Rural Myth and Urban Actuality

THE ANATOMY OF ALL BLACK AND NEW ZEALAND RUGBY 1884–1938*

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the mythology that was constructed around New Zealand rugby, but little effort has been made to distinguish between myth and actuality. Jock Phillips has examined the emergence of rugby in the context of a rural pioneering mythology in which the virtues of colonial egalitarianism and outdoor life were supposed to have produced a New Zealand male ‘type’ superior to its apparently sedentary urban counterpart in Britain. John Nauright extended this theme in a discussion of the way in which the success of the 1905 All Blacks was used to assuage contemporary concerns about urban physical deterioration and declining racial virility in the British Empire during the crucial years between the South African War and the Great War.1

These accounts fail to address the disjuncture between image and experience. At no point do they embark on any rigorous analysis of the social and geographical origins of the All Blacks or consider the fabric of New Zealand rugby at the local and provincial level to determine the extent to which the myth of egalitarianism and rural rugby primacy coincided with the actualities of the New Zealand game. In the rural backblocks of an endnote, Nauright does state that: ‘The majority of the 1905 All Blacks were from urban areas’.2 Phillips also acknowledges the rhetoric which encouraged rugby in an urban context as a means to maintaining the essential physical values of a more vigorous and idealized rural life,3 but this serves to enhance the rural ideal rather than challenge it. To analyse social class, Phillips draws on a sample of 44 Auckland players in 1890 and 1893 and a single study of the game in Manawatu 1878–1910, suggesting that rugby players represented a normal cross-section of New Zealand society.4 Indeed, the closest one gets to unravelling the myth is a vague impression that the All Blacks, apparently representative of New Zealand rugby, were also representative of the balance between rural and urban society and a cross-section of the occupational strata. At any time before World War II this would suggest that they were largely rural, engaged in primary or industrial occupations and unlikely to have attended secondary school.

This paper argues that the social origins and occupational profile of the All Blacks were quite different from that suggested by the myth. They were disproportionately urban, educated and employed in professional occupations. This is not necessarily to suggest that the broader pattern of New Zealand rugby — the game of school, club and province — can be deduced from the profile of the All Blacks. At the very least it reflects the way that the projection of the game into the public arena, and especially the rhetoric which accompanied it
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