

New Zealand banknote promotes rugby!

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It is no wonder that New Zealand has won three Rugby World Cups. New Zealand is the only country in the competition which has a banknote featuring a world famous rugby player.

Media regularly accuse New Zealand of being obsessed with rugby football. And not just because every one of its 1992 banknotes has the spirographic pattern around the map of New Zealand centred on Nelson, the reputed birthplace of New Zealand rugby.

On the morning news of 6 June 1991, the Reserve Bank of New Zealand announced that new banknotes were needed. Their existing ones were designed a quarter of a century earlier and many of their security features were about to be overtaken by colour copiers. At the same time the Bank floated the idea that the portrait of the Queen be replaced on some of the new banknotes by those of prominent New Zealanders.

A tremendous noise ensued as the Royalists collectively herniated.

Before ducking for cover, the Bank sought suggestions for names of suitable people.

Of the then population of about 3,500,000, some 400 people responded to the Bank with a mixed bag of names, such as the then wife of ageing rock star Rod Stewart, the sheep dog in a popular cartoon Footrot Flats, and the captain of the only All Black team to win the Rugby World Cup until then.

I too had a suggestion which was accepted.¹ Ernest Rutherford, internationally the most famous of all New Zealanders, was placed on the least used, but highest value, banknote, the \$100 note. Therein is hidden a rugby story – of a young man grafting away in the forwards, who learned to play at Nelson College and Canterbury College and twice played on Christchurch's hallowed turf at the late Lancaster Park.

That New Zealand is a small and young country is shown by the linkages of the banknotes. There had to be a Māori. Apirana Ngata (\$50 note) was a fellow student. The first Maori to enrol at Canterbury College, the first Māori graduate of the University of New Zealand, a leader of his people, and a Cabinet Minister in Parliament. He played a couple of times for a lower rugby team. There had to be a woman. Kate Sheppard (\$10 note) had

Rutherford's landlady and future mother-in-law, Mary Newton, as one of her right-hand women in the fight which, in 1893, saw New Zealand become the first country to allow women the vote. Mary was likely the first to sign the nationwide petition that allowed this historic moment. And Ernest Rutherford, as President of the Royal Society, was well-known to the Society's patron, the Queen's (\$20 note) grandfather, who had raised him to Ernest Lord Rutherford of Nelson.

A prime requirement was that the person had to be dead, in order that they wouldn't sully their good reputation. The suite of notes is rounded out by Ed Hillary, the then only living person on our banknotes (\$5). New Zealand desperately wanted him. Apparently, when asked, he turned to his wife and said 'I suppose there's not much chance of getting into trouble at my age?'

Nelson, the geocentre of New Zealand and therefore the centre of the security spirographic pattern, is where Rutherford was born and learned to play rugby.

In 1889, his final year at Nelson College, the school roll consisted of only 29 boys older than 15. As the head-boy, Ernest Rutherford, being tall and lanky, did his duty as a forward. The main worry of the master in charge of rugby, 'Porky' Littlejohn, centred on how to field a passable team. Of the previous year's team, only two forwards and two backs had returned. The new squad were all raw beginners. Littlejohn was Rutherford's maths and science master. His nickname came from the lazy schoolboy's version of the French translation of Littlejohn's persistent query encouraging his pupils to think, why? why? why? (pourquoi).

All games were played in the Botanic Gardens or the Park. The first match of the season brought a loss to the inexperienced College team. Few of the forwards could control their feet (which wasn't surprising as they played in smooth-soled street-boots), and still fewer kept on the ball. Rutherford gained a mention as one of the five College forwards who played well enough, according to the rugby reporter who wrote under the pseudonym 'Pass' (actually Mr Littlejohn.)

The team played once a fortnight against the three other teams of their standard. The second match saw an improvement and a further loss. 'What with a better knowledge of the rules, a decrease of adipose tissue, and an increase of experience and

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skill, the combatants fought a good fight ...' Rutherford was to be cited in six of the eight games that season ... 'Rutherford by his fine following up and good tackling, being the best' (of the college forwards) ... 'Rutherford especially doing some good dribbling.'

Unfortunately in 1889 the team achieved a poor record of one win, one draw, and six losses. Nonetheless, under Mr Littlejohn's dictum of persistence, most, if not all, would have played their hearts out, for 'Porky' taught by example. They would have recalled his performance on the cricket field at the time when the then, new, headmaster and well-known batsman Mr Ford, was visited by a friend from England who was obviously another first-class cricketer. A friendly match with these two opening degenerated into a competition to see who could score the most runs. When the boy bowlers were spent, it was Porky Littlejohn who left his wicket keeping to take up the battle. For over an hour he tried every kind of bowling but to no avail. Ernest Rutherford, a spectator at the game, recalled in later life for Porky's biography² '... I never saw a better example of grit and persistence in an unequal contest. He refused to give in, and attacked with the light of battle in his eye ...' 'The whole episode left on my mind an enduring impression of courage and resource under difficulties, and, though technically defeated, I thought he was the true hero of the occasion, notwithstanding the brilliant display of pyrotechnics by the batsman.'

Further evidence of the team's poor year is that Nelson College proudly displays photographs of all its early rugby teams, but no photograph appears to exist for the 1889 team.

Nelson College had a great influence on Ernest Rutherford's development. Later in life he still recalled many of his experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. He had vivid memories of his life in the dormitories, for on occasions he literally had to fight his way through them. Joining the school at the late age of fifteen probably shielded him from many of the unsavoury episodes usually inflicted on young new chums. With the passage of time the memories of the unpleasant events fade while those of pleasant occasions grow. As he lay on his death bed he turned to his widow-to-be and emphasised 'I want to leave a hundred pounds to Nelson College. You can see to it. Remember, a hundred to Nelson College!'

Rutherford, after one failure, finally obtained a University of New Zealand scholarship which took him to Canterbury College in Christchurch for 1890. The College rugby club fielded three teams. After a few weeks, the list for the third team included for the first time 'Rutherford'. Of the sixteen names listed, he and another were bracketed as the reserve. The team trotted onto the Cranmer Square ground to play Merivale Thirds. A noteworthy game ensued. College scored a converted try in the first spell. A quarter of an hour later the referee disallowed the try when he discovered that College had sixteen men on the field.³

This seems to have been Rutherford's only appearance of the 1890 season.

In 1891 he had a permanent place in the third of the three college teams. It was an undistinguished year, with his team being thrashed most weeks, even by the Lyttelton juniors second fifteen.

That year a ladies' football team toured New Zealand. This event caused a lady society gossip columnist to remark that 'No ladies should play and I fancy the "appreciative crowd" would not be composed of the gentle sex.'⁴ (The tight restraints on women were further loosened that year following a report in a British

medical journal. Several female monkeys had died of suffocation after being encased in plaster of Paris jackets to imitate corsets.⁵)

During the 1892 football season Rutherford was again undistinguished at rugby. He oscillated between the second team, the third team, and oblivion. (Perhaps the latter signals this as the year he injured his knee which was to plague him in later life.) With the second team he participated in one forfeiture (the college had trouble raising even one team during university vacations; Rutherford, for one, regularly returned to his home in Taranaki), two postponements (due to rain), three losses, and one win. His real success that year was to pass his BA final exams.

In 1893 Rutherford returned to Canterbury College for a master's degree in mathematics and physics. So began his illustrious research career. (For someone who in 1890 didn't appear to be able to add up to 16, it is curious that it was a mathematics scholarship that financed his 1893 year.) Perhaps rugby losses helped him to quickly pick himself up whenever an experiment didn't proceed as expected. The rugby club elected him assistant secretary. College could field only two teams, with 21-year-old Rutherford immediately going into the first team.

He played in the first competition game of the season at Lancaster Park before a paying audience (admission sixpence, ladies free). That Saturday dawned with the grounds wet and slippery, but the rain held off. College started the season well, and in a very even game, much appreciated by the spectators, they defeated Christchurch 10-7.

From there on it was mostly downhill. With one game cancelled because of a snow storm, and two forfeited through not being able to raise a team, College finished the season as bottom team. They won two games, drew one, and lost the rest, even though most losses were in games described as fairly even contests. The club was not healthy, and by the end of the season they struggled to raise even one team.

Rutherford did receive sporadic mention in the newspapers. Occasionally he assisted or was prominent in the forward rush - 'A College rush, led by Morris, Rutherford, Haast and Dawson was stopped at the East 25 ...' and once 'the College line was again in danger. Rutherford, however, dribbled to the centre.'

That year was Canterbury College's turn to visit Otago University. When the maroons and the blues met on the field of battle the day was right - fine, with a light breeze that carried dense volumes of smoke across the ground from the local brickworks. The conditions were right - the ground in good order and a fair number of spectators were present. The players, however, were not right. Otago University, like Canterbury College, graced the bottom of its league. Even though Otago boosted its team with two ex-provincial players the game was tediously slow and uninteresting. '... some life was infused into the game by a capital passing rush, in which Buchanan, Rutherford, Gibson and Dawson participated, which shifted the play into the Varsity quarters where Cresswell obtained possession and nearly dropped a goal.⁶ Canterbury led 4-2 with five minutes to go, but Otago scored two late tries.

Ernest Rutherford couldn't get a job in New Zealand. On three occasions he failed to get a schoolteaching job. It was enough to drive a young man overseas. Every second year one scholarship was offered to New Zealand for a graduate to go anywhere overseas to conduct research of importance to the nation's industries. So in 1894 Rutherford returned to Canterbury College with this scholarship in mind. He continued his researches, which were at the forefront of electrical technology.

To be a candidate for the scholarship he had to be a registered student so he enrolled for a BSc degree in geology and chemistry, his third degree.

The football club elected Rutherford as a committee member, and as a selector. Two teams were entered in the Saturday competitions and one in the Thursday competition against commercial teams (e.g. Drapers, Hardware). Little success fell to the College teams – they were invariably beaten if not thrashed. Complaints were made that elements of professionalism were creeping into the game in Christchurch. It was hard times and good players were given jobs. But this did not explain College's poor performance. Regrettably, football at Canterbury College was in decline. During the mid-year vacation it could not even scrape together one team.

The first team finished bottom of the senior competition. Their standard was so low that when they played Otago University at Lancaster Park most of the 1500 spectators watched an adjacent game. Appropriately, the university match resulted in a scoreless draw. The game against Linwood was described as not worthy of a senior contest and many spectators wandered off to watch a junior match.

Once again Rutherford played a relatively undistinguished role in the first team. Occasionally, he rated a mention in the newspaper reports. 'Afterwards the maroons, headed by Hawkins, Gray, Rutherford and others, made a determined charge' ... 'Dawson, Gray and Rutherford worked well in the scrum ... Hawkins and Rutherford best in open'.

In one highlight of the season, Rutherford scored a try against Drapers during one of the team's few wins.

The true measure of Ernest Rutherford may be found in the last game of rugby he played. College were at the bottom of the table; the day was wet and cold. By half-time Christchurch was beating College 8–0. Then the College forwards came to life. Rutherford took the ball to the Christchurch twenty-five and Craddock completed the move by potting a goal. 4–8. Rutherford picked up at the centre and ran again to the opposition's twenty-five. As he went down in a tackle he threw the ball behind him, where Dawson took it on the full and scored. 7–8. Alas, there was no fairy-tale ending. The try was not converted.

The poor performance of the College football teams during 1894 was not entirely the fault of the team members but part of the general malaise beginning to pervade the undergraduates. A capping day song captured the mood (Tune – All Doing a Little Bit).

*Oh sacred nine assist me as I sing my modest lay
About a certain College, which is famous in its way,
Successes academical have won for her a name,
Her sons however, sadly lack all love of manly game;
The undergrads have seemingly no stout esprit de corps,
As we return defeated, trailing homewards from the park,
The fops are always ready with some would be smart remark.*

CHORUS

*They draw-as they-cadge from you a fill.
"Aw! have you really been put down by 20 points to nil."
But they would not soil their collars,
Oh, no; not for "fawhty" dollars.
The thought really makes them ill.*

This reality flew in the face of a motion debated by the College's Dialectic Society: 'The tendency at the present time is to overestimate the value of athletics.'

The final song of the 1894 capping day concerned the football

team, in praise in particular for the man who scores the try. Its final verse enthused:

*Five minutes yet to time, boys – now just another point,
O tempora, O mores,
Oh Dawson, Speight, and Rutherford – just sweep them off
the ground
O tempora, O mores,
I told you so – they're over!
Upon the ball they lie,
Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
O tempo – tempora
All glory to them all for all have scored the try.*

Even the Science Society lost spirit that year. The secretary, gave his, and his committee's, view of the undergraduates in the draft of the annual end-of-year report. 'Like other of our college institutions this society has not received the support of the present race of undergraduates who it must be confessed are of a degenerate type. They have either dropped all enthusiasm, or else they reserve it for their text books. If this meeting therefore should be of the opinion that this undesirable state of affairs is likely to be of long duration, it is evident that it would be necessary to consider the question of suspension or of reconstruction. If the society is to continue and flourish it must receive the support of some few at least of undergraduate scientific enthusiasts. The rest they leave to you.' 'You' did not pull his weight. At the end of 1894 the Science Society went out of existence.

It is ironic that Ernest Rutherford was to obtain his research scholarship solely because the only other candidate was awarded the scholarship nomination but then withdrew. He held a job which paid more. So by chance Rutherford went overseas, and chose to go to Cambridge University. The rest is history.

The people in the Cavendish Laboratory could only lament that such a large fellow did not play. His dicky knee meant his football playing days were over. But his career in science was to blossom. Not only was he to set the world record for the distance over which electric wireless waves could be detected, he later explained radioactivity (for which he received the 1908 Nobel Prize in Chemistry) as the natural transmutation of atoms, dated the age of solidification of the Earth's crust, invented the Rutherford-Geiger tube (later to become the Geiger-Muller tube), determined the nuclear structure of atoms, and become the world's first successful alchemist. Furthermore, the principles of the household smoke detector can be traced to some of his earliest experiments in Canada, when he blew tobacco smoke into his ionisation chamber.

Though he always seemed to play his heart out, Ernest Rutherford's rugby career was undistinguished. But it was an example of what we are in danger of losing in this professional era: grass roots rugby played not for financial reward but for comradeship, enjoyment, and team spirit.

References

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