

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF  
**ENGLISH RUGBY UNION**

Tony Collins



ROUTLEDGE



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## A SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH RUGBY UNION

From the myth of William Webb Ellis to the glory of the 2003 World Cup win, this book explores the social history of rugby union in England.

Ever since *Tom Brown's Schooldays* the sport has seen itself as the guardian of traditional English middle-class values. In this fascinating new history, leading rugby historian Tony Collins demonstrates how these values have shaped the English game, from the public schools to mass spectator sport, from strict amateurism to global professionalism.

Based on unprecedented access to the official archives of the Rugby Football Union, and drawing on an impressive array of sources from club minutes to personal memoirs and contemporary literature, the book explores in vivid detail the key events, personalities and players that have made English rugby.

From an era of rapid growth at the end of the nineteenth century, through the terrible losses suffered during the First World War and the subsequent 'rush to rugby' in the public and grammar schools, and into the periods of disorientation and commercialisation in the 1960s through to the present day, the story of English rugby union is also the story of the making of modern England.

Like all the very best writers on sport, Tony Collins uses sport as a prism through which to better understand both culture and society. A ground-breaking work of both social history and sport history, *A Social History of English Rugby Union* tells a fascinating story of sporting endeavour, masculine identity, imperial ideology, social consciousness and the nature of Englishness.

**Tony Collins** is Professor of the Social History of Sport at Leeds Metropolitan University, a founding editor of the journal *Sport in History* and a member of the executive committee of the British Society of Sports History. He is twice winner of the Lord Aberdare Literary Prize for Sports History (1999 and 2006).



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*Tony Collins*

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## PROLOGUE

Of the little that is known about William Webb Ellis, we can be certain of one thing: he did not invent the game of rugby football.

An unremarkable schoolboy, he lived his life in dutiful obscurity as an Anglican clergyman until his death in 1872. Four years later, however, a second life began for him when Rugby School old boy and benefactor Matthew Bloxam suddenly named Ellis as the boy who in 1823 first picked up the ball and ran with it. Bloxam offered no evidence for his claim. Nor did he provide any in 1880 when he reiterated his view.

At the height of the war that split rugby apart in 1895, the Old Rugbeian Society set up a committee to investigate the true origins of the Rugby football. Despite considerable efforts, not one person came forward to support Bloxam. The committee found not a single eyewitness, not a solitary written word, not even a syllable of hearsay evidence to support the William Webb Ellis story.

Nevertheless, the committee decided ‘in all probability’ that Ellis was the ‘innovator’ of running with the ball. In 1900 a plaque was erected at the school that proclaimed unhesitatingly that Ellis ‘with a fine disregard of the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it’ in 1823.

Not for the first time in the history of rugby, evidence had been outweighed by expedience.





## THE SCHOOLBOY'S GAME

It is a sunny, brisk afternoon in November, with a slender breeze blowing across the pitch. In a few moments School House will face School in a match that would change the face of British sport.

Thwack! The ball is kicked off, far into the distance but no more than fifteen feet in the air at its highest. It is caught and taken back bravely by a School House player into the oncoming School forwards. As the two packs meet, the ball temporarily disappears. As struggle for possession seems to get increasingly desperate, the ball suddenly appears on the House side of the scrum.

Their forwards hesitate momentarily and in a flash the ball is taken up by the onrushing School breakaways and kicked down field, threatening to breach the House defence. But a covering House three-quarter cleans the ball up, sidesteps a couple of oncoming forwards and drop-kicks the ball deep into School's half. House forwards flood into School territory and the two packs pile into each other, desperate to regain the ball. House pile on the pressure and seem to have School penned into their own quarter.

The ball squirts free again but as soon as it appears in open play, it is once again entombed by a mass of scrummaging forwards. Two take their life into their hands and fight their way to middle of the scrum, determined to drive the ball through their School pack and out the other side. But the experienced School forwards get the better of them and they lose track of the ball, forcing them to fight their way back out of the wrong side of the scrum before re-entering it back on their own side.

Then Brooke, the House captain, takes charge, crouching low and driving the ball forward through the legs of the opposing school forwards. His skill and strength get it so far but he too is driven back. Slowly School begins to get the upper hand and House are driven back inch by inch, each step contested as if the forwards had the backs towards a precipice. The ball

suddenly appears on the wrong side of the House goal line but the danger is averted by a sharp kick into touch.

As the line-out is formed, both sides jostle for position but Brooke takes the ball and throws into the hands of his brother, who scorches through the School line to take it deep into School territory. He beats one tackler, then another, kicks the ball forward and, just as the defenders rush in to kill the threat, throws himself on the ball as it bounces over the goal line and between the posts. Try! Try to House and the Brooke brothers' combination.

But the try counts for nothing if it is not converted into a goal. Crab Jones, the coolest player on the field, steps forward and amidst a swarming mass of defenders hoping to charge down his kick, calmly steers the ball over the crossbar and between the posts. First blood to House.

The two sides change ends and, following a brief break for refreshments, School kick off high into the air, giving their forwards time to advance deep into House's half. Their tactics are to keep the ball near the House goal through sheer weight of numbers but the House forwards meet them blow for blow. Each time the ball emerges from the scrum, it is a House player who retrieves it and takes it back up the field. Those loose balls they miss are cleared up by Crab Jones and his fellow backs, who drop-kick the ball out to safety, momentarily relieving the onslaught.

But the pressure refuses to go away and as the end of the match approaches, School forwards get the ball at their feet and drive it forward again towards the House goal. Brooke throws himself into the centre of the rush but fails to get the ball. As it heads towards the posts, Crab Jones manages to get his hands on it but before he can set himself for the relieving kick the School forwards bring him down and the ball slips from his hands and rolls behind the House goal posts.

As the rest of the House team hold their breath and School is about to salute the try that could tie the game, a slight and inexperienced boy playing in his first match rushes headlong towards the ball, a fraction ahead of the incoming School forwards. As the rampaging pack push him over, he manages to fall on the ball a fraction before they collapse in a mass on top of him. As his teammates rush up to congratulate him, the match ends and House celebrate a glorious victory.

The schoolboy was Tom Brown. The game was Rugby football.

And this was the match that would take the game and its values out of the school, across Britain and around the world.

### Tom Brown and Rugby School

Of course, the School versus School House match described in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was entirely fictional.<sup>1</sup> And Tom Brown never existed. But the future popularity of the Rugby School code of football arose in large part to the remarkable impact of this fictional pupil of the school.

In contrast, the fictional exploits of William Webb Ellis, a real pupil at the school, had no bearing on the development of the sport. His tale belonged to a later time, when the story brought comfort to those concerned at the direction rugby had taken in the 1880s and 1890s. Thomas Hughes himself, a pupil at the school in the 1830s, knew nothing of him. "The Webb Ellis tradition" had not survived to my day,' he told the Old Rugbeian Society.<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt that if the Webb Ellis story had contained a shred of truth, Hughes would have woven it into *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a veritable compendium of folklore about Rugby School.

First published by Macmillan in April 1857, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* became an instant best seller, almost single-handedly establishing a new literary genre of the 'school story', and creating the first schoolboy hero.<sup>3</sup> In it, young Tom Brown, the son of a country squire, is sent to Rugby School, where, through a series of moral lessons, including the importance of playing football and cricket, he matures into a model Victorian gentleman. *Tom Brown* was an attempt to describe public school life for young boys (Hughes originally wrote it for his eight-year-old son Maurice, who died just two years after its publication) and to bring the teachings of Rugby's most famous headmaster, Thomas Arnold, to a wider audience. Sentimental and sanctimonious in equal doses, it proved popular with boys and men alike, selling 11,000 copies in its first year and being reprinted almost fifty times by the end of the century. It was, said *The Times*, a book that 'every English father might well wish to see in the hands of his son'.<sup>4</sup>

In its tone and outlook it epitomised all the self-confidence that the middle classes felt during the decades that followed the 1832 Reform Act, which finally brought them the franchise. The final collapse of the threat of Chartism after 1848 guaranteed an unprecedented period of relative social and industrial peace that lasted for almost thirty years. The Great Exhibition of 1851 symbolised Britain's triumphant global ascendancy, and the years that followed saw exceptional economic growth both at home and overseas. New markets continued to be opened up to British trade and manufactures, profits and rents carried on rising, and the size of the middle class itself grew rapidly, thanks to the expansion of clerical, administrative and managerial

work. The number of people employed in 'white collar' occupations grew by 69 per cent in the three decades after 1851 to over 900,000. Clerks, bankers and accountants multiplied fourfold over the period, while those employed in education almost doubled. It was also a period in which the professions began to consolidate organisationally, raising their social status and prestige. For example, the British Medical Association was established in 1856, the 1860 Solicitors' Act allowed the Law Society to organise entrance examinations, and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors was founded in 1868.<sup>5</sup>

For the more adventurous, the discovery of gold in Australia and California offered opportunities to amass considerable fortunes. Industrial capitalism was now accepted, if not necessarily universally embraced, by the middle classes as an engine of their prosperity now and in the future. This was a world in which all sections of the middle classes – businessmen, churchmen, military men and country gentry – could feel that they, above all other classes, had made the decisive contribution to the success of their nation. Britain's position at the apex of world power, they confidently believed, was a result of ordinary middle-class families like theirs and, for Thomas Hughes, that of Tom Brown:

much has yet to be written and said before the British nation will be properly sensible of how much of its greatness it owes to the Browns. For centuries, in their quiet, dogged, homespun way, they have been subduing the earth in most English counties, and leaving their mark in American forests and Australian uplands. . . . noble families would be somewhat astounded – if the accounts ever came to be fairly taken – to find how small their work for England has been by the side of that of the Browns.<sup>6</sup>

This sense of Britishness also encompassed an increased awareness of military responsibilities overseas. This was partly because of the growing newspaper coverage of Britain's frequent wars, most notably in William Russell's despatches from the Crimean War in *The Times*, but also because Britain's increasing international influence necessarily meant increased vigilance as its reach extended across the world.<sup>7</sup> The frustrations of the inconclusive Crimean adventure were followed in 1857 by the outbreak of rebellion in India, which was not only shocking in its violence but also in the way that it questioned Britain's right to rule. But such challenges to British authority became occasions not for doubt but for the reassertion of national and racial superiority. It was an age of self-satisfaction and moral certitude.

And it was the age that shaped and moulded rugby football, indelibly marking it with features and attitudes that remain with it to this day.

The game's birthplace, Rugby School, self-consciously expressed and promoted the spirit of mid-Victorian England. It had been founded in 1567 by a London grocer, Laurence Sheriff, to 'teach grammar freely' to boys from the midlands town of Rugby and surrounding area. By 1818 the school had become the second largest public school in England, with almost 400 pupils. By this time there was very little that was either free or public about it, although Sheriff's legacy of land in London's Gray's Inn Fields had ensured its prosperity. While it had attracted some boys from aristocratic families in the late eighteenth century, and continued to do so throughout the nineteenth, the majority of its pupils came from the upper middle classes, especially the clergy and the rural gentry. This tendency intensified under the headship of Thomas Arnold, partly because he appears to have discouraged the recruitment of aristocratic boys, but mainly because he himself was the archetype of the social layer from which the school drew most of its boys.<sup>8</sup>

He had been appointed headmaster of the school in 1828 and set about reforming it according to his belief that Christian principles were an inseparable part of everyday living. He changed the school's prefect system so that much of the responsibility for the social and moral welfare of pupils rested on the shoulders of sixth form prefects, or praeposters as they were known in the school. He also raised the importance of mathematics, science and modern languages in the curriculum, deepening a process that had started before his arrival, moving the school slightly away from the public schools' traditional exclusive concentration on Greek and Latin. In 1844 a poem entitled *The Masters of Science* won the school poetry prize, marking the small but significant shift in the curriculum.<sup>9</sup>

But Arnold's overriding concern was to create boys who had 'character', whose education would enable them to provide leadership to British society and the Empire. 'What we must look for here is, first, religious and moral principle; secondly, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly, intellectual ability' he explained.<sup>10</sup> Although not a term used by Arnold, this philosophy became known as Muscular Christianity. Under him, Rugby became distinguished by a sense of moral certainty hitherto unknown in public schools. He saw life as a continuous battle between righteousness and evil and the school's role was to produce young men who would pursue this struggle in every aspect of their lives.<sup>11</sup> He argued that the cause of evil was the 'natural but most deadly error of human indolence and corruption, [and the belief] that our business is to preserve and not to improve. It is the ruin of us all alike,

individuals, schools, and nations'.<sup>12</sup> Shaped by his response to the French Revolution, Arnold's philosophy was a mixture of anti-aristocratic sentiment, Protestant self-help, political reformism and monarchism. In this, they almost perfectly expressed the piecemeal ideology of British capitalist society, combining as it did belief in free trade and opposition to aristocratic excess with a sentimental loyalty to the monarchy and other trappings of traditional authority. Rugby's view of itself and its place in the world was spelt out by an anonymous contributor to the school magazine in 1846, who described the school as

the image of that most powerful element in modern English society, the Middle Class . . . [it] may even claim kindred and fellowship of spirit with Railway Kings and Cotton Lords, being equally with them the creation of modern, burning, life-like energy. Her golden age alluded to above, synchronises with the strong convulsions which attended the Reform Bill. . . . Save in the one article of birth a manufacturer may make himself an equal to a duke. In a late stage of civilisation, like the present, the idea of trade comes prominently and almost exclusively into notice, being able at length to connect itself with that from which it has long been kept apart, education and enlightenment. Even so, we feel that our power has of late begun to be acknowledged; and that feeling shall animate us to proceed, holding fast the birthright of moral thoughtfulness which our great teacher [Arnold] bequeathed to us.<sup>13</sup>

This also explains the importance that began to be placed on competitive sports in the mid-nineteenth century. The economic dominance of British capitalism was based on competition, both in the struggle for new markets and colonies and, more fundamentally, in the very nature of how society functioned. The success of the industrial factory system had been accompanied by the imposition of a new culture of time-work discipline that attempted to inculcate the virtues of hard work and thrift into the working classes. In a similar fashion, the leaders, managers and administrators of the economy and society also had to be educated in the competitive spirit that drove forward the engine of economic expansion.

Another aspect of that competitive outlook was the expression of English nationalism, of which Arnold was also a passionate advocate. He believed in the innate moral superiority of men of his own race and class: 'a thorough English gentleman – Christian, manly, and enlightened – is . . . a finer specimen of human nature than any other country, I believe, could furnish'.

The same sentiments were expressed about the Rugby code of football by the school's pupils. 'At football you must possess either muscular strength, or fleetness of foot, or true British pluck (the three points on which a Rugbeian prides himself most) to become even a tolerable player,' wrote one enthusiast in the school's *New Rugbeian* magazine in 1860. Thomas Hughes fully shared the nationalism of his mentor, declaring later in his life that he did not 'like any foreign nation much from the little I know about them and I am certainly a most thoroughly prejudiced John Bull'.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, however, the core of Arnold's beliefs, and of his disciples such as Hughes, consisted of a fervent conviction of the moral correctness of his view of the world. 'Perhaps ours is the only little corner of the British Empire which is thoroughly, wisely and strongly ruled just now,' suggests a master with oblivious self-importance to Tom Brown towards the end of Hughes' book.<sup>15</sup> Many critics have accused Hughes of distorting or even betraying Arnold's ideals in favour of a cult of athleticism, but Muscular Christianity was literally the embodiment of Arnold's struggle for righteousness against sin. If one was to 'fight the good fight with all thy might', as J. S. B. Monsell's 1863 hymn had it, it was not enough that it be fought in lectures and sermons. It had to be fought in the industrial cities and throughout the colonies of the empire. Although Arnold had no interest in sport, he shared Hughes' belief that Christianity was about action, not contemplation. Muscular Christianity gave British middle-class men of action at home and abroad a moral framework in which to justify their work.<sup>16</sup> Such was the intensity of the school's training and the effect it had on its boys that many former pupils came to see themselves, in the words of *The Times*, 'as members of a semi-political, semi-sacerdotal society; [with] an inclination to extend the monitorial system to the world'.<sup>17</sup>

*Tom Brown's Schooldays* was part of that crusade. The book portrays the social mores and values of Rugby School in ways that would be easily understood by its youthful audience. This leads to a highly idealised view of school life. Contemporary accounts make it clear that Hughes underplayed the daily brutality of the school even under Arnold. In addition to the violence of the football field, the school was a "rough and tumble" sort of place in the [eighteen] thirties and forties' where 'pugilistic encounters' were not uncommon, according to old boy Reverend Bulkeley Jones.<sup>18</sup> Bullying was far more common than is portrayed in the book, in which it is almost exclusively the preserve of the cartoonish Harry Flashman character. Those who failed to meet such physical challenges, whether at football or in school life generally, were guilty of the grievous sin of 'funking'. The clunking didacticism of the book ascribes this defect to the suspect older boys, such



as Flashman – who ‘played well at games where pluck wasn’t much wanted’ – and the unpopular Snooks and Green, ‘who had never faced a good scrummage at football’.<sup>19</sup>

But, as was the case with the sport of rugby football itself, Hughes had an ambiguous view of violence; it was not always condemned. At one point in the book he even describes how Arnold strikes a boy for mis-translating a piece of Latin. Moreover, he himself had a strong and regularly expressed belief that ‘fighting with fists is the natural and English way for English boys to settle their quarrels. What substitute for it is there, or ever was there, amongst any nation under the sun? What would you like to see take its place?’ He was also a keen pugilist throughout his life, being arrested for brawling with a Chartist speaker in London in 1848 and personally boxing with every recruit to the London Working Men’s College he helped found in 1850.<sup>20</sup>

As *Tom Brown* makes clear, the school was a microcosm of a rigidly hierarchical world, in which all boys were educated to expect deference and servility from those considered to be of lower status. An escalator of rank operated, on which even the lowest boy could expect to acquire increasing status as he progressed up the school. But for the lower classes, Arnold’s worldview was one in which they knew their place and kept to it. Trade unions, he wrote in 1834, were a ‘fearful engine of mischief, ready to riot or assassinate’.<sup>21</sup> While his ideas of moral rectitude, hard work and leadership by example were the embodiment of British capitalism’s self-image in the nineteenth century, the place of the working class in his worldview belonged to a mythical Merrie England in which masters and men (women never being thought of as worthy of consideration) coexisted in mutual respect, each happy to acknowledge the other’s place in the social hierarchy. This idea is strongly expressed in the early passages of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. Hughes idealises his own boyhood in the Berkshire Downs and fictionalises his own father in the character of Squire Brown, who tells the young Tom that ‘it didn’t matter a straw whether his son associated with lords’ sons or ploughmen’s sons provided they were brave and honest’. But this apparent equality was dependent on the lower orders’ accepting that they were, in the words of Hughes’ father, ‘bound not only by diligence but to strict obedience and deference to the wishes of master and mistress’.<sup>22</sup>

Class distinction was central to the school and to *Tom Brown*. As he travels to the school for the first time, young Tom is told by the coachman how boys from Rugby use pea-shooters to fire from the coach at passers-by, including at Irish road builders with whom they subsequently got into a fight. On arrival he is informed by East, his initial guide to the school and his

subsequent best friend, that local youths are known as 'louts'.<sup>23</sup> Tom is ludicrously ignorant about the lives of boys outside of his class. 'All boys are sent to a public school in England' he tells the sensitive George Arthur late in the book. The reality was that less than a quarter of one per cent did so at that time.<sup>24</sup> In 1864 the cost of a Rugby School education, including boarding, was 90 pounds, 18 shillings and 10 pence per year, almost exactly the same as a skilled manual worker's annual wage. Not all those who attended the school survived its stifling social snobbery either. The Clarendon Commission noted that foundationers, local boys who paid minimal fees to be educated at the school according to the terms of Laurence Sheriff's original endowment, usually left after their first two or three years. This was because they were 'the sons of persons of the town who happen to belong to a class in society decidedly inferior to that of the mass of boys in the school, [and who had] to encounter always . . . the knowledge that they were born and bred in an inferior position'.<sup>25</sup>

This was also a world in which conformity was encouraged and intellectual curiosity frowned upon. As Walter Bagehot pointed out, intellectual dullness among the middle classes, and deference, especially on the part of the lower classes, were two of the defining qualities of the period and essential guarantors of political stability.<sup>26</sup> 'I don't care a straw for Greek particles, or the digamma; no more does his mother,' confesses Tom's father as the boy leaves to go to Rugby. 'What is he sent to school for? . . . If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian, that's all I want.'<sup>27</sup> On arrival at the school one of the first lessons that the new boy Tom is taught by East is that it is the boy who has 'nothing odd about him' who most easily fits in with school life.

The book's most famous, or infamous, declaration of conformist philistinism is that of the praeposter Brooke who, during a speech after he has led his side to victory in a football match, asserts 'I'd rather win two School-house matches running than get the Balliol scholarship any day', about which Isabel Quigley memorably remarked 'qualifies him as either a liar or an idiot'. This sentiment is echoed when Tom is asked what his ambitions are at the school: 'I want to be A1 at cricket and football, and all the other games, and to make my hands keep my head against any fellow, lout or gentleman. I want to get into the sixth before I leave, and to please the Doctor; and I want to carry away just as much Latin and Greek as will take me through Oxford respectably'.<sup>28</sup> Even after he leaves the school the same attitude is highlighted, approvingly by Hughes, in a conversation with his holiday companions: 'What a bother they are making about these wretched Corn-laws! Here's three or four columns full of nothing but sliding-scales

and fixed duties. . . . Ah, here's something better – a splendid match between Kent and England, Brown! Kent winning by three wickets. Felix fifty-six runs without a chance, and not out!' This dialogue was memorably echoed eighty years later by the characters Caldicott and Charters in Alfred Hitchcock's 1938 *The Lady Vanishes* as they attempt to ignore the onward rush of the Second World War around them by burbling about cricket scores throughout the film.<sup>29</sup>

The promotion of sport over intellectual pursuits did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. 'Scholarship throughout this little volume is kept quite in the background,' noted a reviewer in *The Times* drily, who in an otherwise very positive review also took the opportunity to 'protest' at the growing tendency of public schools to make games compulsory.<sup>30</sup> This was a debate that was to rage over the next fifty years among public school educators. The phrase that was most commonly used to encapsulate the philosophy of Muscular Christianity was Juvenal's 'Mens sana in corpore sano': 'a healthy mind in healthy body'. This has been subsequently interpreted by many historians to suggest that Muscular Christians believed in a balance between an athletic body and a studious mind. But for Hughes and similar thinkers, a healthy mind did not mean one that was scholarly but one that was morally pure. 'Healthy' meant that one was observant of Christian obligation and free of sexual corruption, which for schoolboys meant the avoidance of masturbation and homosexuality.<sup>31</sup> Other Muscular Christians were more outspoken in their advocacy of brawn over brain. Loretto headmaster and rugby football evangelist H.H. Almond argued that 'from fourteen to seventeen, long hours of brain work are unnatural and injurious,' that there was 'an overdone system of examinations' and that boys should spend 'two to three hours daily' engaged in physical training.<sup>32</sup> Whilst there were undoubtedly examples of scholar-athletes who excelled in both worlds, they were few and far between.

The tendency for athletics to take precedence over academic work was also an issue that troubled the Clarendon Commission. Established in 1861 to examine the state of public school education in England, its main concern was to investigate the extent to which the public schools' stodgy curriculum of Greek and Latin met the needs of an increasingly scientific age. As part of its review, it also spent considerable time investigating the precise details of student activities and the place of games in school life. Perhaps in recognition of the passions that the debate stirred, the commission trod carefully, finding no direct evidence to support the view that games overshadowed study but, with a subtlety that suggested that its sympathies were not wholly in favour of sport's growing prevalence, noted that it was possible that there might be

some danger of sport being taken too seriously. Football was compulsory at Harrow, Shrewsbury, Winchester, where younger boys were required to fag for seniors, and Rugby, at which failure to play meant 300 lines followed by a beating for a repeat offence, but not at Eton. The commission also enquired whether boys regarded sporting success as a substitute for scholarly excellence. It found that at Harrow, 'the importance assigned to games in the estimation of the boys is somewhat greater than it should be', but at Rugby the philosophy of the school meant that sport 'distinguishes the strong, strengthens the studious and spares the weak'.<sup>33</sup> If the commission was circumspect in its assessment of the other public schools, it was effusive in its praise for Rugby and its philosophy. The school, it declared, had 'become in fact a national institution, as being a place of education and a source of influence for the whole Kingdom. . . . It instructs everywhere, is known everywhere, and exercises an influence everywhere.'<sup>34</sup>

### Rugby football and its rivals

The Clarendon Commission's unqualified endorsement of the school and its principles was crucial to the success of the Rugby code of football. It effectively gave an official seal of approval to *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. The huge sales of the book had brought Arnold's principles to a new and wider audience. Not only did its description of football make the game exciting and attractive but, crucially, and for almost the first time, the book also gave the sport a 'meaning', above and beyond the intrinsic enjoyment of chasing a ball around a field. Today it is a commonplace to talk about the 'meaning' of sport and its broader cultural importance. But, aside from the occasional references to boxing being part of the British character by early nineteenth century writers such as Pierce Egan, no one before Hughes had ascribed a set of moral values to a sport. Even cricket, which had been seen since the late eighteenth century as the signifier of pastoral England and its romanticised rural past, did not yet carry the same assumptions of individual moral purpose.<sup>35</sup> 'This is worth living for; the whole sum of school-boy existence gathered up into one straining, struggling half-hour, a half-hour worth a year of common life,' says Hughes during one of his descriptions of a game.<sup>36</sup> Rugby football now had an explicit social purpose. It was a way of implementing Arnold's teachings. To play it was to build on his moral tradition.

The values of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* became the moral foundation for what would become rugby union football wherever the game was played. Put broadly, these values – which will be discussed as they recur throughout this book – were a commitment to a masculine and anti-effeminate

worldview; a defence of social hierarchy and order; a belief in British national superiority, with England as 'first amongst British equals'; and an absolute certainty in one's own moral purpose. The success of Hughes' book and the evangelical fervour of the school's former pupils with 'their nervous anxiety to look after other people's moral welfare', combined with the ringing endorsement of the Clarendon Commission, meant that Rugby School, its methods and its football code achieved a prominence far beyond its origins in a small English country town.<sup>37</sup> As much as it was a recreation, Rugby football had also become an idea, an ideology even.

Following the publication of the Clarendon Commission report, Arnold's Rugby became the model for the mid-Victorian public school. Older schools such as Harrow reformed the curriculum along Arnoldian lines and new schools such as Haileybury and Clifton, two of a burgeoning number of public schools founded during the mid-century, adopted Rugby's philosophy completely. Indeed, middle-class expectations of public school life came to be shaped in a large part by reading Hughes' book, causing many schools to adopt its principles in order to attract new pupils.<sup>38</sup> For a large number of schools, this meant that Tom Brown's game became their football code of choice. The authority which Rugby School commanded can be gauged by the fact that at Wellington College, which took up rugby football in 1860, the first rule of football was 'in case of any dispute arising during a match, the rules are the same as those used at Rugby'. Moreover, such was the fervour for the game that, upon leaving school, many of its adherents formed clubs in order to play the game as adults. The two oldest clubs in England – Liverpool, formed in 1857, and Blackheath, formed in 1858 – were both organised by boys who had learnt the game at Rugby School and Blackheath Proprietary School respectively.<sup>39</sup>

The book's influence also extended far beyond the narrow strata of the upper middle classes that could afford to send their sons to a public school. The expansion of the middle classes during the mid-Victorian years had led to a corresponding rise in the demand and opportunities for leisure. This was intertwined with a recognition that, for middle-class males at least, an urban and sedentary lifestyle often had a detrimental effect on their health. 'In an age like the present', wrote the anonymous 'Stonehenge' in 1857, 'when in the struggle for precedence in the senate, the bar, or the haunts of commerce, time is considered as of equal value with money, it can scarcely be wondered at that many of the competitors in the race lose health, both of body and mind. Nothing enfeebles and lowers the bodily and mental tone more than an entire giving up of all the energies in one single pursuit.'<sup>40</sup> The rapid urbanisation of society was also a major cause for concern. 'The tendency

of the population to congregate in large towns, the multiplication of artificial means of transit, the increased strain and competition of modern life, the calamitousness of change, by which business hours have begun and ended later, till crowds of sallow clerks are now released from offices after the expiry of daylight for many months in the years, are all causes antagonistic to this prime necessity of a nation which is to be long vigorous,' argued H.H. Almond.<sup>41</sup>

For many middle-class men the Rifle Volunteer movement, which had been created in 1859 in response to an increase in Anglo-French tensions, offered the opportunity for the necessary physical exercise through military training. Gymnasia also started to appear in major towns and cities, as did athletic clubs, most notably London's Amateur Athletic Club in 1866.<sup>42</sup> By the mid-1860s it was common for football clubs to be formed by members of the local middle classes who had not been to public school. For example, in Leeds a local cap manufacturer, J.G. Hudson, helped to found the city's first football club in 1864. One of its unfulfilled ambitions was to play a match against Rugby School. And common to all these initiatives was a firm belief in the Arnoldian philosophy of 'Mens sana in corpore sano'.

Of course, the Rugby School code of football was not the only set of rules played by these new football clubs. Most played a modified or hybrid version of a public school code of football, although clubs in the Sheffield area played their own independent form of dribbling-style football. Even those who looked to Rugby rarely followed the school's rules exactly. Many did not allow hacking for example. But as the number of clubs grew the desire to play matches against other sides – rather than between members of the same club, as tended to be the case initially – also increased. Although matches were organised where the teams would use the rules played by the home side, this was not seen as a satisfactory solution and ideas about developing a 'universal' set of rules started to emerge. Similar discussions had started to take place in the public schools, as the increasingly high public profile of football stimulated inter-school rivalry and opportunities for matches increased as a result of the growth of the railways.<sup>43</sup> It was the desire to find an answer to this problem that led a number of clubs in London to meet in October 1863 to discuss the formation of an association of football clubs with a common agreed set of rules.

Although hindsight has led some historians to make the formation of the Football Association (FA) the decisive act in the creation of the soccer and rugby codes of football, the reality was not so simple. The FA took six meetings and a not inconsiderable amount of political manoeuvring before it arrived at a final version of its rules. By the end of the fourth meeting on

24 November 1863 the nineteen delegates, representing just ten clubs, had voted to accept a set rules that included:

9. A player shall be entitled to run with the ball towards his adversaries' goal if he makes a fair catch, or catches the ball on the first bound; but in the case of a fair catch, he makes his mark, he shall not run.

10. If any player shall run with the ball towards his adversaries' goal, any player in the opposite side shall be at liberty to charge, hold, trip or hack him, or wrest the ball from him; but no player shall be held and hacked at the same time.<sup>44</sup>

To all intents and purposes, the FA's proposed rules were to be based on those of Rugby School. It is worth noting that hacking, or 'shinning' as it was known elsewhere, was not confined to Rugby School football at this time. 'Shinning', noted an Etonian in 1859, 'is carried out to such an extent at our public schools that it would be greatly increased' if inter-school football matches took place.<sup>45</sup> However, the secretary of the FA, Ebenezer Morley, was not a supporter of Rugby's rules and proposed a motion to endorse the football rules of Cambridge University, which forbade carrying the ball and hacking. This was not put to a formal vote, possibly because on a show of hands only eight delegates indicated their support, but a committee was set up to discuss with the Cambridge footballers. Confusingly, the delegates also decided that hacking was a non-negotiable principle in the discussions with Cambridge, but that running with the ball in hand was negotiable. The meeting was adjourned amid controversy over exactly what had been decided.

When the delegates reconvened the following week, procedural wrangling broke out when Morley failed to read correctly the previous meeting's minutes and left out the motion that was passed in favour of hacking. Despite there being four fewer delegates and two less clubs than at the previous meeting, C.W. Alcock successfully proposed a motion to strike out the previously agreed rules allowing hacking and running with the ball. From the discussion that followed, it is quite clear that Morley and Alcock were determined to adopt the Cambridge rules come what may.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, most of the clubs supporting the Rugby School game did not even bother to turn up at the following week's meeting that rubber-stamped the non-hacking and non-handling rules. Although the founding clubs of the FA numbered eighteen, it appears that at least six of them, such as Blackheath, subsequently left because of their adherence to Rugby rules.<sup>47</sup>

Even after the break with the adherents of the Rugby code, FA rules still allowed handling the ball. A ball could be caught with the hands before it bounced and the catcher allowed to take an unimpeded kick, similar to the 'mark' in rugby or Australian rules football. Even the Royal Engineers, who were to appear in four of the first seven FA Cup finals, still played their own code of football that allowed running with the ball. Such apparent anomalies demonstrate not only the fluid state of the various rules of football at this time but also how little difference the FA's formation made to the game. Most football clubs were not members and even those that were members did not rigorously follow its rules. In fact, the formation of the FA had little impact on immediate direction of football. The FA's minute book records that 'no business was conducted' at its meeting of 28 October and it did not assemble again until February 1866 when it met to revise its rules. Twelve months later it had just ten member clubs, nine in London and Sheffield FC, which played its own rules anyway.

By January 1871, such was the dominance of the Rugby code of football that *Bell's Life*, the premier sporting weekly of the time, pointed out that since the formation of the FA, 'every year has increased the superiority in point of numbers and popularity of the Rugby clubs over those who are subject to the rule of the Association'. This is confirmed by Adrian Harvey's painstaking research into football clubs of the time. In the period 1868–73 he estimates that twenty-five of the thirty-eight major British football clubs played a version of football based on Rugby rules. This is confirmed by the first issue of what became C.W. Alcock's *Football Annual*, published in 1868, which records eighty-eight football clubs in existence at the time, of which forty-five played according to the Rugby tradition with thirty Association clubs and thirteen Sheffield Association clubs. It was only once the FA Cup became popular in the mid-1870s that differentiation between the various sets of football rules began to harden – and the FA began to grow – as the increased rivalry and competitiveness of the cup forced clubs to choose a code in which to specialise and thus increase their chances of success in the competition.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, alone of all the public school codes of football, it was the Rugby School code that survived and flourished among adult clubs. Despite the considerable social prestige attached to Eton, Winchester and Harrow, their codes of football did not become adult sports. Apart from one or two isolated instances, for example at Oxford and Cambridge universities, clubs playing the Eton or Harrow football rules did not exist. To some extent this was because the FA incorporated some of the features of these schools' football codes. The FA rulebook was a conglomeration of football rules and



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