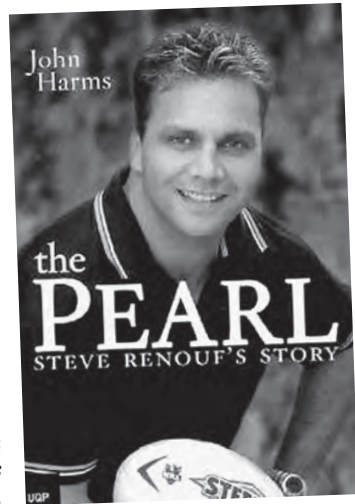
With particular reference to rugby league, the disillusion I had experienced as a result of Super League was ameliorated by my involvement in writing about the game and particularly through writing about Indigenous players.

Somewhere along the way I met Wayne Coolwell, an Aboriginal Australian with a powerful Stolen Generation heritage, who had been a sports journalist and broadcaster with the ABC in Brisbane. He took me to the Queensland Indigenous sports awards where Sir Neville Bonner made a brilliant speech and I met so many community leaders: so many of them brilliant sportspeople.

I developed an interest in the Anthony Mundine story, and the public response to his decision to leave rugby league for boxing. Many described it as a 'defection'. That was illustrative, as was the attitude of those who went to see Mundine's fights in pubs. Most wanted Mundine to be pummelled. There was often baying anger in the room, and certainly abuse. When, having moved to Melbourne, I watched subsequent Mundine fights in public venues the mood was rather different.

I also met Steve Renouf who was then playing for Wigan, and in the final year of his celebrated rugby league career.

Steve Renouf, known as The Pearl, had a fine career as a footballer and has continued in roles with the Department of Recreation in the state government, as an ambassador in private enterprise, and in roles where he has assisted with the management of diabetes.



Steve wanted to publish an end-of-career story and, through Bill Walker, journalist and former media manager at the Broncos, Steve asked me. Initially the plan was to produce a traditional ghosted personal story. But quickly Steve and I worked out that he wanted to do more than that. He wanted to research some of his family history and to try to express something about his sense of Aboriginal identity in 2003.

I was invited into a world of which I had only a peripheral knowledge and limited understanding. I met many Indigenous people and heard their stories. I learnt of Frankie Fisher and rugby league at Barambah (now Cherbourg) near Murgon where Steve's family had lived until his grandmother moved into Murgon. We uncovered the story of Steve's eight great grandparents.

Steve took me to the family home in Murgon where I met his mother. He also took me to some of the places around Murgon that mattered to him, including the football ground where he played as a junior. I spoke with leaders like Wayne Bennett and Tony Currie, both of whom influenced Steve's career, and his life.

This was of interest to people because Steve was a brilliant rugby league player, a beautiful mover, a try-scorer, yet a reticent performer. Even once he was established he had doubts about being involved the way he was. He once phoned his Murgon friends and family from the dressing room of a State of Origin match. 'Football owns me,' he said to his brother-in-law.

The Pearl

He was at the peak of his powers during the Super League years, signing huge contracts, every last cent of which was honoured. He was used very cleverly by News Limited, especially Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*, which was trying to win a new audience for rugby league. The paper chronicled his life: debut, engaged, married, graduated from his apprenticeship, kids and so on. All spliced with images of him in his trademark headgear going over for another try. News Limited wanted footballers as celebrities, and they were able to construct previously rough and tough boofy footballers into characters who appealed across the whole community.

Steve, *The Pearl*, had a fine career as a footballer and has continued in roles with the Department of Recreation in the state government, as an ambassador in private enterprise, and in roles where he has assisted with the management of diabetes. He has suffered from diabetes for most of his life; and three of his five children also suffer from diabetes.

The book took three years to complete. My interest in rugby league was rekindled. I was interested in how the game was represented in newspapers and by those brave authors who wrote rugby league books. Indeed I was interested in sportswriting generally, having made writing pretty much my full-time profession.

Following the success of two collections of Australian football writing — *The Footy Almanac 2007* and *The Footy Almanac 2008* — I established a sportswriting site, footyalmanac.com.au in 2009. Initially working with Paul Daffey, I wanted to create a platform both for sportswriters and for writers generally. I believed that many people had sports stories to tell. And over the years they have told them. Over 12,000 stories have been published from over 1000 writers. Most of these stories have generated comments and, in some case, the conversations which follow in the comments are substantial. The site has become a respectful community of writers and readers.

While many stories have focussed on Australian football, we attract a fair few stories on rugby league as well. These have included NRL match reports, comment and opinion, State of Origin pieces, memoir, biographical profiles and other interesting articles.

In recent times, for example, Patrick Skene (who is here tonight) has written about the PNG Hunters by using a report of their match at Redcliffe to tell their story. He also wrote a story about a rugby league competition for players with disabilities. His story about the

Redfern All Blacks is a classic as many of the comments which follow suggest.

An Aboriginal solicitor, Arabella Douglas posted this comment:

Patrick,

Thank you so much for this thoughtful and inspiring story about the The Redfern All Blacks. As a family member of the Tweed 'Currie Family' descendant of James Currie I and Ellen Currie and their eight children:

James II

Charles

Harry II (Jumbo)

Henry (Barney)

Jane

Lilly

David and

Ellen II

I would like to extend my gracious thanks for highlighting some of the beauty and magnificence of the All Blacks story.

Like most of the Black families of the Tweed (which also respectfully included islanders) football, and the magic and strength of the game encouraged our communities when we were suffocated by limitations, and inspired our families with stories of glory and courage when we doubted our abilities.

Football and its heroes were cemented by the Redfern All Blacks era when it was originally the Tweed All Blacks. Communities met and galvanised their stories, their connections and their linkages at the games, and football replaced to some degree missionary movements which was how my family moved between missions and communities prior to the game of football.

It's why the game still resonates with so many communities not just for the sport but for the coming-together, the communal liberation of sheer talent, excellence and pride we were allowed to rejoice in and make our own. Most every Black household on the Tweed, has pictures of their family playing for the All Blacks as pride of place, a signifier to excellence unbound by social constraints.

Our family like many hold football, its teams, and its

unbridled opportunities with high regard, in many ways because it seemed the closest to an even playing field in a society that was at times challenging, brutal and unforgiving. Like the comfort of falling into Black family slang (as a sign of resistance), football offers the same comfort to my family and to many. A sharp physical reminder of human capability; relied upon and revered when Australia bombarded us with the limitation, exclusion, doubt, and hate.

We celebrate with football, we affirm our excellence through it, we die embraced by team colours, we connect, we share history and we survived with echos of missionary music that soon turned to the chant 'keep the ball in motion'.

My family sing that song proudly even when not at a game, and we celebrate its poignancy of a song of overcoming struggle, together.

I thank you sincerely for sharing a part of this incredible story with your audience. I acknowledge with humble respect Great Uncle Charlie Currie's son Uncle Stokel Currie, Uncle Napier Paulson (Jane Currie son), the great Larry Corowa (Uncle Jack and Aunty Martha family), the great Uncle Lionel Morgan, (son-in-law of Charlie Currie), Uncle Geoffrey Compton (grandson of Charlie), Tony Currie (grandson of Stokel), and the many Currie family descendants who continue to play a brilliant game for reasons greater than a game score.

warmest energy

Arabella

(Great Granddaughter of Jane Currie)¹⁰

That is a powerful statement, full of substance, full of meaning.

Subsequently Arabella wrote a story about the significance of South Sydney which was published on our site on the day of the NRL grand final.¹¹

There can be no doubt how meaningful the Rabbitohs' victory was to Arabella and her family.

There is an audience for this type of writing which goes beyond rugby league.

I also believe there is an audience who crave good writing about rugby league. I have thought that for a long time.

Given the success of the *Footy Almanac*, an annual of Australian

football story-telling which is a game-by-game account of the AFL season by fan-writers from all walks of life, Nick Tedeschi and I decided we would do an equivalent book of the 2012 NRL season. These books take an enormous amount of organising and hard slog to complete.

The Rugby League Almanac

Published in November that year, the *Rugby League Almanac 2012* featured match reports from a diverse range of fans. An old hippy from Mullimbimby, John Campbell, wrote some of the Rabbitohs stories; actuary Cliff Bingham wrote Raiders yarns; a sports journalist from Tumut, Liam Hauser (who wrote a book on the history of State of Origin) wrote match reports. There were lawyers and accountants and teachers and other everyday folk with a love of the game.

The book received reasonable media coverage, but it sold very poorly and lost a significant amount of money. Those who took the time to read it loved the concept. I am not sure why it failed so miserably but we could not get NRL clubs interested in it and it was difficult to get it into bookshops. Our distributor explained that, unless rugby league books are about the superstars, bookshop proprietors don't trust them to sell, hence are reluctant to stock them.

It was very disappointing. Just as disappointing was that we gathered all the stories for a 2013 edition of the *Rugby League Almanac* but, despite all the effort, we could not find sponsors or generate sufficient pre-sales to enable us to publish it.

Despite warnings from publishers, and even from those who write rugby league books — Alan Whiticker explained how hard it has been to get people interested in some of his historical books — I still believe there is, or there can be, an audience. At the moment I am working with Sasha Lennon and Ian Hauser to put together a collection of rugby league fan stories with a view to publishing in 2016. We have a dozen or so excellent memoirs so far.

I continue to meet people in rugby league, and to hear their stories. Many years ago I was guest speaker at the Goodna Rugby League Football Club Cox Plate Luncheon. I told a few yarns and we drank a lot of beer. I got to know Ted Bradley and Keiran Butler (the under-achieving greyhound trainer) and Billy (the life member of the ALP who would jump on the bar and sing 'The Internationale' with all of his mates joining in) and all those great people at the club. Ted still phones me, still gives me a racing tip when he gets one, still asks about my family.

And I continue to follow rugby league. I don't barrack for a side, like I barrack for the Geelong Football Club in the AFL, but there are reasons for that. The meanings which surround my love of the Cats are intertwined with family and philosophy as I have tried to explain in my book about that very topic, *Loose Men Everywhere*.¹²

I watch *The Footy Show* on Channel 9, and *NRL 360*, and would take in one NRL match each weekend. I go to Storm games occasionally. State of Origin remains a highlight. I like to write about it.

The Footy Show is a cultural phenomenon and a fascinating prism through which to analyse the game. It's about the fun of footy and the larrikinism of those who play and follow it. For all its chili-eating nonsense, and hypnotists, and blokes geeing each other up, it sometimes unwittingly hits on those things that matter.

Earlier this year I wrote a piece about how I thought a highlight of the State of Origin coverage was when the commentators went through the teams. The club of origin would be shown in a graphic for each player. The segment took us all around New South Wales and Queensland. From Cairns to the Dapto Canaries, from Dubbo to West Mitchelton.

To my amazement they dropped it in the 2014 coverage!

Rugby league is about just *doing it*, not getting caught up in thinking about it too much.

Yet some of us like to think about it. And the more I observe, the more meaning I find in rugby league.

For a start it's about action, about shaking your fist at the gods. Not sitting around waiting for the inevitable, but having a go, and doing something which brings people together in the face of our common plight.

It's about places and the communities that live in them.

It's about team. It's about subjugating self, ego, for the sake of the collective, yet never losing sight of the importance of the individual.

It's about pursuing the common goal, the premiership cup, and all that symbolises.

It is about play. Movement. Colour. Fun. Space.

But it's also about brutality, aggression, intimidation, confrontation.

Hence it is about courage, and the capacity to continue to perform skills under the threat of physical violence.

It's about physical and mental strength.

Hence it is about the test. What the Greeks called the *agon*: the test of self, and the test of battling the opponent.

It's about determination and endurance.
For supporters it's about loyalty and support.
It's about memory and the mythology that surrounds it.
It's about hope.
Ultimately it's about people.



*The grandstand from
where I genuinely
wanted Oakey to win.
This was my team.
They were my boys.*

(PHOTO COURTESY Jamie Treble.)

NOTES

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- 6 William McInnes, 'Oh, You Beauty', *Rugby League Almanac*, no. 1, 2012, pp. 7–19.
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- 10 Arabella Douglas, 'Glory Glory to South Sydney', *Footy Almanac*, 9 October 2014, <http://www.footyalmanac.com.au/glory-glory-to-south-sydney/>, accessed 25 January 2015.
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THE 16TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE
was delivered by John Harms. This lecture was
entitled *People, Meaning and Stories in Rugby League*.

Rugby league is full of characters and stories.
Some of these stories have been written down, but
libraries aren't bursting with rugby league books.
Most are told and re-told in pubs, at work, outside
of mass, on the train, on TV and radio, at functions
and events, in public and private conversations,
formally and informally.

Rugby league stories are rich in meaning.
However, that meaning is not something that
rugby league people think about, as the game is
not self-conscious nor contemplative. It has no
pretence. People just get on with it.

Some of that meaning is expressed unwittingly.
Until recently, one of the highlights of the sporting
year was the pre-match coverage of State of Origin
when each player's image was accompanied by a
graphic of where they are from and which junior
club they played for. It represented an affirmation
of place.



Tom Brock

Published by the Tom Brock Bequest Committee
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