

*New Zealand Rugby Country: How the Game Shaped our Nation*

By Desmond Wood

David Bateman (2016)

ISBN 978 1 86953-927-6

Reviewed by Geoff Watson

Desmond Wood has produced a very readable social history of rugby union in New Zealand. The strength of the book lies in the way he synthesizes scholarly analyses of the game, including his own interviews and research, into an easily accessible style. This book is one an interested general reader will be able to pick up, and emerge with a significantly enhanced understanding of the social context of rugby union. The preface makes a sound justification for the book, noting there is a plethora of popular publications and a significant number of specialised scholarly studies of aspects of rugby union, but as yet no concise single volume work that analyses the social history of the game in New Zealand from its inception.

For the most part, Wood's book is based on solid, scholarly ground. He rightly notes the significance of the educational sector, the emergence of rugby as the leading choice of code for interprovincial football encounters and the early successes of New Zealand teams against international opponents as key factors in the rise of the game. He is also suitably sceptical about some elements of the popular mythology of rugby union. He thoughtfully engages with the differing perspectives of Phillips and Ryan on the extent to which the game developed in rural areas, making a persuasive argument that, initially the strength of the game was in urban centres although there was a strong, albeit, fluctuating uptake of the game in parts of rural New Zealand. While acknowledging the significance of the 1905 team and its achievements, he also observes that by this time it was well established as the national game and a distinctly New Zealand form of the game had emerged. The book is written from the perspective of a fan, but Wood is not an uncritical observer and acknowledges incidents of rough and violent play by New Zealand teams.

Wood's analysis of sporting contacts with South Africa, Māori participation in rugby, and commercialism is also generally sound. Commendably, Wood begins his discussion of sporting contacts with South Africa with the Boer War, noting the racial sensitivities which prevented Māori formally serving in the Boer War (although, he might have noted a number of soldiers of Māori ancestry did in fact serve in South Africa). This, context, he plausibly argues, is significant in understanding the exclusion in 1919 of Ranji Wilson and Parekura Tureia from the New Zealand Army Team when it visited South Africa. He is rightly critical of New Zealand rugby authorities, and New Zealand society more widely for the omission of Māori players from All Black teams to South Africa in 1928, 1949 and 1960. He also skilfully charts the changing nature of opposition to sporting ties with South Africa, from primarily sporting concerns that South Africa should select merit-based teams and allow players from all ethnicities in visiting teams to the politically-centred protests of the 1970s, which argued against any sporting contacts with South Africa while apartheid was in place. Wood expresses disappointment that New Zealand rugby, and much of wider society, supported sporting contacts, asserting it was 'not a comfortable position for a nation whose people had demonstrated a collective and acute social conscience for much of its history' (133). In some respects, however, it might be argued that this is an overly optimistic reading of New Zealand's history. Time and again, New Zealand governments and the electorate more widely acted in such a way as to suggest their 'collective and acute social conscience' did not extend to Māori. The effects of the Native Land Court are well documented, much of the Liberals 'progressive' policy in advancing closer settlement for (primarily Pākehā) farmers was premised on the acquisition of Māori Land, while the Foreshore and Seabed Act in 2005 demonstrated the Crown's ongoing practices of using legislation to deny Māori due process to secure their rights.

Arguably, the policies of the rugby union towards Māori players reflected the dominant practices of New Zealand society towards Māori in general.

The discussion of commercialism is thoughtful and, generally, plausible. Wood rightly notes rugby has faced a number of challenges in the post-war period, including a greatly diversified leisure sector, significant changes to work patterns with many people now working weekends, and a growing trend towards watching games at home rather than attend matches in person. He is especially insightful on the significance of First XV rugby which has, he notes, been reinvented for a modern commercial audience. He also skilfully charts New Zealand's somewhat ambivalent relationship to professionalism in rugby since 1995, although he might have devoted more attention to the creeping commercialisation of the 1980s and early 1990s that preceded this era. Equally significantly, he emphasises women's role as active, rather than passive participants in the game, noting their initially significant influence as spectators and consumers and, particularly in recent times, their growing presence as players. There is also an interesting discussion of sevens rugby which, he notes, started as a festival type of game in the nineteenth century before evolving into an Olympic sport. He might, however, have discussed in more detail the decline of the formerly very successful Wellington sevens tournament, now transferred to Hamilton, because it is an interesting case study of changing trends in sport and, more widely, the entertainment sector. New Zealand rugby administrators have been variously criticised over the years for their apparent conservatism, chauvinism and, in more recent times, an allegedly excessive focus on commercialism. Such criticisms are not entirely without foundation, but a central argument of Wood's book is that New Zealand rugby has, albeit slowly at times, demonstrated an ability to adapt to changing times and values and remain relevant to at least a working majority of its constituents.

While Wood's analysis is, for the most part convincing, there are some areas in which he is less surefooted. He asserts that the name 'All Blacks' was 'coined by an English newspaper, the *Express and Echo*' although Wood himself notes that the name was applied to the team before the tour, so it might be more accurately argued the tour popularised the term (47-48). Indeed, Palenski makes a convincing argument that the term was used at least as early as 1904 and that, since the 1880s, it had been a common practice for New Zealand teams to be referred to by their jersey colours. On the influence of rugby league in New Zealand, his central argument – that the game never emerged as a serious competitor to rugby – is correct, yet Bill Greenwood's doctoral thesis on rugby league in New Zealand demonstrated the game *did* gain significant support in some areas, particularly in Auckland and Christchurch during World War One. Ultimately, it was the virtual exclusion of rugby league from schools, the stigma of it being branded a 'professional game' and its uneven support in the provinces that militated against its growth. The otherwise sound discussion of commercialism in rugby is undermined slightly by Wood's perception of amateurism, which he describes as 'a decidedly strange concept' (247). There is much to be said for Wood's argument that amateur regulations were unevenly and often arbitrarily applied. Yet, even if one disagrees with amateurism, its persistence in New Zealand needs explaining if one is to understand the history of rugby, and indeed sport more widely in New Zealand. Rightly or wrongly, many New Zealanders associated amateurism with egalitarianism. Even players like Andy Haden and Graham Mourie, who criticised amateur regulations in the 1980s, were wary of full professionalism because they were concerned, not without foundation as it turned out, about the impact it would have on lower levels of the game. Their principal concern was that players ought to receive a living wage from the game, so they did not *lose* money if they were selected for provincial and national honours. They were certainly not seeking to make vast sums of money from playing the game.

There are, occasionally, moments when the book veers uneasily in tone between the scholarly historian and the sports fan. The prologue of the book focuses on the thrilling 2011 Rugby World Cup final which New Zealand won 8-7, and Wood seemingly endorses the notion that New Zealand was a 'stadium of four million'. As a generalisation, it is true that the 2011 Rugby World Cup engendered a high level of sporting nationalism, yet as Toni Bruce has pointed out, many New Zealanders felt excluded by this rhetoric. These, however, are minor quibbles in the wider scheme of things. This is a cogently written and thought-provoking book which engages the reader from start to finish and deserves a wide readership.