NO MORE BLOODY BUNDLES FOR BRITAIN

Thomas Keneally

It is hard for anyone who wasn't alive at the time to understand the desperation of the Second World War, and the hope and exultation that quite temporarily greeted its end. Temporarily, I say, because the soldiers came home to the realities of the post-war world: to rationing, housing shortages, and a still flourishing black market. But even so it was obvious that Aussies, despite the narrow squeak we had had with the Japanese, had enjoyed an easier and healthier time of it all than the British. The practice of sending food and clothing parcels to the embattled British might have begun in the then neutral United States as early as the northern spring of 1940, but it became the practice of generous Australian families after Goering's dreadful air blitz of England in the summer of 1940. Bundles for Britain became a national endeavour, and in the name of fraternity and kinship, Australian families skimped to put together parcels of knitted clothing and small luxuries for bombed-out, overworked, hard-up British families. In every suburb, the town hall, the local Red Cross and many other centres received the knitting and spare food of Australian homes for shipping to a distant Britain.

The war over, Britain was still suffering shortages. In late 1945 Australia's External Affairs minister, Dr Herbert Evatt, patron of the New South Wales Rugby League, went to London for talks with the British Foreign Office and travelled on to Leeds to lobby the Rugby Football League Council for a British tour of Australia to take place as soon as possible, preferably in the southern winter of 1946. Many of the council put forward the argument that rugby league was just settling in again, counting its dead, assessing its new generation. But Doc Evatt argued the question of morale, as the Rugby Football League minutes of 10 October 1945 show. Emergency leagues, as they were called, had been kept going between 1939 and 1945, with the British Rugby Football League Council being notified in 1940 that the Ministry of Labour 'wishes it to be conveyed to the meeting that it desires as much football as possible to be played, so as to provide recreation and relaxation to the workers'. That was not as easy as it sounded, given the number of men in uniform and in reserved occupations such as coalmining. Playing surfaces were scarce. Central Park, Wigan's famous home ground, had been taken over by the Territorial Army and there were anti-aircraft guns on the Kop, the hill at Central Park. Salford's and Swindon's grounds were also turned into storage depots and parade grounds, and a game between Hull and Batley was

The Ashes Cup (awarded for Test series between Australia and Great Britain, 1928–2001), won in 1946 by the touring British side, Australian and New South Wales Rugby League.

abandoned after 65 minutes when the air raid sirens sounded on Humberside. Clothes rationing made the acquisition of guernseys nearly impossible. Improvisation was everything. The smart Eddie Waring, a Dewsbury boy, made use of men from the large nearby military camp to take Dewsbury successfully to the Challenge Cup.

The British Rugby League reacted with alacrity and a remarkable amount of flexibility to Evatt's suggestion, holding trial matches at Central Park and Headingley to select their touring party of 27 men. They did so in blind hope, lacking even the resources to get their men to Australia or New Zealand. The shipping of the world was fully taken up with repatriating troops and prisoners, taking war brides to their new husbands' homelands and, as was the case with my father's own troop ship, with shipping French and Dutch paratroopers to colonial wars in what was then Indochina and the Dutch East Indies.

It took the intervention of the Australian Government itself before 32 berths — not cabins — were found for the British team. The berths were aboard the aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable*, and sailed from Plymouth on 4 April 1946. The team would inevitably and with some justice thereafter be styled 'the Indomitables'. The ship carried Australian troops, particularly members of the RAAF, and a number of British war brides, as well as its full crew. It also carried the great rugby league commentator and entrepreneur Eddie Waring, who was canny enough to get an upper class berth in the petty-officers' mess. Gus Risman, a 36-year-old veteran, who would play rugby league for 26 years and also five rugby tests for Wales, was the captain. He was the only one who had previously toured Australia, but he had also met Australians in his war service with the First Airborne Division in North Africa. Risman was worried about his elderly mother's welfare while he was away, but his application that she should receive 30 shillings a week from the British Rugby Football League was turned down. Northern British Members of Parliament had to lobby the War Minister to release three of the team from the military to enable them to board with their fellow Lions.

Reaching Fremantle, the teams travelled for five days by troop train to reach Central Station in Sydney. In those days Test series, whether in cricket, league or union, involved much foreplay — the Lions appeared in remote Junee, in Canberra, and again against New South Wales, a game that attracted a crowd of 52,000 to the Sydney Cricket Ground. Newcastle beat the British 18–13, and Hunter Valley people began to think a team of theirs might one day belong again in the Sydney competition. By the time of the first Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground, the Lions had played six games and attracted a frantic degree of attention.

The selection of the Australian team was an issue over which newly demobilised troops or newly de-manpowered workers and their children spent countless hours of fruitful, or at least enriching, discussion. The story may be apocryphal, but it is said that when the English team disembarked from their bus for a training session at the Sydney Cricket Ground, an Aussie bystander who saw the size of the British forwards Whitcombe and Gee shouted, 'No more bloody bundles for Britain!' Whoever it was, he was declaring that for rugby league and for the world the war had ended, and all bets were off.

The Australian team was led by Joe Jorgenson of Balmain — its stars included Pat Devery, the Balmain five-eighth, (who had been discovered by coach Norman 'Latchem' Robertson while playing football with his fellow sailors in the Domain during the war); and Lionel Cooper, whom Easts captain Ray Stehr had seen playing Australian Rules football as a soldier in Darwin. A notable member of this internationally unexperienced team was Arthur Clues, Wests' strong second rower. He would soon be lost to Leeds, where he would play football and open a sports store. Another of the team was Bumper Farrell, the legendary prop from Newtown, who had come close to being expelled from rugby league the year previously when he was accused of almost biting off the ear of St George prop Bill McRitchie. In an era of greater scrutiny, Farrell might have been in trouble for his associations with underworld figures, but in those days all that was grist to the legend, and he was the first of many post-war tough-guy hookers in an age of fiercely contested scrums.

The first Test on 17 June 1946 drew a crowd of 64,526 to the Sydney Cricket Ground for a ferocious encounter. For many people the blowing of referee Tom McMahon's whistle that day signalled the true return to peace, to the remnants of the pre-war world, and to the intense sporting discourse between Australia and Great Britain. The Australians scored two tries and kicked a goal, and so did Great Britain, and Australian and British honour stood at 8–all at the end of the game. English schoolmaster Jack Kitching, the Bradford Northern centre, was sent off for striking Australian Jorgenson. Expectation for the second Test in Brisbane was intense.

My father's stories of the war in North Africa had been largely to do with the holy task of bringing embarrassment to British allies, of borrowing a compliant officer's uniform, hooning into Cairo in a truck and picking a fight with an officer of one of the household cavalry or infantry regiments in the officers-only bar of Shepherd's Hotel. For him and for hundreds and thousands of other men in Eastern Australia, a huge amount of psychological back-pay was wrapped up in the question of this Test series.

They were in for a disappointment. At the Brisbane exhibition ground on Saturday 6 July, the gates were closed when 40,500 were inside the ground. The Australian team itself was shut out with a large part of the crowd. It is estimated that 10,000 people invaded the ground after the gates were shut. A new captain had been appointed, Ron Bailey, Canterbury–Bankstown centre and captain–coach who had spent the first year of the war playing for Huddersfield and who, the selectors thought, might be better qualified to read the British game. The Test was a rugged and forward-dominated affair, although the Halifax winger Arthur Bassett scored a hat-trick of tries for a final score of 14–5 to the Lions.

Back in Sydney three weeks later, a somewhat smaller crowd than had turned up for the first Test, came to the decider. Britain won 20–7, but the Australians had lost Balmain fullback Dave Parkinson with a broken leg only seven minutes into the game and then, in the second half, Arthur Clues was sent off for punching the English hooker, Joe Egan, who was in brilliant form and totally dominated the scrums.

Perhaps this tour awakened in the Australian breast such a passion to beat the English that over time we ended up doing it so frequently that no rugby league supporter under 40 can remember or hope to understand the intensity of emotional investment that attended the tour by that great Welshman Gus Risman and his boys. The year 1946 was simply a triumph for British rugby league, and that post-war tour, rich in imponderable values as well as in gate takings and public interest, symbolised an end to the privations that had accompanied the conflict and a move forward into the peacetime boom years.

The centenary of rugby league provides the game with an opportunity to make sense of its history, and to appreciate the struggle people have made to play it — whether it is the case of a dairy farmer's son in remote New South Wales pleading with his father to let him turn up bare-footed in time to play in some forgotten local game in the 1920s, or the war-battered Brits dragging together a team of barely de-mobbed players lacking in match practice, and taking them halfway across the world in triumph. In all the excitement and the hectic pace of the centenary celebrations, it is a delight to have a chance to remember and honour them, all of them, in the slight stillness before the whistle is blown, and the rage begins.

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