



Wales: Culture and identity

Rugby and Welsh identity

Gareth Williams

I think Welsh rugby has a fairly unique nature certainly within the UK and possibly even at a worldwide level. There has from – almost from the very beginning been a strong, working class presence in the game in Wales, certainly started in the 1870's and 1880's when the game arrived in England from the English public schools and universities and it initially made an impact at the public school Llandovery, Lampeter college, Brecon College, at that level in Wales but in less than a decade it spread out into the society which was at that point undergoing massive population increase, related to that massive industrialisation. So you have a new workforce which is anxious to assert itself and it will take to the game of rugby for a variety of reasons. But from the very beginning therefore certainly by the time when Wales won the first rugby triple crown when they beat the other three countries, England, Scotland and Ireland, for the first time in 1893, there was a strong working class complexion to the Welsh National Fifteen which marked it out as different from the other national sides, which were predominantly middle class and professional men, not professional in the playing sense but they were financially independent. They were doctors, accountants, surveyors and so forth. I think then there's a distinctive characteristic to Welsh rugby, which was resented, it must be said, by the other home unions. They thought that Wales was acquiring unfair advantage by the fact that they were coal miners and steelworkers and dock workers, but particularly coal miners, in their side who were using the skills of their work at play in ripping the ball out of mauls, physical strength. This was damned unfair. I mean the people who played rugby in the other countries were doing it as recreation – different from their work. Here were the Welshmen employing the skill and strengths of their work actually on the field of play and that was not seen as fair play.

How do differences of class play out today in Welsh rugby?

Gareth Williams

I think the element of class difference is still there today, partly in terms of support but also on the field of play. It is less pronounced than it was because the onset of professionalism has reduced everything to the level of the cheque book as it were but there is still at the international level predominant in England, a grammar school, independent school element still play the game whereas nearly all the Welsh teams without exception are products of the local comprehensive who some of them have gone on to college to study sports science. They come predominantly from working class families but that element of almost class tension and antagonism which I think was a feature certainly a hundred years ago is far less pronounced today

How would you say that class of Welsh and English rugby versus one another plays out today?

Gareth Williams

I think the class element is still present in Anglo-Welsh rugby relations in the sense that there are certain English clubs that still seem to represent a certain elitist slightly toffee nosed element within rugby. The hooray henry element which I think is unfair because they are pretty tough characters. But equally there are sides like Leicester and Gloucester that are seen as pretty uncompromising, physically robust, play a style of rugby which the Welsh clubs and Welsh players immediately identify with and are often beaten by them. And I think the class element to some extent has been eliminated and perhaps substituted for that I think there is a keener element of straight Anglo-Welsh nationalist antagonism.

Let's move on to place and I'm interested in how rugby has united Wales despite and over its differences and ways in which although the game is played less in the north nonetheless there's many supporters in the north who identify with participating in the national sport, the national team. So could you tell me how rugby has overcome spatial divisions in Wales?

Gareth Williams

I think rugby plays an almost unique role in contemporary Welsh society in that it is able to unite factions of society and geographical areas which in other senses have little in common. And I think the Welsh Rugby Union has done its best to portray itself as a national institution. I think it has played a role in uniting the Welsh geographically: east, west, north and south, including the midlands. It is significant in that it does not have a linguistic component. In other words it's the game that you play rather than the language you speak. I think it has a gender unifying role, a more sophisticated awareness of gender relations. And I think the Welsh Rugby Union has been quite skilful in securing the ear of the Assembly, portraying itself as one of these few national almost trans-national institutions. So I would say although it is clearly its core area, its heartland is in the south, the industrial south, it does have a significant presence in the other parts of Wales, even the thinly populated ones and certainly on big match days there are contingents who will make an effort to come down to Cardiff for the week end or for the day or whatever.

Let's turn to the connections between rugby today and the world of work – the Welsh economy. You said something about the origins of rugby lying with industrial south Wales, working class. The national team was characterised by players from these industries. Now lets fast forward to the present. How does rugby today connect with the world of work in Wales?

Gareth Williams

I think Welsh rugby has been shaped by the world of work in the sense that whereas Welsh players, were renowned for their physical strength and their robustness and their physical endurance. Now I think it would be fair to say that players, although they don't come from that industrial working class base, nevertheless are probably fitter in a physical sense. They might well be stronger. They spend more time in the gym. They are on their high protein supplement diets. So they have I think different kinds of assets which express themselves probably in a more combative game and in a faster and fitter game. At its best I think it makes for a more attractive game. But that working class coal mining, steel working, dockers' element is no longer there. But I think the players have a different kind of strength. And where they don't they look to compensate for it.

We've explored class in relation to England we've talked about class in terms of the origins of Welsh rugby as in social class of players in the early days. We talked about occupation of players more recently. How about the role of public school, feeding and sustaining rugby in recent years?

Gareth Williams

The public schools and the universities have played a role historically in Welsh rugby and in feeding the Welsh national side. In Wales itself Llandovery College, Monmouth School, Christ College, Brecon, there's been a steady stream of products from those institutions and they have played alongside grammar school products, comprehensive school products and working men who have had no education beyond the age of often their early teens. I think that has been attributed if you like to the integrative role that Welsh rugby has played and that has been encouraged by it's administrators to emphasise the bonding role that rugby could play. But within that I think it's worth pointing out that there is some hostility in the valley clubs which are strongly working class still, to the Fancy Dans of the bigger port sides. There is an element of that in the demise of the Celtic Warriors, which is recent. The Pontypridd Bridge End region which is allowed to wither on the vine, that's the perception from the valleys by the Welsh Rugby Union. But some of these valley clubs have a reputation for uncompromising play violence. They don't have some of the social graces and the finesse of the urban centres and I think there is an element of unspoken class tension that the town sides enjoy privileges. They enjoy wealth. They enjoy social status that the Pontypridd's who will draw

their players from the Rhonda, from Merthyr, and the old valleys that they lack that kind of social finesse.

Okay. Let me pick up on gender which you talked about a bit in terms of grass root support for the game. What about other ways in which women are and aren't involved in rugby?

Gareth Williams

Women have almost since the hundred year's existence of the game played a greater role in it at the supporting level. Of course there are women teams. I'm not thinking of that. There are women administrators in the game. The Welsh Rugby Union has a number of key administrative roles, which are held by women. Women are active in many rugby clubs and there are very knowledgeable women who are there on the terraces and in the stands. There is an element, what's known as the fur coat brigade, in the stand on big match days and the women there perhaps less well informed but where the heartbeat of the of the game pulses vigorously in Welsh rugby there are women there: knowledgeable, informed and not subject to banter and "what you doing here love?" I think there is an element of integration within Welsh rugby which I think serves to undermine that myth that it's a sexist game.

Can we talk a bit about race? Now in some senses race is accommodated within rugby. In other ways there have been racist incidents in rugby. Now race in Wales is a very distinct nature. I think it takes a particular form, but also the significance of racial minorities in Wales is rather different from within the UK as a whole. So I wonder if you could tell me something about the implications of race in Welsh rugby today.

Gareth Williams

Race is a major contemporary issue in the world today and Welsh rugby is not untouched by it although I think for many decades it was and it cocooned itself in a almost inside a protective shell where it wasn't really too concerned about what was happening in the outside world. Now this operates at an international and at a national local level. At an international level I think the Welsh Rugby Union has a great deal to reproach itself with reference to its connections with white apartheid south Africa from the 1960's when there was international protests and Welsh rugby was one of the last bastions of maintaining sporting contacts with South Africa. Within Wales itself post 1945 players from ethnic communities found it difficult to break through. The name Billy Boston is one of the all time greats of professional rugby league. He came from Cardiff. Came from Butetown and had a very successful career in the north of England because he couldn't break through into the essentially small c but also I think capital C conservative nature of Cardiff rugby club then. Wales's first international rugby player was Mark Brown from Pontypool in the 1980's and after that you have a sequence of players like Glen Webb and others down to Colin Charvis and they never exploited in any sense their ethnic difference and they've been assimilated within the rugby community and they played for the major clubs. But the idea that Welsh rugby in some sense has been particularly tolerant I don't think necessarily stands up though but essentially I think the element of discrimination in Welsh rugby I think now that has gone.

And I would say, especially since we've had someone like Colin Charvis who actually captained Wales, that Welsh rugby is reflective now of a more inclusive attitude to race. I'd be inclined to say that race is not an issue in Welsh rugby today.

Let's move on to the second part of the book and let me start with nationalism and I'm interested in the relationship between Welsh rugby and the nationalist movement in Wales.

Gareth Williams

To an outsider in other words to a non-Welsh observer I would have thought that Welsh rugby is one of the most total potent symbols of Welsh separateness, Welsh identity, Welsh nationalism. On closer inspection I'm not sure that that altogether stands up. Certainly there have been separate characteristics which have marked out Welsh rugby historically which have made it different and these has been seen often as a sort of touchy Welsh patriotism. But at another level Welsh rugby has always been and still is closely tied into what you might call the British imperial game and it's never sought to be different. Certainly it is a focus and a channel for Welsh national identity but to use a phrase that's been used in the context of Scottish soccer many Welsh supporters are eighty-minute nationalists. They are nationalists

on the day of the match and they could be criticised for a superficial sense of Welsh identity which is quite content to express itself in ferociously supporting Wales during that eighty minute encounter particularly against England but beyond that they recognise and do not wish to change the British political structure and its arrangements.

In terms of the language there has always been a strong linguistic element insofar as it's something of a myth that the language belongs to rural Wales and industrial Wales has been untouched by it.

To see the language as belonging to almost as it were solely west Wales and west of Wales no longer stands up because not only is the whole of north Wales not monolithically Welsh speaking but equally there are strong Welsh speaking communities in south and in east Wales and the Welsh medium schools.

By now you have quite a strong Welsh speaking contingent of players from Cardiff families who have been reared and educated in what were or what are I suppose the Anglicised districts of Wales.

The Welsh language now is not the preserve of any particular geographical area. I think it's pretty well disseminated across Wales. So the language is certainly there.

The Welsh Rugby Union's attitude to the language, I think, is a bit more ambivalent. I've never seen the Welsh language as something that the Welsh Rugby Union has attached great significance to. It's been pushed into various responses and recognition of it bi-Lingual School Board bi-lingual announcements but generally it hasn't jumped voluntarily. It's been pushed. I won't say it's exactly indifferent to the language but I don't think it's a concern and it's never seen itself as particularly keen in progressing the growth of the Welsh language but equally why should it be? That's not its role.

The other great political tradition in Wales is the Labour tradition. Could you tell me something about the connections between the Labour tradition today and Welsh rugby?

Gareth Williams

I think it's difficult to identify explicit connections between what we might call the Labour tradition in Welsh rugby for the reason, which is perhaps a cause for regret, that most players, notably apolitical. Even at the time of the apartheid protests of the 1970's Welsh players would go quite happily to South Africa – "well it's just a game. That's what I know. I don't know anything about politics". There was an element of dumbness I think in the attitude of highly gifted and respected Welsh players in pretending that they didn't know what was going on.

Now the Labour tradition in that sense worked in two ways. They were almost unstinting in their support for Labour. They came from a strong Labour background, socially, politically, which emanated from their industrial background and environment. but equally there were thinking elements within the Labour movement, which was progressive for instance in its attitude to race relations. But essentially players are apolitical and I don't see Welsh rugby as representing or articulating any particular party or even tendency within the Welsh political spectrum. But if you canvassed the views of the fifteen players in the current Welsh National Fifteens and what their political views are I think you might be surprised by the wide spectrum of opinion you got.

Can we move on finally to cultural representations? Ways in which through images, sound, on television, rugby connects people in Wales. So what are the sorts of representations that we find of Welsh rugby today?

Gareth Williams

Welsh rugby is one of the most clichéd ways in which Wales is represented to a wider audience. But Welsh rugby is there as one of the sort of iconic symbols of Welsh-ness. It's not only at the playing level though. Varieties now of writers, poets, dramatists, novelists, leading writers in Wales in both languages have incorporated rugby into their writing in the way that perhaps American writers have absorbed particularly boxing and baseball into their

writing. And there is nothing equivalent I think elsewhere in Britain apart from some writing involving boxers from Scottish novelists like William McIlvanney.

How important is rugby for Welsh television?

Gareth Williams

I think the relationship between rugby and television in present-day Wales is a contentious one. I'm a great rugby lover. I always have been but it is my view, and it's not personal or unique to me, that there is far too much rugby now shown on television. It suits the Welsh Rugby Union because the broadcasting companies will pay mega bucks for the right to show programmes. There is nothing more dispiriting and the Welsh Rugby Union seems reluctant to face this than less than half filled grounds with voices echoing cavernously around empty stands and terraces. There are games shown weekly, and I've been in this position myself and I know I speak for tens if not hundreds of thousands of others – why should I make the trip ten miles, fifty miles down the road, on a wet night where I might have ten, fifteen years ago, but now it's on television and I will stay in and watch it. I think television has played a role in highlighting some of the brutality which occasionally creeps into the game and action replay which again in some ways perhaps de-mythises the game. There is less room now for ongoing controversy of that kind which in some ways you know feeds into the literature, the mythology of the game. There is a lot of unnecessary speculation, pre-match post match often trivial analyses I think. I don't think the game is best served by its commentators and as I said I think there is far too much of it. I think the treatment needs to be more sophisticated. I think it needs to be more discriminating and treat its audience sometimes as adults rather than just stupid fanatic