

Rugby Union and Globalization

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Rugby Union and Globalization

An Odd-Shaped World

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*In memory of
William Derek James
for showing me the way*

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Over the years I have enjoyed working with a number of people on research that has nothing to do with rugby but has been valuable in developing my writing and ways of thinking about the social and cultural landscape of sport. My collaborative work with Ben Clayton on a range of sporting celebrities certainly influenced the way in which Chapter 4 has evolved and although I make explicit reference to our work on rugby and metrosexual identity, much of our other research on sporting celebrities, while not directly relevant to the present study, has certainly shaped and informed my analysis in this area.

The great challenges faced when moving nations is an experience shared by many migrant workers including rugby players and coaches. For Danielle and I moving to the US proved a greater challenge and a bigger culture shock than we were ever prepared for. The kindness and warm welcome shown by a number of people made our adjustment possible and it would be remiss of me not to say a big thank you to Sue, Quinn, Theresa, Mark & Julie, Steve & Caroline, Kim, Andy & Josephine and others who helped us adapt to living in a foreign country. A special *diolch yn fawr* must also be made to Brian, Rhonda, Jenna and Logan – our surrogate family in Ohio without whom our US adventure would have been so much shorter.

My biggest debt of gratitude though, goes to my wife, Danielle, who shows remarkable patience and understanding in support of my working on this text when there are always many other things that need to be done. As someone who likes and understands the game she has also kindly read through the work and offered numerous suggestions on drafts of the various chapters. During the course of thinking about and (finally) writing this book life was turned upside down by the birth of our son Thomas Wyn. His early morning wake-up calls, and night-time visits, meant that this book became a true 24/7 project and parts of it were written at hours of the day that I had last seen by the side of a kebab van many years before. He is too young to understand why his Dad keeps disappearing to type a few more words on the computer but he makes every day special and is our world.

Prologue

I was once told that I talked a good game of rugby. As a scrum-half of limited ability there was little chance that Gareth Edwards would lose his position as the greatest number nine in the history of the sport to me. It is hoped that friends and family who have no choice but to read this book will acknowledge that I am indeed a better writer of rugby than I ever was a player. This text is written from the premise that all work is firmly located and needs to be read and understood in a particular time and place. To this end the focus of this book is on rugby union since 1995. Yet although this year marked the beginning of open professionalism in the sport it was not the year zero and I reflect upon the many changes to rugby since this change through reference to the game in the amateur era. Within the following pages I try to analyse rugby's open professionalism within and alongside the process of globalization.

Unlike much of the published work on sport and globalization, I do not follow one particular theoretical approach in developing the arguments put forward in this text. This is not intended as a criticism of such work, for this study draws heavily on much of the valuable groundbreaking work undertaken by scholars aligned to a particular theoretical stance. It is based on the premise that all understanding takes place within a particular social and cultural context so it is important to recognize the situatedness of any work. Globalization is a contested concept and continues to reshape how we study the social world (Robinson, 2007). Globalization is also a ubiquitous concept that continues to (re)shape our everyday lives. Yet it is also important to provide a reflexive account of any analysis involving discussions of globalization for we all see the world from somewhere in particular. As will become apparent in the following pages, this study is shaped by a variety of the works on aspects of globalization. In a broader sense, and relating to my wider work within sport, the sociological imagination espoused by C. Wright Mills and the cultural studies approach of Raymond Williams are clear influences on my understanding. For someone born in Wales but now working in the US, this coupling represents an appropriate point of departure for

this work. I am pretty sure that Mills never took to the rugby field in the US but Williams, like all good Welsh schoolboys, played the game at school in Abergavenny. Identifying and recognizing the situated limits of research represents both a strength and weakness of any study, particularly one that aims to examine the relationship between the local and the global.

Reflections of the disinterested sociologist

Born and raised in Wales, where rugby is perceived to be the national sport, my interest and understanding of the game is firmly located and undoubtedly influenced by the positioning of rugby within and around the promotion and celebration of national identity in the Principality. Indeed one of the real challenges for anyone writing about a subject like sport is not to look at certain issues through rose-tinted glasses and fall into a romanticized portrayal of the imagined and invented traditions that shape our social worlds even though sport may be especially susceptible to such positioning for it can be such an emotive issue.

As Smith (2008: p. xiv) perceptively notes, 'sport has a rich conceptual framework' and 'we see what we want to see when we watch sport'. The world of academia dictate that work should be critical and reflexive and attempt to unpack some of our own assumptions and taken-for-granted views. Here to be recognized as a 'scholar' one must submit their works to learned journals where experts can offer critiques of the research. One of the politer critiques of my work, in the dark arena of the anonymous peer-review process, suggested that the writing seemed to be 'more like that of a rugby enthusiast than the disinterested sociologist'. I am still not quite sure what a 'disinterested sociologist' is for the heart of sociological inquiry is guided by the itch to know things. For Mills (1959) it was the interplay of biography and history that shaped sociological thought and that to 'be a good craftsman' a social analyst must try to have a good grasp of the relations between the two. By this it is clear that within any particular space there is a hegemonic ideology or code that shapes it. Yet it is also important to note that while something may be dominant 'it is never either total or exclusive' (Williams, 1977: p. 113). So in trying to accurately portray just where this book is written from, I state clearly that it is reflective of a particular time and a particular place.

As a book about the competing demands of tradition and change, and the relationship between the local and the global, it is also a critical account of the governance of international rugby and the development of the sport.

Many of the ideas were first conceived and developed when working over the border in that country to the East of Wales. When asked where Welsh rugby would now go after a heavy defeat by New Zealand in the first ever world cup competition in 1987, the then Wales Manager Clive Rowlands remarked that it would probably have to be back to beating England every year. Sadly 'Top Cat's' prophecy was remarkably short-lived and much of my early academic career living and working in England was a period where Wales suffered numerous heavy defeats at the hands of the men in white. During this time my esteemed colleagues regularly reminded me of this fact and although I know that much of their abuse may have stemmed from jealousy of not being born on the right side of the border I am pleased to still consider them as friends.

As a visible reflection of globalization, and in particular the significance of transcontinental migration to this inter-connectedness between people and places, the book has been written in the state of Ohio in the US. Here rugby is very much a minority activity and occupies a marginal place in the sporting landscape of the country. Being Welsh, and conforming to national stereotypes, on arriving in the US I was asked to assist with coaching the University's rugby team. This was a fantastic experience and something I enjoyed immensely. Working with this group of players provided a new impetus and encouraged a very different thinking in my understanding of the sport. Teaching in a state university, including a course on sport in a global perspective, further opened my eyes to the ways in which we each make sense of the world and conceive of different people and places. Indeed while I have had the opportunity to visit a number of nations for conferences and the like, it is interesting to consider how this may reflect the life of a professional rugby player and that often we see little beyond the confines of a hotel and conference facility (or hotel, training field and rugby pitch for the latter). To spend an extended period within a different country and learn more about a particular culture is key to really understanding more about aspects of globalization and local/global intersections within different contexts. Living in a different environment also allows you to critically reflect

upon your own sense of place, and understanding of identity, in a way that remaining rooted in 'the local' never can. For Mills (1959) this would be best articulated as encompassing semantics (establishing what something is in itself) and syntax (establishing what it is not) in furthering this understanding.

I recall one of our rugby matches being delayed because there were no pads on the base of the posts. I think this was because the women's team had forgotten to return them from the previous week but the referee was adamant that the game could not start until these had been found. Given that the playing surface resembled a recently ploughed field and included what could best be described as a ditch, where our small scrum-half was only visible by his curly mop of hair, the sudden focus on safety seemed rather strange. Indeed, had the referee witnessed our performance the previous week he would have realized that the posts were probably one of the safest places on the pitch! Phone calls were made and a pick-up truck arrived with the remnants of an old sofa, probably trashed at the last party, flapping around in the back. These were then painstakingly taped around the base and the game could finally begin. This is just one example of the many barriers that this group of men had to overcome to play the game they had grown to love. Players like these, across the continents, represent the true heart and soul of the game and a world removed from the environment of psychologists, notational analysts and nutritionists that increasingly characterize the sport at the elite level today.

From Wales to the US represents two extremities in the global rugby landscape, yet it is also important to recognize that they are only separated by ten places in the International Rugby Board world rankings (IRB, 2009). To illustrate the challenges of developing rugby as a truly international game a second/third string Welsh side, minus their leading players touring with the British and Irish Lions, easily beat the strongest US team in 2005 and 2009 thereby highlighting the massive gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of international rugby. In terms of trying to provide insights into the development of rugby union since 1995 and how the forces of commercialism and consumer capitalism have reshaped the game I look at the sport in a range of different contexts but the very dominance of a small group of core nations regarding all aspects of the sport deems that they are part of the story more than others. It attempts to critically examine

the relationship between the local and the global in different places. While every attempt is made to provide examples from across different parts of the world the cases used are both deliberately selective and, as a result of my own experiences and linguistic capacities, necessarily limited. Part of the challenge with trying to understand and write about something as complex and contested as globalization is that the very nature of the subject means that it is impossible to touch upon all aspects of global flows even in one particular sport. Rugby's biggest challenge, to develop a truly global presence, lies in its somewhat insular and narrow outlook. This resultant connectivity between a relatively small group of nations dictates that much of the book comments on how rugby has failed to embrace globalization.

Two things I tried to do from the outset was to avoid using endnotes and to keep the language as clear and concise as possible. While I have succeeded in the first goal, the very nature of the subject and the language employed in the established literature means that I have been less successful in the latter. It is hoped that I have managed to get the points across as clearly as possible and have been able to write a better game of rugby than I ever played.

Rugby and globalization: Starting in Bridgend

Routes and roots form a big part of this text; and although the present journey and moving between different places have certainly shaped my thinking about rugby and globalization, it is also firmly rooted in my past. This book was written in the US and owes much to living in England, but its real inceptions can be traced to Bridgend in South Wales. At the Brewery Field in the town Boxing Day derby matches against Maesteg were always a highlight of the festive season. Rumour had it that it was always best if we attacked the brewery end of the ground in the second half as the smell from there would spur the players on. So although growing up on the Gwent border, where most of my classmates' rugby affiliations were to the formidable forward power of Pontypool, I always supported Bridgend.

In Bridgend it was my Uncle Derek who unknowingly provided me with much of the inspiration to pursue a career of reading, writing and talking about sport (aka academia). His collection of sports books were something I relished reading from a very early age and our conversations about rugby at the dining table, as my Auntie Marlyn kept

us stocked up on tea and cake, were a big part of this fascination with rugby union and sport in general that has provided me with opportunities to see different places and meet many interesting people. As a proud and long-serving postman in Bridgend, sometime in the early 1990s he worked with a young man named Gareth Thomas whose father was also employed at the same depot. Rugby then was still an amateur sport so its leading players worked in a range of professions and even the biggest stars still had to find ways of paying their mortgage, feeding their families and/or having enough money in the pocket to enjoy the festivities that followed a rugby match. For more than a century rugby was about the postmen, publicans, plasterers and policemen who played the game for no financial gain but solely for the love of the sport.

More than a decade on and 'Alfie' no longer worked at the depot for a successful career in professional rugby encompassing plying his trade for Toulouse in France, captaining both his country and the British and Irish Lions, meant that he was one of the best paid players in the country. Gareth Thomas was one of the last of a group of men for whom playing rugby and its associated aspirations initially stretched as far as 'going out on the piss with the boys' (Thomas, 2007: p. 47) and enjoying the game with their friends. Now boys growing up in Bridgend, Southampton or Columbus can aspire to a career as a rugby player and a life as a full-time professional athlete. Yet despite the great strides forward made in many aspects of the game, and the seismic shifts that have occurred to reshape the sporting landscape today, their options may still be somewhat limited and it is only in a select small number of nations that a man can earn a living solely by playing rugby union.

This text is certainly not the final word on rugby union and globalization. Indeed the work clearly highlights the need for further research on many areas that need to be better understood and that there are pressing issues to be resolved. Moreover, the rapid transformations brought about by open professionalism, intensified globalization and its related impacts mean that the game has changed more in the last 15 years than it did in the 100 years preceding that. The sport continues to alter at a remarkable speed and recent developments such as the proposed addition of Italian teams to the Magners League and the potential addition of Argentina to an expanded Super 15 and Four-Nations competition are reflective of this. Perhaps most

significantly the inclusion of Rugby Sevens in the 2016 Olympic Games means that the sport is 'reaching out' in a way not seen before. Yet it is also important not to get carried away by these developments and to try and provide a measured evaluation of the current state of play. Richard Burton once suggested that rugby is a game of massive lies and stupendous exaggerations. Many of the claims made on its apparent globalization would appear to fall into this category for the sport remains dominated by a very select group of nations and a small cohort of men. In the period since 1995 the blazers may have had to accommodate the suits but they continue to keep control of the ball and dictate just how and where the game is played.

JH
Kent, Ohio.