

Repression and Reform

RESPONSES WITHIN NEW ZEALAND RUGBY TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE 'NORTHERN GAME', 1907-8

'IF THERE WAS any doubt before', wrote Keith Sinclair, 'there was none after 1905 that rugby football had become the national game' of New Zealand.¹ Rugby was increasingly perceived as a vehicle for the expression of a burgeoning New Zealand nationalism, firstly within the context of the British empire and later throughout the wider world. J.O.C. Phillips and others have claimed that 'it was [not] until the South African tour of 1981 [that] rugby's status came to be questioned'.² This article will argue that the status of rugby was seriously endangered in 1907 and 1908 with the arrival of the 'Northern game' (or, as it later became known, rugby league³). However, the peril arose from a dispute which developed within rugby union football over the most effective means of dealing with this ostensible threat to its hegemony, rather than from any 'pernicious trait' inherent in the 'Northern game'.

No subject so sorely vexed the rugby community within New Zealand during 1908 as the possible consequences for rugby union football of the return from

1 K. Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Wellington, 1986, p.152.

2 Jock Phillips, 'Rugby and Male Identity in New Zealand', in J. Nauright and T. Chandler, eds, *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, London, 1996, p.88; J. Nauright, 'Sustaining Masculine Hegemony: Rugby and the Nostalgia of Masculinity', in *Making Men*, p.230.

3 During the late Victorian and Edwardian periods a number of different varieties of 'football' competed for players, spectators and control of public recreation venues. The names of the different codes varied over time and with geographical location. In Britain from 1895 there existed two major handling codes. Rugby union football was played in most regions of Great Britain under the auspices of the four Rugby Football Unions. Another code, usually referred to as the 'Northern game' or 'Northern Union football', was played primarily in Yorkshire and Lancashire under the control of the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU). The term 'rugby league' was coined in Australia on 8 August 1907, when the New South Wales Rugby Football League was established to control the Northern game in that state. Not until 1922 did the NRFU formally change its name to become the Rugby Football League. The designation 'rugby league' was only regularly applied to the Northern game in New Zealand with the formation in April 1910 of the Auckland Provincial Rugby League and the New Zealand Provincial Rugby League; I. Heads, *True Blue: The Story of the NSW Rugby League*, Randwick, NSW, 1991, p.33; M. Phillips, 'Rugby', in W. Vamplew and B. Stoddart, eds, *Sport in Australia: A Social History*, Melbourne, 1994, p.198; J. Coffey, *Canterbury XIII: A Rugby League History*, Christchurch, 1987, p.14.

Great Britain of the 'Professional' All Blacks.⁴ It was generally agreed that an attempt would be made by the 'Pro-Blacks' to introduce the 'Northern game' and that the new code could pose a serious threat to the existence of amateur football. Opinion was divided, however, regarding the most efficacious means of confronting this 'menace'. Some favoured waging a vigorous campaign to repress the new code. Others preferred a programme of reform which would make the amateur game as appealing as the interloper for both players and spectators. The struggle which subsequently developed among those involved at all levels was of the utmost importance for the future of rugby in New Zealand. The outcome would determine not only the character of the game, but also whether New Zealand rugby would remain integrated in the 'Imperial touring network'.⁵

This network played an important part in preserving imperial unity. Sport was prized by imperialists as a means of persuading the inhabitants of the Empire that they shared a common set of cultural values. A collective culture became increasingly important as an emerging 'colonial nationalism' began to pose a potential threat to imperial solidarity.⁶ Thus, a profusion of sporting tours traversed the British empire between 1878 and 1914 with the objective of consolidating imperial links by raising an awareness of a shared cultural patrimony.⁷ A touring network gradually emerged, based primarily upon the exchange of cricket tours between England, Australia and South Africa. However, the range of 'Imperial' sports expanded to include athletics when, anticipating the Empire games, an athletic competition between Britain, Australasia and Canada was included in the 'Festival of Empire' which accompanied the coronation of George V in 1911.⁸

The integration of rugby football into the touring network by the English Rugby Football Union (RFU) was designed both to strengthen imperial bonds and to forestall any effort by the Northern Union (Rugby League) to spread its 'professional' code throughout the empire. The RFU believed that, while 'amateur' rugby was played solely for the benefits of physical health and pleasure which it bestowed on participants, the 'professional' 'Northern game' was played for sordid material gain. The colonial rugby unions participating in the imperial touring network, including that of New Zealand (the NZRFU),⁹

4 It was by this name that the team was known in New Zealand before World War I, the appellation 'All Golds' being of Australian origin; G. Moorehouse, *A People's Game: The Official History of Rugby League, 1895-1995*, London, 1995, p.352; J. Haynes, *From All Blacks to All Golds: New Zealand's Rugby League Pioneers*, Christchurch, 1996, passim.

5 J.A. Mangan, ed., *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, London, 1992; J.A. Cooper, 'Many Lands—One People: A Criticism and A Suggestion', *Greater Britain*, 15 July 1891, pp.459-60; G.T. Vincent, "'Practical Imperialism": The Anglo-Welsh Rugby Tour of New Zealand, 1908', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, forthcoming.

6 Cooper, 'Many Lands'; *Otago Daily Times* (ODT), 6 April 1908, p.11.

7 The Mayor of Dunedin, J. McDonald, was one of many New Zealanders who believed this to be so. For his opinion of the significance for New Zealanders of British rugby tours see ODT, 30 May 1908, p.6.

8 K. Moore, "'The Warmth of Comradeship": The First British Empire Games and Imperial Solidarity', in Mangan, pp.202-3.

9 A.C. Swan, *History of New Zealand Rugby Football, 1870-1945*, Wellington, 1948, pp.115, 126.

were affiliated to the RFU. They all adhered to the rules laid down by that body and, at least hypothetically, to the tenets of amateurism, while eschewing any hint of 'morally corrosive' professionalism.¹⁰

The return of the 'Pro-Blacks' forced the footballing community in New Zealand to formulate its own responses to the problem of professionalism. However, divisions existed within the ranks of the players and administrators of the rugby union game. Some favoured simply repressing all manifestations of Northern Union football, while others favoured radically reforming the 'amateur' game in order to make it more attractive to both players and spectators. A serious dispute developed within New Zealand rugby during 1908 between the conservative 'sporting Imperialists' and the reform-minded 'sporting Nationalists'.¹¹

Sporting imperialists, sensitive to criticism from sporting authorities at 'Home', tried to ensure that games in the colony adhered strictly to what they perceived to be the spirit of their English progenitors. Despite their obvious concern for the financial well-being of the game, sporting imperialists declared that rugby was a character-building form of 'manly exercise', and that professionalism was a corrupting influence.¹² This ethos was promoted by the schoolmasters of the colony, whose power grew as rugby football was made compulsory for boys in most secondary schools from about 1900.¹³ A second such group controlled the principal bodies administering sport in the colony, the most prominent of these in 1908 being the Management Committee of the NZRFU.

The sporting nationalists, on the other hand, resented that control of the game from London so dear to conservatives. 'New Zealanders', declared one sporting nationalist, '[are] quite capable of controlling their own football, and [do] not need to go to England on the matter'.¹⁴ This group intended to force the NZRFU to enact whatever reforms were necessary to enable rugby union to withstand the threat allegedly posed by the 'Northern game'. Sporting nationalist sentiment existed within the Southland, Canterbury and Wellington unions, but was strongest within the Otago Union (ORFU). The ORFU had a long history of challenging orthodoxy, having been the last — and most reluctant — of the 17 affiliates to the New Zealand Union.¹⁵

A prolonged struggle between these two groups was sparked by the announcement to a 'startled' rugby world in March 1907 of a projected tour of the Northern

10 For a full discussion of the game's ethic and amateurism, see E. Dunning and K. Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*, Canberra, 1979, pp.154-64.

11 The cultural background of, and the strong unifying themes within, New Zealand rugby are examined in G.T. Vincent, "'Practical Imperialism": The Anglo-Welsh Rugby Tour of New Zealand, 1908', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1996, chs 1-6.

12 ODT, 21 May 1908, p.10.

13 Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male: A History*, Revised Edition, Auckland, 1996, pp.103-7.

14 *Lyttelton Times* (LT), 25 July 1908, p.11.

15 A.C. Swan, *History of New Zealand Rugby Football, 1870-1945*, p.132; S. O'Hagan, *The Pride of Southern Rebels: The History of Otago Rugby*, Dunedin, 1981, pp.57-59.

Union by a team of 'Professionals' from New Zealand later that year.¹⁶ The Management Committee of NZRFU immediately denied any involvement in the scheme and mounted a vigorous campaign to unearth and expel from New Zealand rugby any players found to be implicated.¹⁷ The first wave of expulsions spanned the period from May to October 1907, but failed to halt, or even seriously hinder, the organization of the 'Professional' All Black tour. Albert Baskerville, a postal worker who played for the Oriental club in Wellington, was rapidly identified as the architect of the venture and expelled from the game 'under [the] . . . Rules as to professionalism'.¹⁸ The detection and removal of the remainder of those involved proved to be rather more difficult.

The Union attempted to bind the leading players in the colony to the amateur code by obtaining their signatures on a written declaration. Therein, they 'solemnly and sincerely' declared that they had never compromised their status as amateur footballers, nor committed themselves to participate in the 'Pro-Black' project.¹⁹ These declarations hindered rather than helped the Union in its search for nascent 'Pro-Blacks'. By tacitly impugning the character of players uninvolved in the 'Professional' venture, they aroused intense irritation among loyal amateurs. The 12 players from Auckland selected for the inter-island match in 1907 refused 'en bloc' to sign the document. Those not involved with the 'Professional' tour reportedly considered that 'they are under an obligation to those who wish to go, even at the expense of themselves'.²⁰ The refusal of players to inform on the activities of others closed an important source of information to the Union. Moreover, the declaration probably shielded the 'guilty', many of whom signed it after obtaining a legal opinion that 'the undertaking [not to join the 'Pro-Blacks'] is quite void of legal effect'. A player could signal his nominal loyalty by signing and be deemed by the New Zealand Union to be above suspicion, whereupon inquiries into his involvement with the 'Professional' project were abandoned.²¹ However, the signatory could ignore that commitment with impunity.²²

The hunt for incipient 'Pro-Blacks' was also impeded by the lethargy of some major provincial unions, who failed to imitate the opposition to the venture exhibited by the Auckland Union. The Otago Union resolved 'to ignore the matter altogether', which amounted to a refusal to assist the NZRFU.²³ The Canterbury Union also seemed curiously disinterested in identifying any nascent 'Professionals' among its players. All but one of the four players from Canterbury participating in the inter-island match in 1907, including two 'Pro-Blacks', had signed the declaration. Despite the strong suspicion that he was in contact

16 *Athletic News and Cyclists Journal* (AN), 18 March 1907, p.1.

17 *Star*, Christchurch, 23 May 1907.

18 New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) Minutes, 27 May 1907, New Zealand Rugby Football Union, Wellington.

19 For the legal provisions and status of the Declaration see *New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 28 May 1907; *Star*, 30 May 1907.

20 NZH, 28 May 1907, p.7.

21 *ibid.*, and 9 September 1907, p.6.

22 *Star*, 30 May 1907.

23 LT, 21 May 1907, p.8.

with Baskerville, the Cantabrians declined to suspend the recalcitrant national sporting hero Duncan McGregor,²⁴ preferring instead to hand this unpopular task to the national body.²⁵ The New Zealand Union also procrastinated, expelling McGregor on 29 August, and the last nine 'Pro-Blacks' only on 3 October, after they had arrived in England!²⁶

A second wave of expulsions, far more extensive though no more successful, commenced in June 1908, in response to the introduction of the 'Northern game' to New Zealand. Several 'inter-provincial' matches, featuring many of the recently returned 'Pro-Blacks', were played in various parts of the country to promote the new code. The 'professional' participants in these exhibition fixtures were paid 10s. per day in allowances, a significant but not vast improvement over the 3s. permitted their amateur counterparts. Though financially 'impoverished', the Northern game secured and maintained a tenuous foothold in Auckland, Wellington, Taranaki, Otago and Southland. By November 1908, almost 80 players from the Taranaki, Wellington, South Canterbury, Otago, Southland and Auckland unions had been expelled by the NZRFU.²⁷

The decision of the sporting imperialists within the NZRFU to persevere with their ineffectual crusade was partly dictated by their belief, which they shared with the staunch amateurs of the RFU, in the morally damaging nature of professionalism in rugby football. The professional footballer was held to be 'practically a loafer, [who] benefited neither himself nor the game'. By the time his playing days were over, this loafing had become an ingrained indolence, which doomed the professional to end his life 'in the workhouse'.²⁸ Such jeremiads ignored the fact that the 'professional' footballers of the Northern Union had to maintain themselves in peak physical condition in order to retain that status. Moreover, because the Northern Union competition did not generate sufficient revenue to support a corps of full-time professionals, players were compelled to obtain regular employment outside football. Thus, opportunities for loafing were limited. Indeed, with the possible exception of the professionals in the Association game (soccer), the professionals of the Northern Union were arguably the busiest and most highly-trained group of athletes in the footballing world.

The New Zealand Union clearly foresaw the consequences of unilaterally 'going professional'. Teams from New Zealand would be unable to play against those of the home unions or Australia. The opportunity to arrange another tour

24 McGregor had scored the two tries which had secured victory for New Zealand over the British touring team of 1904, and four tries against England at Crystal Palace while touring with the All Blacks in 1905; *New Zealand Referee* (NZR), 5 June 1907, p.59; *Star*, 29 May 1907; *LT*, 29 May 1907, p.8, 15 August 1904, p.6; T. Godwin, *The Complete Who's Who of International Rugby*, Poole, Dorset, 1987, p.272.

25 Canterbury Rugby Football Union (CRFU) Minutes, 4 June 1907, Canterbury Rugby Football Union, Christchurch.

26 NZRFU Minutes, 3 October 1907.

27 NZH, 19 August 1908, p.4, 10 October 1908, p.9; Otago Rugby Football Union (ORFU) Minutes, 3 October 1908, and Punishment Register, 1904-54, [October] 1908, Hocken Archive, University of Otago, Dunedin; O'Hagan, pp.68-69.

28 ODT, 9 April 1908, p.10.

of Britain, or the keenly-sought trial of strength with South Africa, would be irretrievably lost. All Black sides would, like the 'Pro-Blacks', be reduced to playing against the 'provincials' of the Northern Union, and the new Rugby Leagues of New South Wales and Queensland. The imperial connection would thus be weakened, and the principal means by which New Zealand maintained its identity within the international sporting community nullified. 'Football is the national game of New Zealand', warned the *New Zealand Herald*, 'and the fame that New Zealand has won in it all over the world is worth guarding, and should not be risked in any way'.²⁹

Finally, the sporting imperialists saw their campaign against the new code as a war of survival. They were painfully aware that in the only regions (Yorkshire and Lancashire) in which professional rugby had been organized before 1907 the 'amateur' game had become virtually extinct. Their fears may have been heightened by an awareness that a majority of senior players in New Zealand during this period were drawn from working-class areas³⁰ and might therefore be tempted, as the working-class players of the north of England had been, to desert 'amateur' football for the supposed financial rewards of the professional code. Such anxieties would have appeared eminently justified at the time. Industrial conflict escalated from the end of 1906 as workers became increasingly dissatisfied with the decisions regarding 'wages and wage-related issues' handed down by the Arbitration Court. James Holt has argued that by 'the middle of 1907 the arbitration system was under attack from all sides'.³¹ Small but growing numbers of workers, particularly the coal miners on the West Coast, vented their discontent through industrial action and various strains of radical political thought began to spread throughout New Zealand. Thus, in an atmosphere of growing working-class belligerence, and with only the example of the north of England from which to draw their conclusions, the sporting imperialists were convinced that the triumph of professionalism would mean the annihilation of both the New Zealand Union and the amateur game.

These conservatives received enthusiastic support from some sections of the wider community. Prominent sympathizers denounced the advent of 'professional' rugby in New Zealand, and applauded efforts to stamp it out. M.R. Neligan, the Anglican Bishop of Auckland, told the university graduation ceremony that he was 'glad that the battle against professionalism was being fought so well'.³² James Langan of Stanford University, a keen apostle of rugby in California, then visiting the dominion, believed 'that professionalism will kill Rugby in New Zealand and Australia . . . just as it has killed base-ball as a SPORT in America'.³³

29 NZH, 1 June 1907, p.6.

30 N. Swindells, 'Social Aspects of Rugby Football in Manawatu from 1878 to 1910', BA (Hons) Essay, Massey University, 1978, p.30.

31 J. Holt, *Compulsory Arbitration in New Zealand: The First Forty Years*, Auckland, 1986, pp.70-71, 76-77.

32 NZR, 12 June 1907, p.56.

33 *ibid.*, 18 December 1907, p.57.

The conservative press was even more supportive of the sporting imperialists. Subtle attempts were made in newspapers to vilify the 'Pro-Blacks'. The Australian appellation 'All Golds' was used to describe them, thus distinguishing their venture, supposedly undertaken solely for financial gain, from that of the amateur, and therefore morally superior, 'All Black' tour of 1905.

The *New Zealand Referee* also attacked the 'Pro-Black' venture by presenting the 'Northern game' as a sink of corruption which flourished within a cultural milieu of ignorance, alcohol and violence. It was strongly implied that skilful football was met with skilful thuggery in the Northern Union. The transfer system operating within the Union was portrayed simultaneously as a virtual white slavery ring and an open invitation to players to become both slaves and knaves. Worst of all, perhaps, once players had finished their careers they were alleged to be 'always sure of a poob'. 'The brewers were liberal patrons of the game', readers were informed, 'and when leasing a public-house always gave a footballer preference because he drew custom'.³⁴ Having spent his playing days as a dissipated brute, the Northern Unionist became, on retiring, the means by which others were drawn into the 'pub culture'. Thus, simply by involving himself in the 'Northern game', a player was corrupted and dehumanized. This 'information' was clearly calculated to arouse opinion against the new code at a time when the temperance movement was enthusiastically supported by 'nearly all New Zealanders in positions of authority', and by perhaps 50% of the general public.³⁵

This energetic and sometimes ingenious campaign failed to achieve its purpose. The arbitrary manner in which the NZRFU dealt with suspected 'professionals' alienated many loyal players and supporters of rugby union. Moreover, moralistic denunciations of the beer-sodden and corrupt Northern code had little impact on that community among whom the pub culture was important.³⁶ Finally, the new game may have been regarded in some quarters as an opportunity for New Zealand to test regularly its sporting mettle against that of the 'Mother Country'.³⁷

The entire crusade against 'professional' football was probably unnecessary. Just as the population of New Zealand was too small to permit the middle class to develop a socially exclusive attitude towards participation in rugby, so it could not support a corps of full-time professional footballers after the fashion of Association football in Britain.³⁸ Ironically, this fact was explicitly acknowledged by George Campbell, the president of the NZRFU and one of those primarily responsible for perpetuating the campaign.³⁹

34 *ibid.*, 19 June 1907, p.54.

35 Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, pp.60-65; A. R. Grigg, 'Prohibition, the Church and Labour: A Programme for Social Reform, 1890-1914', *New Zealand Journal of History*, XV, 2 (October 1981), pp.137-8.

36 Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, pp.55-59.

37 LT, 27 May 1907, p.6.

38 Only Tom (later Sir Thomas) Wilford among the leading administrators of New Zealand rugby realized that nothing prevented the Northern game being played on an amateur basis; ODT, 21 May 1908, p.10.

39 *Otago Witness* (OW), 1 July 1908, p.62.

The sporting nationalists eschewed the punitive and ultimately unproductive methods employed by the imperially-minded conservatives, preferring to deal with the problem posed by Northern Union football in a more subtle and sophisticated manner. They regarded the new code as an attractive seducer of players and paying patrons away from rugby, a menace best fought with its own methods. Those tempted to desert the old game in favour of the new were to be wooed back, not punished as heretics. These reformers intended to enhance the appeal of the union game for participants and spectators by making it more 'open', and by securing a relaxation of the rules relating to professionalism in order to allow the payment of more generous allowances to representative footballers.

The ORFU initiated the drive for reform when it decided on 30 March 1908 to recommend at the annual meeting of delegates to the NZRFU that the management committee be instructed to 'consider carefully the rules of the game, with a view to [their] improvement . . . where possible'. The 'suggestions of the Committee' were then to be 'circulated amongst the affiliated unions for their consideration prior to them being sent home to the English Union for their adoption'.⁴⁰ The delegates acceded to this suggestion, although only after acrimonious debate.

Rather surprisingly, given their disagreements, the delegates resolved on the motion of Frederick Pirani of Manawatu, a sporting nationalist, that 'the affiliated Unions and referees associations . . . submit to the Management Committee suggestions for the improvement of the game, within two months, and that the proposals of the Management Committee on these proposals be forwarded to the English Union as soon as convenient, with a request that they be dealt with before the next season'.⁴¹ By means of this proposal for reform, the impetus for change passed from the central body to the provincial Unions' and Referees' Associations, and, through them, to the clubs.

The committee of the Otago Union responded with alacrity. A three-member sub-committee was established to formulate, in collaboration with the Otago Referees' Association, a set of proposed changes to the rules.⁴² The Canterbury, Southland and Taranaki unions took similar action. Conservatives and imperialists within the NZRFU, however, embarked on a subtle push to derail the campaign for reform through a combination of obstruction and creative inertia.

Urgency was lent to the cause of the sporting nationalist reformers by the arrival of the 'Northern game' in New Zealand on 13 June 1908. About 8000 people turned out to witness the inaugural match at Athletic Park, Wellington. This figure represented approximately 10% of the total population of the city,⁴³ and compared favourably with the 10,000 who watched the second Test match between the All Blacks and the Anglo-Welsh at the same venue two weeks later.⁴⁴ The fixture was played for the benefit of the widowed mother of

40 ORFU Minutes, 30 March 1908.

41 ODT, 21 May 1908, p.10.

42 ORFU Minutes, 25 May 1908.

43 *New Zealand Official Year Book, 1909*, Wellington, 1909, p.131.

44 *Dominion*, 29 June 1908, p.9.

Baskerville, who had died of pneumonia in Brisbane in May, at the age of only twenty-five.⁴⁵

Various characteristics possessed by the new code evoked favourable comparisons with rugby union. The system of scoring placed a premium on tries by valuing them at one point more than a goal of any kind, whereas in 'amateur' rugby the try was worth less than any goal except the 'conversion'. The brevity of the scrums and the abolition of the line-out also occasioned agreeable comment. Especially commended was the expansive, and consequently entertaining, style of football which distinguished league. One contributing factor was the skilful passing game of the forwards, a facet of play in which they were the equal of the backs and clearly superior to their 'amateur' counterparts. Above all, observed the *Evening Post*, it was the absence of the wing-forward which encouraged open, dashing play because it enabled 'the rear division of the side which secures [the ball] . . . ample time to get moving'.⁴⁶

The NZRFU was widely perceived to be facing a conundrum following the enthusiastic reception accorded the new game in Wellington. Though 'one of the best games in the world', the dreary procession of scrums, line-outs and fumbling attempts at running play which allegedly characterized many union matches meant that it suffered by comparison with the new code.⁴⁷ Northern Union football possessed many attributes which would improve the amateur game were they to be adopted, but the New Zealand Union was prevented from doing so by the rules of the RFU, to which it was affiliated.

The first tangible attempt by the sporting imperialists to stifle the movement for reform occurred at the meeting of the management committee of the NZRFU in July 1908. The committee tactlessly rejected 'nearly all' the proposals for reform submitted by provincial Unions' and Referees' Associations, 'or adopted them in a form that leaves them of little or no value'. This clumsy obstructionism merely inflamed reformist opinion. One commentator thought that 'the matter of the rules of Rugby' should immediately be 'removed from the Management Committee and placed in the hands of experts, who know the requirements and possibilities of the game'. Public support would 'go to the more open, brighter display, and the competition of the Northern Union game should not be set lightly aside'. Reforms, he concluded, 'are necessary to prevent [the amateur game's] extinction'.⁴⁸ Others demanded more extreme action.

Simmering discontent among local players seemed likely to be the catalyst for the introduction of the new code into Canterbury. The 'executive officers of local clubs' and other interested people in Christchurch were circularized during late July 1908 by a group wishing to replace rugby football in the city with the 'Northern Union Code'. The circular contained the significant pledge that 'no professionalism regarding players will be considered'. The 'whole benefit to be

45 *ibid.*, 21 May 1908, p.8.

46 *ibid.*, 15 June 1908, p.9; EP, 15 June 1908, p.3.

47 *Press*, 18 June 1908, p.7.

48 OW, 15 July 1908, p.62.

gained' from the new game 'will go to the various clubs with a view of their improving, and obtaining social and up-to-date training quarters'.⁴⁹

On 24 July, members of the 'amateur and professional "All Black" teams', two members of the committee of the Canterbury Union and players from every club in Christchurch met to discuss 'applying the Northern Union code to Rugby football as played in this province'. Any such possibility was avoided when Samuel Wilson, a stalwart of the Albion RFC and the CRFU, skilfully managed to convert those present to the moderate sporting nationalist position of seeking fundamental reform of the old game.⁵⁰

The committee of the Otago Union also felt the hot breath of extremism on its neck. On 24 August 1908 it was advised by Claude Young that if it did nothing within one month to 'cope with the spread of professionalism', he would call 'an extraordinary meeting of the delegates to consider the advisability of seceding from the N.Z.R.U. and forming a South Island Union'.⁵¹ Those to whom Young's letter was addressed shared much of his anger. However, they believed that while the Otago Union was facing 'a revolution in football', the appropriate course was to emulate the Canterbury Union by channelling the discontent among players and supporters into the drive for reform of 'the Old Game'. The committee therefore insisted that 'a special general meeting' of the New Zealand Union be convened to discuss proposals for the reform of the rules of rugby. They were supported in their demand by the Southland and Canterbury unions. The last-named promulgated their own set of proposals which were influenced by Northern Union rules, thus reflecting the sentiment of the turbulent meeting of 24 July.⁵²

The executive of the ORFU appointed a sub-committee, consisting of the chairman of the Union, F.H. Campbell, and committee members W.J. Wilson and G. Thomson, 'to draw up suggestions for the improvement of the game'. This triumvirate rapidly produced a report which gave practical expression to the desire of sporting nationalists to create a more exciting rugby union game. The management committee of the Otago Union endorsed this report, resolving that amendments to the rules of rugby football were 'imperatively necessary'.⁵³

The ORFU made several recommendations. The most complex of these was contained in proposal (2), the various sub-clauses of which were intended collectively to promote a more open game resembling the 'Northern game'. For example, sub-clauses (a) and (b) demanded that the charge by a defending team at a free kick be abolished, and that a throw-in from touch should travel at least five yards. Sub-clauses (h) and (i) pressed for a reduction in the value of a goal from a penalty or a 'mark' from three points to two, and for players 'brought to the ground' to be permitted to pass the ball, 'provided it be done immediately'. Sub-clause (j) suggested that the game itself, rather than being conducted in two

49 *Press*, 23 July 1908, p.9.

50 *LT*, 25 July 1908, p.11.

51 ORFU Minutes, 24 August 1908.

52 *ibid.*, 31 August 1908; *OW*, 26 August 1908, p.62.

53 ORFU Minutes, 7 September 1908.

45-minute halves, should be played in four 20-minute periods. Sub-clause (d) insisted that any player who crossed 'an imaginary line drawn through the back of the scrum on his own side' should immediately be penalized. Sub-clauses (e) and (g) suggested that teams be reduced to 14 players and that the referee should place the ball in all scrummages.⁵⁴

The last three sub-clauses were particularly significant for their intent was to encourage more exciting football through the elimination of the wing-forward, who was the greatest single impediment to the passage of the ball into open play. The wing-forward combined the role, in both attack and defence, of the modern loose-forward with that of an auxiliary scrum-half. Wing-forwards were admonished by the author of one coaching manual never to 'overrun the ball and be given off-side'.⁵⁵

However, because wing-forwards in New Zealand frequently indulged in obstructionism and rough play, the position had fallen into disrepute. Both the Otago Union in 1897 and the New Zealand Rugby Referees' Association in June 1901 had demanded that 'wing forwards . . . be abolished'.⁵⁶ British critics joined this chorus during the All Black tour of 1905, unanimously condemning what they saw as an attempt to institutionalize flagrant obstructionism and off-side play. Hamish Stuart, the irascible rugby correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle*, denounced the wing-forward play of All Black captain David Gallaher as un-English 'cheating', born out of the inferiority of the colonial side.⁵⁷ Among those who, after the memorial match for Baskerville, favoured abolishing the wing-forward were Robert Isaacs and Neil Galbraith, prominent members of the management committee of the NZRFU.⁵⁸

Despite the anger which these 'spoilers' aroused, the New Zealand Union persistently refused to proscribe them because 'wingers' were highly effective. Had Gallaher, for example, been completely ineffectual, he would probably have provoked only contemptuous and patronizing levity among critics in the 'Mother Country'. Any attempt to secure the implementation of the three sub-clauses appeared certain to face considerable opposition.

More overtly offensive to sporting imperialist opinion was proposal (4), which urged a relaxation of the rules relating to professionalism sufficient to permit payments for 'broken time' to be made to touring representative footballers. Players were justified, wrote Claude Young, 'in asking for a refund for a loss of time'. He considered that 'the great majority of present-day amateur footballers . . . do not want professionalism, but amateurism, with the individual who earns the money not at a loss for doing so'. The failure of the New Zealand Union to

54 *ibid.*

55 A.H. Baskerville, *Modern Rugby Football: New Zealand Methods; points for the Beginner, the Player, and the Spectator*, London, 1907, pp.66-69.

56 R.H. Chester and N.A.C. McMillan, *The Encyclopedia of New Zealand Rugby*, Auckland, 1981, pp.88, 130; ODT, 13, 14, 16 September 1897, p.4, p.2, p.4; O'Hagan, pp.62-64; NZH, 24 June 1901, p.3.

57 B. Dobbs, *Edwardians at Play: Sport 1890-1914*, London, 1973, p.110; T.N.W. Buchanan, "'Missionaries of Empire": The 1905 All Black Tour', MA Extended Essay, University of Canterbury, 1981, p.14.

58 *Dominion*, 15 June 1908, p.9; EP, 15 June 1908, p.3.

address this problem, wrote Young, would lead many players to embrace the 'Northern game'.⁵⁹

This proposal did not signify the surrender of the sporting nationalists of Otago to 'professionalism'. The Otago Union acted ruthlessly toward those players involved in the first Northern Union fixture played in the province and prohibited a former Northern Unionist from playing in South Otago because he 'is a professional in terms of the rules of the English Rugby Union'.⁶⁰ The ORFU remained implacably opposed to professionalism and intended, by means of the proposal, to immunize the amateur game against this malaise.

Proposal (3), the ultimate expression of radical sporting nationalism, defined the consequences for rugby should the English Union (or the International Board) reject the proposed reforms. The NZRFU would secede from the imperial touring network and combine with the unions of New South Wales and Queensland to establish 'an Australasian Rugby Union to control the game under the revised rules'.⁶¹ This notion presupposed a commonality of interest between the three unions concerned. All apparently faced the same threat from 'professionalism', and none seemed likely to obtain effective assistance from the RFU in London.

Acceptance by the New Zealand Union of this proposal would have entailed a serious element of risk, because New Zealand rugby depended upon gate money for its survival. External opponents would have consisted solely of the Australian unions and — possibly — the rugby enclaves on the Pacific coast of North America. Competition between Australian and New Zealand sides could not be guaranteed to retain its appeal indefinitely. Moreover, both the New South Wales and Queensland unions were confronting a growing threat from the Northern Union game.⁶² Nor was it certain that North American rugby would survive, let alone provide the quality of competition for New Zealand that would generate large numbers of paying spectators. One or more long and expensive tours might be required before the truth was finally established. The future of the amateur game as a paying proposition in both of these regions appeared very uncertain in October 1908.

It became clear during a meeting of the Auckland RFU on 24 September 1908 that a showdown between conservatives and reformers was inevitable. After prolonged discussion, the committee of the ARFU rejected only sub-clause (c) of proposal (2) (which demanded the imposition of a penalty kick 'in the event of the ball landing directly in touch from the kick-off or kick-out'), and suggested a minor amendment to proposal (4). Despite this endorsement, the committee did not believe that turning the proposals into law would be easy. One member warned that 'the members of the New Zealand Rugby Union Executive' intended 'standing or falling by the old game and its principles'. There was evidently a

59 OW, 26 August 1908, p.62.

60 ORFU Minutes, 25 May 1908.

61 *ibid.*, 7 September 1908.

62 M. Phillips, 'The Rugby Codes in New South Wales', in Nauright and Chandler, *Making Men*, pp.158-80.

clear understanding that the sporting imperialists intended to persist in their fight against reform.⁶³

The NZRFU felt 'strongly' that proposal (3), which insisted that New Zealand secede from the imperial touring network if the RFU rejected the proposed reforms, was 'premature'. First, no reply had yet been received from the English Union to the proposals for reform forwarded by the management committee the previous May. Secondly, as the provincial unions were suddenly informed, the Australasian and South African unions had jointly approached the RFU regarding their 'being accorded representation on the International Board when matters affecting the laws of the game are under consideration'. The management committee believed that this proposal would have the support of the English Union.⁶⁴ 'The logical attitude' was to await the responses of the RFU and the International Board 'before even discussing the advisability of severance from the union of the Mother Country'.⁶⁵

This exhortation to inertia from the management committee was ill-judged and disingenuous. The improvements in question were those already condemned as worthless by the provincial unions in July.⁶⁶ The prospect of New Zealand becoming a member of the International Board in 1908 was extremely remote, for such questions were decided collectively by the extant membership. Even had a bid for this privilege from the NZRFU enjoyed the support of the English Union, the Scots and the Irish, hostile towards both their colonial counterpart and radical reform, were unlikely to welcome a 'reforming' New Zealand Union to the Board as an equal member. The management committee understood this full well.⁶⁷ Moreover, relations between the home unions were at that moment extremely tense. The Scots were threatening to sever relations with the RFU over the failure of its affiliate — the New Zealand Union — to supply a financial statement for the All Black tour of 1905.⁶⁸ It is unlikely that the RFU, struggling to hold British rugby together, would have pressed against determined opposition from the Celtic unions for New Zealand membership of the Board. Even had the NZRFU gained a seat it is almost inconceivable that the planned reforms would have been implemented, as amendments to the rules 'could only be effected by virtue of three-quarters of the representatives present being in favour

63 NZH, 24 September 1908, p.7.

64 The International Board, established in 1887 after a prolonged dispute between the English and Scottish unions, was the final arbiter in all matters concerning the rules of the game. At this time, however, it was effectively controlled by England; D. Smith and G. Williams, *Fields of Praise: The Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union, 1881-1981*, Cardiff, 1981, pp.49-50.

65 For the circumstances of the offer from the NSWRFU and its significance for the sporting Imperialists see G.T. Vincent, "'Practical Imperialism'" thesis, ch.6; NZRFU Minutes, 28 May 1908; NZH, 24 September 1908, p.7.

66 Moreover, it was this committee which had accepted these ineffectual reforms while rejecting those of any value. Its plea for patience, premised upon the anticipated actions of the RFU, was thus unlikely to find a receptive audience.

67 ODT, 21 May 1908, p.10; *Dominion*, 25 May 1908, p.9.

68 G. Williams, 'How Amateur Was My Valley: Professional Sport and National Identity in Wales, 1890-1914', *British Journal of Sports History*, 2, 3, December 1985, p.257.

of a change'.⁶⁹ The hostility of the Celtic and English unions towards proposals which smacked of northern unionism was guaranteed.

The management committee of the NZRFU also reaffirmed its sporting imperialist convictions by declaring in the letter to the Auckland Union its 'unanimous' opposition to 'paying players for loss of time while touring with representative teams', as suggested in proposal (4). Any 'regulation of this nature would', the committee claimed, 'be the first step towards professionalism'.⁷⁰

The battle over reform between the sporting imperialists and the sporting nationalists came to a head at a special meeting of the New Zealand Rugby Union held on 9 October 1908. James Hutchison from Otago fired the first shot when he moved 'That in the opinion of this union the time has arrived when it is imperatively necessary that the laws of Rugby football shall be amended.' George Dixon from Auckland, supported by V.R. (later Sir Vincent) Meredith of Wellington, demanded that the phrase 'imperatively necessary' be replaced by the term 'advisable', thus robbing the entire project of any sense of urgency. Hutchison, apparently feeling himself isolated among the delegates on this issue, accepted the amendment. Though the sporting imperialists appeared to have won the first round, the honours were more evenly shared in the second.

Argument over proposal (2) was completed during the first day. The delegates demonstrated their desire to encourage open football by accepting sub-clauses (a), (b), (d), (g), (i) and (j). The passage of sub-clauses (d) and (g) appeared to signal the demise of the wing-forward.⁷¹ The first obstacle to creating a game more likely to retain the allegiance of its players and paying spectators was thus removed. Eradication of the second was, however, to prove impossible.

The debate over proposal (4), which requested the relaxation of the rules relating to professionalism to allow the payment of realistic expenses to representative players, was woven from vividly contrasting strands of sporting imperialist and sporting nationalist 'ideologies'. J.W. Wilson of Otago formally moved the adoption of proposal (4), though the knowledge that he 'stood alone in the Otago Union in this matter', and that 'nearly all the unions except Auckland' disapproved of it, made him pessimistic regarding its fate. Some support was, nevertheless, forthcoming. E.H. Roberts of Wellington spoke for the motion: 'The mechanic and the labourer', he said, 'could not afford to go away and lose their work unless they got some recompense. The bank clerk and Civil servant did not lose their wages in going away, and therefore were able to afford the trip.' It had been 'the refusal of the English Union to consent to the payment of players which caused the secession of the Northern Union'. The RFU's refusal to compromise on the question of allowances, based on social exclusiveness, had split and enfeebled English rugby. A similar attitude on the part of the NZRFU would have analogous consequences for the New Zealand game, he argued.⁷²

69 Dobbs, p.83.

70 NZH, 24 September 1908, p.7.

71 *ibid.*, 9, 10 October 1908, p.6, p.9; *Press*, 9 October 1908, p.7.

72 NZH, 10 October 1908, p.9.

Sporting imperialists queued to attack the proposal, largely on 'moral' grounds. Professionalism, asserted one conservative delegate, 'would never gain a foothold in the Dominion'. He said he had 'seen Northern Union football in England, and he knew professionalism as mere white slavery, in which players were openly bought and sold according to their market value'.⁷³ Robert Isaacs pontificated that 'in the old days players had to *pay* £5 to go on tour. There were few single men who could not afford to tour, and no married man should play football.'⁷⁴ The impact of such extreme arguments on those attending the meeting is difficult to gauge.

Delegates from the smaller unions may have been swayed by more pragmatic considerations. First, finding an extra 6s. per day for each player (an amendment suggested by the ARFU) would have been an intolerable burden for bodies already struggling to cover the expenses of touring from their limited resources. Secondly, should the smaller unions be unable to pay the augmented allowances, their best players would probably have 'defected' to the larger, wealthier provinces.

Ultimately, for whatever reasons, Wilson's fears were realized and the motion was lost. However, other gains appeared to have been secured when the 'Management Committee . . . was deputed to revise the rules in accordance with the amendments made' by the delegates. The 'co-operation' of the New South Wales and Queensland unions was also invited, 'and three delegates [were] to be appointed to confer with them' regarding the new rules.⁷⁵

The meeting, and indeed the bigger battle over reform, appeared to have ended in a draw between the two factions. The sporting nationalists had apparently eliminated the wing-forward from the game, but had been unable to secure the payment of increased allowances for representative players. The question of seceding from the RFU and establishing an Australasian Union remained temporarily in abeyance.

The following year the sporting imperialists within the NZRFU engineered the decisive rejection of all the proposals for radical reform made by the sporting nationalists. On 18 March 1909 a 'general meeting of delegates' to the New Zealand Union carried sub-clauses (i), (j), (d) and (g) of proposal (2).⁷⁶ At this point, however, the sporting imperialists finally managed to frustrate the ambitions of the reformers. First, they convinced the meeting that 'it would be wrong to adopt the alterations before they had been considered' by the Australian unions. Secondly, the delegates were persuaded to reject an amendment to the constitution of the New Zealand Union, which would have granted that body the freedom to alter the rules of the game in the dominion as it saw fit.⁷⁷ Consequently, no reforms could be implemented without the prior acquiescence of the unions of New South Wales and Queensland. Moreover, even if accepted by

73 *ibid.*

74 *ibid.* (emphasis added.)

75 *Press*, 10 October 1908, p.10; *NZH*, 10 October 1908, p.9.

76 *LT*, 19 March 1909, p.10.

77 *EP*, 19 March 1909, p.4; *LT*, 27 March 1909, p.10.

those bodies, no amendments would have the force of law unless approved by the English Union and the International Board. Thus, proposal (3), which had envisioned the withdrawal of New Zealand rugby from the imperial touring network and the formation of an Australasian Union to 'control the game under the revised rules', was effectively dead.

The coup-de-grace to the reform programme was delivered by the RFU itself. It informed the New Zealand Union in August 1909 that it had 'asked the Home Unions to join . . . in a conference with the colonial unions as to the latter's suggested changes in rules'. The Scottish and Irish unions, both of which were implacably hostile to any hint of technical innovation, were 'willing' to discuss these proposals only with the other Home Unions. The RFU therefore proposed placing the suggested amendments 'before a meeting of the International Board', and until this had transpired felt it 'unwise . . . to sanction your proposed alterations'.⁷⁸

Thus the conflict which had wracked New Zealand rugby during 1907 and 1908 ended in victory for those concerned with preserving imperial solidarity. Although the repressive methods employed by the sporting imperialists and conservatives failed to prevent the 'Northern game' from becoming established, the new code never became the threat to 'amateur' rugby which many had feared. On the other hand, the campaign for radical reform of the 'amateur' game mounted by the sporting nationalists had been artfully thwarted, thereby avoiding the potentially catastrophic severance of the imperial connection. Thus, neither repression nor reform triumphed in 1908. Both the 'Northern game' and the problems which the reformers had sought to remove continued to vex rugby union football in New Zealand for many years to come.

GEOFFREY T. VINCENT and TOBY HARFIELD

Christchurch

⁷⁸ NZR, 11 August 1909, p.56.

Appendix

PROPOSALS FROM THE OTAGO RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION
FOR REFORM OF THE GAME OF RUGBY FOOTBALL

- (1) That, in the opinion of this Union, the time has arrived when it is imperatively necessary that the rules of Rugby football should be amended.
- (2) That, with this end in view, a Committee be appointed to revise the rules in the direction of providing:-
 - (a) For the abolition of the charge in the case of the free kick or kick at goal.
 - (b) For the throw-in from touch being for a distance of not less than, say, five yards.
 - (c) For the imposition of a penalty in the event of the ball landing directly in touch from the kick-off or kick-out.
 - (d) For the imposition of a penalty upon any player who shall cross an imaginary line drawn through the back of the scrummage on his own side, while the ball is in the scrum.
 - (e) For the reduction of the side to 14 players.
 - (f) For the modification of the advantage given to a side which touches down.
 - (g) For the Referee placing the ball in the scrummage in all cases.
 - (h) That a goal from a mark or penalty kick shall count 2 points.
 - (i) That a player brought to the ground be allowed to pass the ball even though it has touched the ground, provided it be done immediately.
 - (j) That the game be played in four spells of twenty minutes each.
- (3) That it be an instruction to the Management Committee to forward a copy of the foregoing resolutions to the New South Wales and Queensland Rugby Unions with the view to securing their co-operation in the formation of an Australasian Rugby Union to control the game under the revised rules.
- (4) That the rules as to Professionalism be revised in the direction of paying players for loss of time while touring with Representative teams.

Source: Otago Rugby Football Union: Minutes, 7 September 1908.