New Zealand and the British Isles, past, present and future.

Chris Laidlaw

It’s a great pleasure to be here at the home of rugby, Twickenham, once the last fortress of the Forsytes, now the symbol of a new age in which the professional rugby player is King. Where Martin Johnson is emperor and Jonny Wilkinson is God. For a while, as sports went professional it was a case of the gentlemen versus the players. Well, the players won and the gentlemen withdrew to the grandstand. How times have changed.

But let me go back in time. In the Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493 there is this depiction of the Antipodean. Those who wrote it weren’t absolutely sure what he looked like but they knew he was different. So, they fancified. He was depicted as an odd, rather ghastly creature; a surrealistic man with his feet facing backwards. He was dog-headed, he was one-eyed – perhaps in anticipation of the modern Australian - and occasionally even headless. He was, in short, an arresting sight to behold. Not that anyone ever got to behold him.

I’m not sure what happened to that antipodean. It seems he was slowly transformed over the ages from beast to being and, as understanding of those distant unchartered parts of the world gradually evolved, he turned out to be a relatively normal human. A rugby player perhaps.

But deep in the psyche of the European there has persisted – almost to this day - the notion that those beyond the fringes of the civilised centre of the world are somehow different and vaguely threatening. There was a job to be done in straightening them out; remolding them in the European image. Well, that job, that evangelical purpose was approached with great vigour; especially by the British. Thus was created the empire and all that went with it – including rugby. And the British seemed to find a ready response whenever they sought to foster the manly games. The Daily Telegraph stated, on 28 August 1888: "It is one of our proud boasts that wherever we go, whatever lands we conquer, we find a great national instinct of playing games. Plant a dozen Englishmen anywhere…and in a wonderfully short time… the level sward is turned into a cricket field in summer, and a football arena in winter." And so it was. Had William Webb Ellis known that his legacy would be taken up with such fanaticism in the colonies he might well have hesitated before picking up the ball so anti-socially and running with it.

We certainly picked up the ball and ran with it in New Zealand. By the end of the 19th century sport in general and rugby in particular had established itself as perhaps the defining point for the new society in New Zealand. We might have been wearing a borrowed suit but it fitted our nationalism very nicely. As the newspaper Zealandia, the mouthpiece of the opiated masses, pronounced in 1899 with ill-disguised relief in contemplating the extraordinary popularity of rugby: “There is now no danger of New Zealand rearing a nation of milksops, effeminate fops and luxurious dandies...”

Muscular Christianity had won. The few who were interested in the arts - and
they were few at that time - looked only to Europe, Britain in particular, for inspiration while the many who became interested in organised outdoor sport looked only to their own backyard; and that is why rugby became the medium by which New Zealanders would come to realize that they were different from the British.

We've never been quite sure why rugby became so entrenched in New Zealand and there's a solid body of mythology about all of that which others will talk about. One of the myths was that it was instantly a multiracial game; that the Maori took it up alongside the Pakeha. The truth was a little different. Maori and Pakeha actually played the game along parallel lines for some years before the urbanisation of Maori led to a more genuinely integrated game. Once the Europeans became a majority and were no longer obliged to Maori landowners the process of marginalisation drove the two cultures apart.

It was this sense of separation that led to the first ever tour from New Zealand – that by a predominantly Maori team here to Britain in 1888. The *Daily Telegraph* couldn't help but enthuse:

"The spectacle of the noble Maori, coming from different parts of the earth to play an English game, is a phenomenon that is of the very essence of peace", it enthused. I think if the editor had said "pacification" rather than "peace" he might have been closer to the mark but such things were seen through a different prism in those days.

The Maori tourists came hard on the heels of a series of deputations of chiefs who had come to plead with Queen Victoria for a fair and just deal with the settlers over land confiscation or expropriation having got nowhere with the colonial administration in New Zealand. Most of those emissaries were shown the door; sent away humiliated by the experience and this was not lost on Maoridom back home, even if it was not widely reported in the press at the time.

Former Governor Sir George Grey who, more than any other individual in the colonial administration of New Zealand, epitomised the confused attitudes toward indigenous people, and who was a senior politician at the time, thought that the idea of a Maori rugby team strutting its stuff in Britain was a particularly good one. It might, after all, help divert them from continually pester the government over the loss of their land.

Goodness only knows what the Maori tourists thought they would get by way of reception. The English weren't too sure what they were in for either. All they really knew was that these Polynesian people had only recently, or so everybody hoped, eschewed the practice of cannibalism. But, as the *Daily Telegraph* made abundantly clear, colonisation must be having a positive impact if a bunch of erstwhile cannibals can be persuaded to play proper games. It must have been immensely satisfying to the average *Daily Telegraph* reader to know that a dozen Englishmen planted on New Zealand soil could so quickly induce a willingness among the uncivilised to play up and play the game.
Well, the Natives team might not have been quite the model tourists, no matter how noble their Maori character. Owen L Owen, in his *History of the Rugby Football Union*, as good an antidote to insomnia as has ever been written, was far from impressed with the unruly natives. "Many people objected to the extreme vigour of the Native forwards on occasion and their tendency to protest violently against decisions by the referee."

Several of the Maoris actually walked off the field in the game against England in exasperation at the referee's mystifying decisions. The last of these, the incident that prompted the walk-out, was a moment of high farce. T R Ellison writing about it later described it thus: "I tackled Mr Stoddart (the star English player) but he escaped, leaving a portion of his knickers in my possession. He dashed along and the crowd roared; then suddenly discovering what was the matter, he stopped, threw down the ball and in an instant we had the vulgar gaze shut off by forming the usual ring round him, stopping play, of course, for the purpose. While we were thus engaged Evershed, one of the English forwards seized the ball and flew for the goal line. We of course disputed the try and while the discussion was proceeding Mr Evershed boldly picked up the ball from the corner and carried it between the posts and claimed a try there, which the referee very happily granted."

The only surprise is that any of the Maoris stayed on the field at all after that. It seemed to be a case of gentlemanly natives being taken for a ride by unscrupulous Englishmen. Or as someone rather cryptically put it a hundred years later, it was the treaty of Waitangi all over again. The referee, Mr G Rowland Hill, who was Honorary Secretary of the Rugby Football Union at the time, became justly famous for his erratic decision-making. It seemed he made the rules up as he went along then set about having them codified, as necessary, later.

The Natives succeeded in making their mark however. The Maori team's badge, worn on their jerseys, was a creative mish-mash of symbols, perhaps illustrative of the confusion over their national identity. It consisted of a set of goalposts, a ball and a small thicket of fernleaves. Under this was written the elevating phrase "Play up New Zealand".

And play up they did, in rather more than the classical sense of the expression. The team swept around Britain and Ireland, playing at least three times a week against anyone who cared to face them, completing a total of 107 matches. In between they partied till they dropped striking a blow for enlightened multiracialism wherever they went. There were plenty of broken hearts among maidens from every station in British society when the time finally came to return. Some didn't return at all, such was the attraction of the bright lights of Victorian London.

In fact, if history and legend can be disentangled it becomes clear that the Natives cut quite a dash here and there in British society, and got away with all sorts of outrageous behaviour, setting the tone for a century or more of rugby tours in which mayhem off the field became the established norm.
But it was their athletic skills that attracted most attention. *Punch* magazine became quite intrigued by this exotic company of Maori footballers. It said that they had "flabbergasted Surrey and scrumplicated Kent and it is a rum age when a New Zealand team could lick us at goal and scrummage". *Punch* had no idea just how prophetic that remark was going to be.

The Maori dimension of New Zealand rugby gradually came to represent our point of difference and it has been a precious talisman for New Zealanders ever since.

There was always a sprinkling of Maori players who were regarded with fascination wherever The All Blacks went. Waka Nathan, perhaps the greatest Maori player alongside George Nepia - and one who looked every inch a Polynesian warrior - was the subject of unending curiosity and it has to be said, some social awkwardness wherever he went. The popular press in Britain adventurously labelled him the “Black Panther” in 1963 but his exotic ethnicity was never raised in his presence. It was a bit like Basil Fawlty mentioning the war. It wasn't considered nice to draw attention to the fact that someone wasn't white. Waka was vaguely aware of this but much too concerned about playing well to pay it much attention. He was not, in any case, very anxious to be singled out as an oddity and he was one of those rare individuals for that time who was relatively comfortable in his own bicultural skin.

Sometimes this social awkwardness produced hilarious results. One night at a very fashionable little bar adjacent to the All Blacks' hotel in Mayfair, Waka and I were approached by an elderly gentleman who was clearly intrigued to see a very brown and a very white man drinking together in such a place. He tentatively introduced himself but couldn't quite bring himself to ask the obvious question. I decided to force the pace. Allow me to introduce you to the Black Panther, I said, confident that this would produce some embarrassment. Waka flinched, but the gentleman, without a moment’s hesitation looked me squarely in the eye and replied “Aha, and I take it you, sir, are the Pink Panther”.

Times have changed. Nobody with 20:20 vision can fail to notice that our team is no longer overwhelmingly white. Far from it. Multi-racialism is transforming the imagery. The Browning of the All Blacks isn't complete just yet but it's well on the way and it's the other dimension of Polynesia - that of Samoa and to a lesser extent Tonga and Fiji – that is transforming the way the game is played. If Stephen Jones is to be believed it results in a more harum-scarum, pat-a-cake style which is a role reversal of the traditional New Zealand approach of forward domination supported by pragmatic, error-free backplay. He’s wrong. Anybody who saw the matches this year against both the Lions and the other Tri-Nation teams will have realized that the contemporary All Black team is as physically aggressive and efficient as ever before (and I include the 1960s here). Now, it’s an amalgam of Polynesian explosiveness, Maori inventiveness and Pakeha sangfroid. And we like it that way.
It's interesting to note here that the All Blacks are infinitely more representative of their various peoples than the Springboks. And for that matter British teams in which black players still remain something of a novelty. In New Zealand it is the opposite. We have affirmative action programmes elsewhere in society – and they are necessary -but in rugby they've never been needed. In another generation we may need a quota system for the white guys. Imagine the political repercussions of that.

The Haka is a fascinating indicator of this evolution. When it was first performed at the beginning of the 20th century it was little more than a nod in the direction of the biculturalism that had yet to flower. It was performed half heartedly, inexpertly and with little understanding of the deeper meaning of it. Maori were at that time firmly expected to disappear into the wider mainstream of New Zealand ethnicity. There was a faint sense of nostalgia about it all and the Haka fitted that mould rather well. To be fair the meaning of it was often a bit obscure.

Te Rauparaha, one of the more enigmatic of the great chiefs of the 19th century bequeathed the most commonly known Haka – the one performed consistently by the All Blacks until recently and the performance of it was for many years little more than an embarrassment. Generations of All Blacks have demonstrated a lack of timing, of gesture, of finesse that would have Te Rauparaha turning in his grave. There have been calls at various times – not least by Maori nationalists – to have the All Black Haka scrapped. There have been arguments over its authenticity and its appropriateness when performed as it more often than not was, by an all-white All Black team.

We are over that. The Haka has refound its energy, paralleling the new cultural energy of Maoridom. It is now performed with skill and real passion. It has become a weapon of intimidation. The players who perform it make this abundantly clear to the opposition.

Now, a century later, we have a new version. It will be on show here at Twickenham when the All Blacks return and it is a truly arresting sight. The new Haka is a much more unashamed demonstration of aggression, tailored to the team's immediate intentions and with more than a hint of pan-Polynesia about it. Now, it isn't just a Maori Haka. There are elements from Samoa and Tonga there. It's a hybrid, a multicultural match of the contemporary All Black team. And the public seems to love it. When somebody asked the other day after it was unveiled against the Springboks where is the European bit a Maori commentator drew attention to the ritual throat slitting motion at the end. "That's the Pakeha bit", he said. Cut-throat society". At least we're in there somewhere.

To offer the thought that an ethnically representative team is actually good for New Zealand or any other society is to state the obvious. Our population is no longer monochromatic. The ethnic imagery and dynamism that the modern All Blacks project is about as powerful as it can get. It doesn't go un-noticed in other parts of the world. Robin Williams, the actor, watched a video of the All
Blacks in action and his preconceived, identikit vision of New Zealand society was shattered. He was so impressed he immediately ordered tickets for the World Cup.

We haven't always been able to perform the Haka. In 1970 The All Blacks in South Africa were told that the haka should not be performed as it would be "misinterpreted" by both the black and white sections of the crowd. To my intense disgust our team management agreed to this arrangement before consulting the players and we were prevented from performing it. Several of us tried to provoke a rebellion but had to abandon it in the cause of team unity. It was a mistake, typical of the unassertive approach that New Zealand for so long took to its relationship with the South African establishment.

One of the great challenges of the 20th century, certainly for Britain and New Zealand, was of finding a way of dealing with the white minority in South Africa. The Afrikaner's game was rugby. The state was heavily dependent on being able to deliver rugby tests to the faithful and the consequences of failure on that front were too awful to contemplate by any South African Prime Minister. That challenge nearly destroyed rugby in New Zealand because we had grown so close to the South Africans through the relationship on the rugby field that we couldn't objectively disentangle ourselves from the mesh of apartheid when it came to the crunch.

For a number of years in the 1970s and 1980s Britain and New Zealand went out on a very precarious limb in order to protect the rights of those who wanted to play against the Springboks. Both countries were pilloried in Commonwealth and UN circles. Margaret Thatcher and Rob Muldoon, both stubborn and near-sighted when it came to apartheid, dragged their societies into a political bear-pit from which neither would ever quite escape. Muldoon and Thatcher were at one on the Falklands they stood together against the Commonwealth over rugby contact with South Africa.

But neither we nor the British had ever really come to terms with the underlying causes of the apartheid abomination. Why did it happen? Who were these racially obsessed Afrikaners?

Oddly enough, there has been very little objective analysis of Afrikaner society by the outside world. Early on, the British encouraged us to ignore and despise them. For nearly a hundred years they were treated like lepers by the western mainstream and they didn't like it. The only major attempt to peel the onion of the Afrikaner personality was David Dimbleby's celebrated BBC television documentary "the White Tribe of Africa". Looked at in retrospect this was patronising and Anglo centric - long on rhetoric about racism and short on understanding of the complex forces that shaped South Africa. Dimbleby kept asking himself "why can't these people be more like us?"

They weren't. In his marvellous survey of the evolution of the Afrikaner nation, "The Mind of South Africa", Alister Sparks recognises this as the essential driving force behind all Afrikaner behaviour. He uses the imagery of a Bitter Almond hedge which Jan van Riebeck the leader of the first consignment of
Dutch settlers planted in 1660 around his little colony at the Cape to keep out animals and Hottentots, not necessarily in that order of priority, and turns this into a metaphor for everything that has happened since.

The truth is, the Afrikaners were driven out of their homes in the Cape by the British every bit as ruthlessly as any of the African tribes. It was the British administration in the Cape, led by Sir George Grey, Ironically, which created the preconditions for institutionalised racial discrimination in South Africa as much as any messianic Afrikaner. It was Albion at its most perfidious which provoked the conflict between the Boer settlers and the African tribes of the region by forcing them into collision.

It was the British who started the war against the Boer republics in the name of avarice. And it was the British who forced the Afrikaner into second-class citizenship from which a burning, and ultimately fatal nationalism arose.

I learned, first hand, just how strongly the Afrikaner felt about the British when in the late 1960s I visited South Africa briefly in an academic context. Because I was an All Black, something which could open any door in that country I was introduced to Prime Minister John Vorster at a cocktail party in Cape Town. Having had several glasses of sherry I rashly offered the thought that the future for South Africa looked a bit on the bleak side. Vorster, a man with a face that only a malicious cartoonist could create, glowered at me from under his dated trilby hat and said "you are an Englishman and the English always have a smart answer for everything. Don't think you can come here and understand what is going on in a day".

This was the first time I had been mistaken for an Englishman. I protested that I was a New Zealander and that we saw things rather differently. To Vorster there was no difference. We were all "rooineks" as far as he was concerned; a form of untrustworthy sub-species to be kept very much at arms length. I have never forgotten that conversation. If a South African couldn't see that we are not British then who ever would?

A couple of years later I met Vorster again, in Pretoria, at a reception for the 1970 All Blacks. He was deeply unhappy at having been forced to make a concession by admitting our non-white players, knowing that the longer term ramifications of that would not be controllable and he was in a very sour frame of mind. I gingerly reminded him of his characterisation of me as an Englishman and his response was immediate: "you fellows fought against our people and you are now trying to tell us how to run our country. You Englishmen have been interfering in South Africa for two hundred years."

The rugby connection with South Africa has shaped all of us in one way or another. British colonial troops, including New Zealanders and Australians first met South Africans on the rugby field during a pause in the fighting during the Anglo-South African war. According to reports the atmosphere was relatively cordial. Perhaps already there was a subliminal sense among the players that they had rather more in common than they had thought. That game certainly did little to bolster the antagonism between these two settler communities.
According to reports of the war later it helped to weaken the New Zealanders' sense of commitment to the whole wacky enterprise. And with the value of 21st century hindsight, was it any wonder?

On one famous occasion a British commander stationed at O'Kief received a written challenge from General Maritz of the Transvaal Scouting Corps to a cessation of hostilities in order for a rugby match between the warring armies to take place. And it did. And the Afrikaners won, or so they say. The British remained silent. They must have lost. They might have gone on to win the war but they lost their primacy in the game they had transported to the colonies.

New Zealand got off to a real flyer of a start in that war, The Empire needed us and there we were, even though the root cause of the conflict had nothing whatsoever to do with us. Premier Seddon offered up a contingent of mounted rifles two weeks before the war was even declared. It was like reserving seats at a test match yet to be scheduled between All Blacks and Springboks. New Zealand's offer was the first to be accepted and when it was, the House of Representatives in Wellington rose as one and sang God Save the Queen.

And so, in the name of imperialism, or more accurately, British commercial avarice, we were on the march. It was actually a BYO war because the Mounted Rifles were obliged to take their own horses. There was only one other caveat from the British. Maori were not invited. Even though Britain finally dragooned more than 10,000 Africans into service as their casualties began to mount, and in spite of the fact that the Imperial army had found out rather painfully in the 1860s just how good Maori were at waging war, they weren't wanted. Lord Onslow at the Colonial Office felt that Maori were "merely children and though they might fight as well as any coloured troops officered by Englishmen, they would soon become a great trouble in a garrison".

They got their chance later. Rugby was war minus the shooting. As author Tom Keneally put it, sport is all about "establishing tribal power without actually going to war". It has certainly served as an admirable substitute when war ended. Often, as in the South African war and again later, the two forms of combat overlapped. The New Zealand Army team that toured Britain in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War simply swapped their battledress for black shorts and jerseys and went straight to work. All of the reports of that tour suggest a joyous, celebratory mood in which New Zealand soldiers produced some post-conflict razzle dazzle and the British crowds loved them for it.

We are regularly reminded by New Zealand historians that New Zealand came of age when its soldiers were gunned down first by Turks then by Germans in the killing fields of the Great War. This is a bit like saying that cold showers at boarding school are character forming.

New Zealand Army teams took on all comers during both world wars. The experiences provided valuable reassurance of New Zealand's fighting spirit after some of the demoralising setbacks suffered by allied troops in such
arenas as Gallipoli and Crete. I can never recall taking any of the picturesque references to Gallipoli, to Monte Casino, or El Alamein that peppered the team talks of New Zealand coaches very seriously.

I came from a generation to which it meant very little. But to those who had been caught up in it the imagery was very much alive. For countless years war was the subliminal theme of every All Black match. For coaches, ex-soldiers like Neil McPhail and Fred Allen, each match was a battle. Each test series was a campaign. Prisoners were not to be taken. Cover defence was a second front. Forwards were the heavy artillery; backs the bayonet thrust. Attack and counter-attack. War and sport; sport and war. The difference began to blur.

As the years went by I began to understand the connection. War and sport are, after all, the only means by which the people of one community can match themselves physically against another. Wars are in rather shorter supply these days and rugby has had to fill something of a gap in the nation's conflict calendar. It is this that still lends any match a transcendent quality even if the team talks are rather more civilian in character.

All the debate about New Zealand's supposed coming of age on the slopes of Gallipoli or later on the Western Front has tended to overshadow the extraordinary impact on national identity of the 1905 All Blacks. The great "Originals" team that toured Britain and France, led by David Gallagher, went away assuming that they were British and came back realizing that they weren't; they were something different. Others have already talked about the impact of that tour, the controversies, the criticism of New Zealand tactics and the apparent admiration, if not astonishment, at the strength, innovation and athleticism of the New Zealanders. They set out without fanfare having been defeated at home before they left, then proceeded to take the sporting world by storm.

Not everybody agreed that the New Zealanders were new world supermen. After the loss against Wales Punch magazine, tongue presumably in cheek, remarked that New Zealanders had become a race weakened by the enervating effects of geysers. But it got worse. New Zealand men, said Punch, were the unwitting victims of the women's rights movement, as witnessed by the recent, revolutionary granting of suffrage to New Zealand women. When the women of a nation had become men, its men, concluded Punch, were likely to become women.

Many myths and legends were born out of that tour. Some have persisted to this day. The delicious uncertainty over the Deans try at Cardiff for instance drew us closer to the Welsh more than any other single factor in either society's entire history. From there on Wales and New Zealand became blood brothers, locked in perpetual combat; each intent on asserting its cultural and emotional distance from Mother Albion.

When the 1905 All Blacks finally returned to Auckland Prime Minister Seddon, ever the one for the photo opportunity, personally escorted the players off the
ship. Their personal reflections on the tour were recounted all over the country. The public in New Zealand began to appreciate that a chink of daylight was beginning to appear between us and the British. In his splendid work of faction about the tour "The Book of Fame", Lloyd Jones explores this theme very effectively and very persuasively. Was this the first hesitant expression of nationhood? I for one have become convinced that it was. A distinctively different New Zealand identity which has always been said to have emerged at ANZAC Cove in 1915 was actually discovered a decade earlier, via the playing fields of Britain.

Ever since, we have been trying by one means or another to differentiate ourselves from the British. There was of course a theory abroad that British settlers in New Zealand created a society composed of "better Britons", something that Jamie Belich has written extensively about. In the early twenties it was noted by a prominent London book reviewer that "the young New Zealander had began to appear in British fiction. Long, lean, athletic, olive-skinned and blue eyed as well as being chivalrous and wealthy. He was, it seemed, at once adorably innocent and miraculously shrewd; in other words, invincible". These are not my words. There might have been something in that in the 20s because the sons of wealthy New Zealand landowners would make a habit of doing some leisurely OE in old Blighty. Somehow it doesn't seem to ring so true today. I think that there was a tendency in Britain at that time to fashion the image of the colonial boy in their midst as essentially a middle class Briton, but at once remove and somehow free of the strictures of British society.

At that time rugby was very much an expression of English devil-may-care manliness; of a desire to engage in pursuits that were slightly madcap. P G Wodehouse summed it all up rather nicely. He said, by way of interpretation of what rugby was apparently all about, "the main scheme is to work the ball down the field somehow and deposit it over the line at the other end. In order to squelch this programme each side is entitled to put in a certain amount of assault and battery and do things to its fellow man which, if done elsewhere, would result in fourteen days without option, with some strong remarks from the bench".

It seems to me that English, if not British rugby retained that slightly off the wall imagery right through until the sixties. It was fiercely amateur in character. If the result mattered it was infra dig to show it. The game was the thing. What happened afterward was just as important as what happened on the field. The contrast between that and the game in New Zealand grew steadily greater. We were growing apart.

By the late 1960s when I first came to live in England, in Oxford, I began to appreciate this motivation to be seen to be different. I shared a house with a number of other graduates, almost all of whom were from North America. One of our first demonstrations of difference was to buy a 22ft long bright pink Pontiac Catalina the tail fins of which were longer than the average British car. On top of this we strapped several surfboards which was an interesting
statement in view of the fact that Oxford was about as far from the sea as anywhere in the whole of Britain.

Never mind, we made our mark; particularly when trying to manoeuvre this gigantic vehicle into the miniscule lane in which we lived. In 1969 we announced to all who would listen that we were going to be the first to surf the famous Severn Barrage, one of nature’s oddities, that small tidal wave that flows up the Severn Estuary once a year at precisely the same moment. After much fanfare we set out in the Pontiac to South Wales to follow our destiny. Alas, it was a leap year and we missed it by 24 hours.

My status as an All Black at Oxford was a mixed blessing. Those who played rugby – the rugger buggers - were objects of derision for the more sophisticated undergraduates, or the serious bookworms to whom sport was an irritating diversion practiced largely by the unintelligent masses. Ormond Wilson, writing of his time as a New Zealand Rhodes Scholar in the 1930s identified a sharp divide between the “aesthetes” and the “hearties” and as an outsider he was never quite sure which group to identify with. In the end he opted, probably wisely, for the aesthetes.

As an antipodean oddity I was often asked to speak about rugby, leadership and whatever else I could summon up to say to an assemblage of acne-intensive young Englishmen at some of the schools in the Oxford area. At moments like this I found myself wanting to convey some sense of what it is to be a New Zealander but I never did. I couldn’t ever quite sort out in my mind precisely what our point of difference was. I felt vaguely frustrated by this but was sufficiently young and inexperienced not to understand why.

On one occasion I had given a speech at a public school of some reputation not far from Oxford. It happened that one of my rugby team-mates, an Australian who was particularly intimidated by English society, had applied for a teaching position at the school and was due to go for an interview with the headmaster. He asked me to go along with him, thinking that the apparently positive vibrations from my earlier appearance might serve to reinforce his candidature.

It was a sparkling Spring day and the headmaster suggested that we talk over a few holes of golf, at a nearby course. We stepped out onto the first tee. The headmaster invited me to go first while he and my colleague discussed the business of his job application. I had played golf twice before in my life, each time receiving a clear message from the results that this was not my game. I nevertheless teed up and took an almighty swipe at the ball which travelled at terminal velocity straight to the headmaster's knee, shattering it. He fell, stricken and unconscious, to the ground.

None of this I immediately saw as I gazed down the fairway looking for the result of what I thought was a pretty good hit. I thought the loud cry from the headmaster was one of admiration for my golfing talents. I was wrong. When I turned all I saw was a recumbent headmaster with my friend bending over him shouting "you've killed the bugger!" Fortunately I hadn't. All I had killed was
my friend's chances of a job at the school. The headmaster was carted off, white as a sheet and semi-conscious by Matron and taken to hospital for knee reconstruction and months of recuperation. If this was the empire fighting back it was somewhat wanting in chivalry. We fled, hoping that he would take the whole thing in the right spirit; if he ever recovered. Against all my instincts I wrote him a grovelling letter of apology but received no reply. Nor did my friend when he meekly inquired whether or not a vacancy was still available.

At about the same time the Rugby Football Union here in London took its first, tentative step toward the recognition that coaching was finally kosher, that coaches were to be brought out of the closet of unacceptability and given official recognition. It was a dramatic step. Up till then British rugby had steadfastly refused to acknowledge the growing reality that coaches were an integral part of rugby. For them the only legitimate coach was the one that took you to the game.

Coaching was of course already something of an art in Wales but the individuals concerned were shadowy figures, never acknowledged in public – men in grubby overcoats who lurked in the shrubbery and were brought out when a club was sure nobody was watching. There were rumours that these men were actually paid for their efforts and that made it twice as bad. Coaches were well established by then in New Zealand. They weren't paid – nobody was – but they were respectable.

There was much debate about this at the East India and Sportsmen's Club where the RFU had its headquarters. Many, perhaps most of the Old Farts of English rugby were dead against letting coaches in the front door. To let coaching gain a foothold was the equivalent of doing nothing to prevent foot and mouth disease. They particularly disapproved of touring teams bringing coaches with them and insisted that these be described at all times as "assistant managers".

Fred Allen and others who coached teams from New Zealand, South Africa and Australia were an embarrassing imposition. The French of course were far more open about their coaches but then the French were, at the time, beyond the pale. The French have always had a knack for finding a way of getting what they want. (Except perhaps when it comes to getting the Olympic Games)

There was considerable resistance to the invasion of the coaches in the English rugby media as well. Uel Titley of the Times, bless his memory, described coaches as a "scourge", an unwanted influence that somehow demeaned the amateur spirit. In his view coaches were to rugby what dogs are to lamp-posts and he, and others in the media made it abundantly clear that this particularly slippery slope was not one the Rugby Football Union should ever set its foot on.

But things were on the move. There were just enough men of vision on the union to sway the vote in favour of at least talking about the issue of coaching with officials from the various constituent clubs and counties. As is always the
habit when an institution wants to make haste slowly, the RFU decided to form a committee to discuss the whys and wherefores of coaching. Perhaps because I had had direct experience of playing under formally recognized coaches in New Zealand I was invited to join the committee. As far as I can remember I was the only player to be invited and this was regarded as a singular honour by my team-mates. It was explained to me that this constituted something of a breakthrough as the RFU had never before directly consulted a player on anything at all. Nor for that matter had the New Zealand or any other rugby union. Players at that time were mere incidentals.

I was asked, by formal letter from the RFU secretary, to present myself at the East India and Sportsmen's Club in St James's Square promptly at midday the following Friday. The meeting would be preceded by lunch and was expected to take up most of the afternoon. Tea would be held at the ready. When I arrived, the rest of the committee – various county chairmen and RFU officials – were in the bar warming to the task ahead.

At 1.30pm on the dot we sat down to lunch and at around 3pm the chairman of this august assembly - whose name I have long forgotten but whose nose I remember glowing brilliantly in the half-light of the dining room - called us to order and announced "I don't know what all the rest of you think about this coaching business but as far as I'm concerned it's a lot of bally nonsense and the sooner we get over it the better. With this he attacked the port bottle with renewed vigour and shortly after declared the meeting closed.

It was another year or two before the RFU tried again. In 1971 the four home unions finally decided to appoint a coach for the Lions team and the RFU gave way. The fact that the coach, Carwyn James, was Welsh must have made it all that much harder but James was a genius and the Lions won and from then on coaching was de rigueur.

The All Blacks come to Britain with ever growing frequency. The once a decade, five month odyssey has given way to flying visits and one-off test matches. Has anything been lost by this speeding up of the cycle? Does familiarity breed contempt? It's hard to say one way or the other. One thing that seems to be a constant is a curious form of resentment in this country at what is regarded as All Black excesses. It began with unhappiness at New Zealand's tactics in 1905. Dave Gallagher was consistently called a cheat by the British sporting press and by many opponents. It continued in 1924 with widespread accusations of rough play. The pattern was repeated on subsequent tours and in 1963, when All Black forward power was at its height, there was continual carping at what were regarded as strongarm tactics, direct and excessive physical intimidation. In 1967, even though our game was much more expansive, the same criticisms persisted. We were too vigorous, too ruthless and too unforgiving. Too professional.

How the worm has turned. The roles have been reversed with England. For half a century it was the dark force of All Black forward power against the free-running inventiveness of the British teams. Each Lions team epitomized that
spirit of adventure. These days it is the trampling bulk of English forward dominance against the colourful creativity of All Black backlines. Will it stay that way; or are we witnessing a temporary aberration; an exchange of parts in a long-running play. I suspect the answer to that lies with the character of the people involved at both ends. It also lies in the sheer weight of the game in England and the massive investment going into growing it on the back of that stunning World Cup success.

My first experience of British society was as a very green and impressionable nineteen year old All Black tourist in 1963-64. It was a highly instructive education. From the moment I stepped off the plane at Heathrow it became apparent that, to most people outside my country, the All Blacks were New Zealand and New Zealand was the All Blacks. One and the same; indivisible. It was the only frame of reference that many people abroad had of New Zealand, apart from the vague impression of a pleasant, quiet and unruffled sort of place; a bit sheepish, unswerving in loyalty to Her Majesty and everything piously closed down at the weekend.

Being on an All Black tour is a bit like being a stunt man in a circus act. Our sense of identity was constructed around our expectation that we would win and of course a loss on the field represented a savage kick in the private parts of that identity. Beneath the veneer of sporting swagger that accompanied the All Blacks wherever we went and which actually opened many doors that are closed to the average Kiwi traveller, we were a collection of uncertain and unassertive beings. Until of course we hit the field of play. As one florid editorial at the time put it: the changing shed was the All Blacks' phone box in Metropolis. They went in as Clark Kent and came out as Superman.

To be beaten was, in a way, to yield up that part of our identity that made us different from the British. That is why we were just that much more motivated than any other team; and still are.

The team to beat was Wales. As I said before there has ever since that epic encounter in 1905, been something of an edge to the relationship between the All Blacks and Wales. For many decades that relationship was the one that everybody talked about. There was an almost spiritual quality to it. Perhaps it had something to do with size and marginality. When the two countries clashed it was the tough guys' day out. The flinty valley miner pitted against the hardened southern farmer. Irresistible forces and immovable objects. They beat us in 1905, maybe not quite fair and square but, nonetheless, they won. That defeat rankled until we won the next one in the 20s but they won the next two, in the thirties and the fifties and they very nearly won again in 1963. These guys didn't expect to lose and we weren't accustomed to meeting people like that. Before that match at Cardiff the persistent melodic refrain of "Wales'll beat you" had become a kind of Celtic Haka, something the locals just broke into, spontaneously. It was reflex stuff then but we don't hear it so much anymore.
In those days the Welsh had hwyl by the bucketload. When I was a child I was
told by some smart alec that Hwyl was a rare vegetable fed to bigtime rugby
players before big matches and, having seen filmclips of the way the Welsh
played I couldn't wait to feast on it when I finally got to Wales many years
later. Such was our understanding of mystic Celtic ways in those days.

It’s hard to know precisely why or where Wales temporarily lost its hwyl.
Perhaps it became entombed in all those mines that have progressively been
sealed off over the years. The great mining town clubs like Neath, Aberavon,
Abertillery, Maesteg or Pontypool don't cater for miners any more. Their
teams seem to be composed of real estate agents, insurance salesmen and
IT experts. A year or two it was being said, not least in England, that Welsh
rugby had gone soft from the centre and that their traditional comparative
advantage - fanatically fit, hard forwards has just melted away; gone with the
miners.

Well, to everybody's delight, and particularly ours, the Welsh are back. The
hwyl's obviously been freshly dug up and administered to the players in very
large doses. I asked Gareth Edwards recently how such a transformation
could possibly have occurred. He hadn't a clue. And if he doesn't know, who
does? I just hope it endures. All that history should never be allowed to go to
waste. Nor should the hwyl.

I also hope that the tradition of the Lions endures. This modern day miracle of
cross cultural cooperation is something that really does catch the imagination.
The recent Lions visit to New Zealand was a runaway success socially and
politically, if not results-wise for your team. The great Barmy army of Lions
supporters was particularly well received and particularly well behaved. There
were some anxieties beforehand that this might turn out to be rugby's
equivalent of the primitive hordes of soccer yobbos who regularly lay waste to
various parts of Europe.

By contrast the Barmy army were brilliant – the best possible advertisement
for Britain and Ireland that anyone could ask for. It would be a brave Home
Unions Chairman who dares to turn this particular tap off.

It's interesting to reflect that Clive Woodward's Lions and its vast support
group was the biggest expeditionary force to land in New Zealand since
Governor Grey summoned up the imperial army in the 1860s to subdue angry
Maori who were being deprived of their land. That particular expedition was a
bit more successful than the 2005 invasion. They lost a few provincial games
but won the test series.

Britain and New Zealand have an easy, mature relationship. A better one than
it used to be. It has evolved over the years with rugby as one of its
cornerstones. It will continue to evolve in future. It may well be that we
choose, quite soon, to go the republican route. I hope we do. That will change
very little in terms of the substance of the relationship. In some respects it
might help to remove some of the ambiguities that surround the role of the
sovereign, those curious reserve powers, and the sense that we are still
somehow dependent on the mother country.

If David Gallagher, who served Britain both in South Africa before the 1905 tour and who died for Britain at the Somme a few years later, were to somehow be reincarnated to pronounce on the quality of our relations today he might be surprised but he would surely be satisfied with the way that rugby has so consistently served the substance of that relationship. And he'd probably still be called a cheat by the British sporting media.

**Lord Macauley's NZer**