

« Les territoires du rugby: une histoire mondiale »

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This event was as timely as it was ideally located, in that it took place against the backdrop of the 2007 Rugby World Cup, and in a Paris still basking in the glory of the latest 'impossible' triumph of the *Quinze de France* over the supposedly unbeatable New Zealand All Blacks. That the front-page news carried by *L'Équipe* should so closely mirror the scientific deliberations of a distinguished gathering of historians, sociologists, ethnographers, and other sports specialists, and, moreover, in such august academic surroundings, is very much to the credit of the Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po, and its director, Jean-François Sirinelli. This landmark event also reflects the contribution currently being made to what we might conveniently term 'the new history' of modern sports by the conference organizers, Patrick Clastres and Paul Dietschy, especially as regards the still relatively uncommon collaboration of Francophone and Anglophone researchers. The properly scientific input of the event's commercial sponsor should also not be underestimated. For, in addition to acting as generous hosts for a reception at its magnificent Agence Centrale, the Société Générale and its staff contributed to broader processes of conservation (through its own archives) and communication (through the excellent exhibition of photographs and memorabilia on display at its headquarters). The company's participation thus reflected its strong commitment to the history of sports and sports clubs – including, naturally, the rugby section of its very own Club Athlétique de la Société Générale. This combined institutional affiliation – at once academic and industrial – was undoubtedly an important part of the event's distinctive atmosphere, and was very much appreciated by all delegates, as was the conference's exemplary preparation and administration.

History and geography constitute a particularly familiar combination in the French educational system, where *le prof d'histoire-géo* is a fixture of the typical secondary school. It was thus very apt that a French sports conference should utilize these habitually associated and practically interconnected disciplines to make sense of the rapidly evolving rugby world. For time and space (or the lack of them) may quite properly be considered as the twin axes of rugby football, not only as a sporting practice, but also as the object of a variety of moral and material investments, and thus of often mutually antagonistic discourses. To begin at the (fondly imagined) beginning, the game of rugby, if not actually unique, is certainly unusual in having given rise to a very precisely dated and located myth of its own origins. As commemorated since 1900 by the plaque set into the Headmaster's Wall at Rugby School in Warwickshire, it was – so the story (if not actually the history) goes – in 1823 that a senior pupil, one William Webb

Ellis, 'with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive character of the Rugby game'. This received wisdom explains why the Rugby World Cup competition, created in 1987, and hosted by France in 2007, should be contested every four years for the William Webb Ellis trophy. It also explains why an otherwise obscure English schoolboy should be remembered each year by the Fédération Française de Rugby. Since, for reasons that remain obscure, and after a lifetime spent as a minister in the Church of England, William Webb Ellis elected to spend his last years on the Côte d'Azur – a highly symbolic 'French connection' that the FFR's visit to his grave in Menton (in the Alpes-Maritime) annually serves to underline.

As the great exception to the general pattern of rugby's historical development and geographical expansion, the game in France undoubtedly constitutes a very special case of sporting diffusion and, crucially, local rootedness. Predominantly a game of islands and of English-speakers (often the inhabitants of formerly British-ruled territories) – from Great Britain itself and its oldest colony, Ireland, *via* South Africa and the South Pacific, to Australia and New Zealand – rugby was, paradoxically, to establish its most significant continental European base in France. Initially promoted by patriotic Parisian *lycéens*, the game would go on to become a pole for regional (and even regionalist) aspirations in Bordeaux, before following the Gironde and the Garonne ever deeper into what was to become its heartland of the South-West. As both a durably local obsession and a periodically national celebration, French rugby would come to epitomize the development of a sport which is everywhere distinctively rooted in a variety of *territoires* – or, better still, *terroirs* – from Aurillac to the Australian Capital Territories, Brive to Buenos Aires, Castres to Cape Town, Dax to Dunedin. This, precisely in contrast to the truly global sports that athletics (in its Olympic form) and football (through its own World Cup) have become – themselves in no small part as a result of pioneering French efforts, by the likes of Pierre de Coubertin and Jules Rimet.

In consequence, rugby typically remains something of an acquired taste, a sport of enclaves and clans, classes and castes, kindred spirits and kinship communities – both real and imagined. It is precisely this distinctive pattern of historical diffusion, geographical implantation, and practical and symbolic recuperation that the Sciences Po conference sought to investigate, over two stimulating days of presentations and panel discussions that successfully combined scientific rigour with appropriately generous doses of adversarial passion and sporting good humour. Bringing together a range of specialists from France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the rugby-playing regions of the Southern Hemisphere, the event productively combined both academic disciplines and national research cultures. It also brought together distinct intellectual generations – by no means inappropriately, in an event hosted by Sciences Po. The event thus juxtaposed a true pioneer of the sociology of the French *rugby des villages* (Christian Pociello, here turning his attention to rugby players' ritual consumption of food and drink) and a leading-edge researcher of Southern Hemisphere (and other) influences on French playing styles (Joris Vincent). Among other experts, it brought together the game's foremost ethnographer (Sébastien Darbon, here focusing on the highly topical case of Fiji), an Inspecteur Général de l'Éducation Nationale with his sporting roots still

very firmly in the Cantal (Laurent Wirth), and a passionate collector and indefatigable website manager whose archival efforts are already appreciated well beyond France's borders (Frédéric Humbert). As for the variety of topics discussed, the conference ranged all the way from the rugby credentials of the intellectual generation of the *Entre-deux-guerres* (Patrick Clastres) to a fascinating medical analysis of the practicalities of drug misuse and doping controls in the professional game (Gérard Dine).

Influences both expected and unexpected were regularly highlighted, as when the principal historian of Welsh rugby (Gareth Williams) drew attention to the Penarth roots of the *manière bayonnaise* either side of the Great War, thanks to the pioneering player-migration of Harry Owen Roe, fully eighty years before the 'Open' era. Rather less attractive, but no less fascinating, were the regularly brutal international encounters between France and the United States of the same period (as recounted by Fabrice Auger). In line with its basic premise, the conference roamed far and wide over 'Planet Rugby': from the home-grown traditions of Parisian *lycées* and company-based rugby (Jean-François Belhoste, Bernard Prêtet, and Xavier Breuil), to the new Europe of not Five but Six Nations, including an Italy radically transformed since the dark days of the Fascist period (Paul Dietschy). We then moved beyond the boundaries of Europe to Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe] (Charles Little), South Africa (Dean Allen), Australia and New Zealand (Adrian Smith), and beyond. Importantly, the event also gave due attention to those dissenting voices who seek to remind us of the darker aspects of this much loved game. Anne Saouter's groundbreaking research on rugby's role in the construction of a variety of gendered identities thus fruitfully informed her fascinating discussion of the increasingly contested post-match festivities of the *troisième mi-temps*. Robert Fassolette, for his part, confirmed his dedication to reminding union enthusiasts both of rugby league's particular virtues, and, crucially, of that game's scandalous treatment at the hands of the Vichy regime – aided and abetted by the French rugby federation. While, for sheer verve and lightly presented erudition, Michel Pastoureau's magisterial analysis of rugby's world of colours was an undoubted highlight of the proceedings.

To conclude, it was wholly appropriate that the Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po should not only mark the coming of the 2007 Rugby World Cup to Paris, but also, in the best traditions of French scholarship, subject the wider social phenomenon that had given rise to that headline-making competition to sustained critical scrutiny. The organizers of the event are thus to be warmly congratulated, while the publication of the conference proceedings will be eagerly anticipated. Held in the intellectual heart of Paris, the discussions extended well beyond the city's boundaries, and even those of the French nation. France's distinctive contribution to the on-field development and off-field perception of the now global rugby game – the rightly celebrated (if undoubtedly 'invented') tradition of 'le French Flair' – was consequently just one of the panoply of rugby-playing continuities and changes explored by the conference. Not that any of this was in the least surprising. On the contrary, French academic universalism *oblige*.

Moreover, there is a remarkable, and appropriately indigenous, precedent for this catholic approach to the study of rugby football, which is to be found in the work of Jean-Pierre Bodis. Still the foremost historian of the rugby game – from any country, and in

any language – this pioneering figure may not, unfortunately, have been present at Sciences Po, but the essential groundwork that he carried out two decades ago undoubtedly continues to inform research in the field. The Proust-like scale and ambition of his doctoral thesis – *Rugby, Politique et Société dans le monde des origines du jeu à nos jours: Étude comparée (Thèse d'État, Toulouse, 1986, 2446 pages)* – may have confounded more than one Anglo-Saxon copy-editor, but it remains *incontournable*, as do the many published volumes to which that study gave rise. By following Jean-Pierre Bodis in his valiant attempt to capture the distinctive flavours of the game's past and present right around the world – *A la recherche du rugby perdu*, as it were – the contributors to the Sciences Po conference collectively paid tribute to a characteristically French blend of scientific imagination and professional determination. That they were able to enjoy themselves hugely in the process was to the further credit of the organizers of this important event.