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‘Ordinary working men...transformed into giants on the rugby field’: ‘Collective’ and ‘Individual’ Memory in oral histories of rugby league.

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Abstract

As a sport that partly owes its existence to the issue of ‘broken time’, the working life of professional players outside the game is a highly symbolic issue in rugby league. In England financial reality meant that until the 1990s most players at professional level had to combine their career with full time employment away from the sport, often in the communities they represented on the field. To many this helped create a strong communal bond between those who played and watched rugby league and this perception has become a key cultural narrative in the sport’s ‘collective’ memory. This article uses individual narratives from oral history interviews which relate to the working life of professional players outside rugby league to examine the contention advanced by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and others that recollections of personal experience are always shaped to fit within the accepted public discourse. A wide range of personal testimonies are considered in order to illustrate how far, as some oral historians have argued, individuals are able to reflect upon the significance of shared experiences in ways which offer alternative perspectives to dominant cultural scripts.

Keywords; Sport History, Rugby League, Oral History, Social History, Cultural Theory.

I remember seeing players like, well on this particular occasion it was Jim Bacon who played for Leeds, but there were scores of Hunslet players who worked in the factories, the place was full of factories you see and I thought that’s the same chap I saw on Saturday afternoon. I couldn’t believe that on Saturday afternoon ordinary working men who wore overalls going down the street were transformed into giants on the rugby field and I was hooked and I don’t think I’ve ever lost that feeling now.¹

In recounting his earliest memories of rugby league during an interview in 2007 Harry Jepson’s narrative paints an evocative picture of the way in which the sport forged a close relationship with industrial life throughout his boyhood years in the Hunslet area of Leeds during the 1920s. The interview was recorded as part of the University of Huddersfield’s ‘Up and Under’ Oral History Project through which a further 105 personal testimonies were gathered from former players, fans, administrators, officials and

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journalists in both the amateur and professional branches of the sport across West Yorkshire.

These memories offer a unique window into the relationship between sport, leisure and the wider social history of twentieth-century Britain. Most of the interviews document the experiences of people who would normally be excluded from the historical record, providing a wide range of perspectives on the past that would otherwise have remained unknown. Like Harry Jepson's early recollections, their testimonies are highly personalised accounts that reflect a variety of different relationships between the sport, the interviewees and the communities in which they were situated.

Yet this fertile mix of historical experience is set against the background of a sport with a pervasive self image which is rich in cultural narratives that largely reflect its distinctive origins in nineteenth-century Britain. The project therefore also provides a valuable opportunity to offer empirical perspectives on the discourse between oral historians and cultural theorists which is focused on the inherent tension between 'collective' and 'individual' memory.

The 1970s saw a pioneering shift in theoretical emphasis among oral historians such as Alessandro Portelli. In answer to conventional historians who began to question the use of personal memory as a historical source because of its lack of factual accuracy Portelli and others developed an approach centred on the subjectivity and meanings which are embedded in oral testimony. Portelli famously argued

oral sources...are not always fully reliable in point of fact. Rather than being a weakness, this is, however, their strength: errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings.²

Through this perspective memory 'became the subject of oral history as well as the source' and greater emphasis was placed on the relationship between past and present in historical memory'.³ Consequently oral historians began to address questions such as

how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context and how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.⁴

But by the 1980s this focus on individual memory as the subject of oral history was itself coming under increased academic scrutiny. A number of oral historians and cultural theorists began to examine how 'the wider social and cultural context in which remembering takes place' influences the way memories are constructed.⁵ Rather than solely reflecting personal experience it was argued that individual memory is built around historical symbols and representations created in acts of popular or collective remembering. These are mediated through various means which have become grouped under the generic term 'collective memory', such as books, films, museums and television programmes as well as orally by social interaction. Drawing on the ideas of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, as Michael Roper explained the collective memory approach is built upon

the notion that personal accounts of the past are never produced in isolation from these public narratives, but must operate within their terms. Remembering always entails the working of past experiences into available cultural scripts.⁶

The key question Roper and others addressed was how far individual memory becomes subsumed within these cultural scripts.⁷ They argued that the conscious and subconscious need for individuals to be socially accepted causes their memories to be shaped or selected in ways which conform to dominant cultural narratives within specific communities. Other academics have also linked these ideas to the form and structure within which personal experiences are remembered and Michael Schudson has argued that as memory can only be expressed through

the cultural construction of language in socially structured patterns of recall; in the most important sense all memory is collective cultural memory.⁸

However, as Peter Burke identified, there is a strong tendency among collective memory theorists to 'discuss the social function of memory as if conflict and dissent did not exist'.⁹ Indeed Anna Green has asked,

Collective memory appears to operate on an understanding of semantic memory where remembering is reduced to operate on a predetermined set of cultural

norms. But in a culturally diverse and mobile world, to what extent are we individuals able to select or choose from alternatives open to them? ¹⁰

Green has also pointed to the important difference between written life narratives and the ‘fluid, interactive and often more ambivalent dialogue’ of an oral history interview in which the interviewer often ‘does not share the same past and there may be less personal constraint on what may or may not be said’. ¹¹

Yet although considerable attention has been paid to the relationship between collective and individual memory, few academics have used evidence from oral history interviews to examine the issue from an empirical perspective. One notable exception is Alistair Thompson’s study which focuses on the memories of Australian First World War veteran Fred Farrell. Thompson adopted a direct interview approach and asked specific questions about how Australia’s collective memory of the ANZACS related to the way soldiers who took part in the conflict recalled their experiences. This led to a detailed examination of Farrell’s life after the war through which Thompson uncovered a complex and shifting relationship between the former ANZACS memory of the conflict and the powerful national discourse. ¹²

This study will also adopt an empirical approach in order to inform the theoretical discourse which surrounds the debate over individual and collective memory. In contrast to Thompson’s in depth focus upon the memories of one individual, however, it will use personal testimonies collected through a much less structured interview technique from a wide range of people who are linked by shared social and cultural experiences of sport and recreational activity. First it will identify how a collective memory of rugby league has been formed through a range of cultural narratives which relate to key themes in the sport’s history. Then the different ways in which personal testimonies that were collected through the ‘Up and Under’ project relate to a central issue within this discourse will be explored to assess how far individuals are able to reflect independently upon their own experiences and offer alternative perspectives on the wider collective memory.

The key role played by the interview process in shaping oral history testimonies, however, first requires a brief consideration of the circumstances under which the material was gathered. The aim of the project was to elicit individual perspectives on prominent themes and experiences which have shaped rugby league’s past. As project manager I carried out most of the interviews, with occasional help from students on work placements

and volunteers who received guidance and feedback throughout their involvement.

Our approach was essentially unstructured and the interviews took the form of loosely chronological life narratives. We sought to engage with interviewees, listen closely to what they had to say and respond by asking open questions to explore lines of interest in the search for deeper explanations and expressions of meaning. In almost every interview, respondents were initially asked to recall their earliest memories of the sport and on occasions the subsequent narrative was directed towards the issues and events which were of interest to us through further more specific questioning. But where possible those interviewed were left free to direct the course of the dialogue and this enabled them to reflect upon the key experiences they gained through the sport in ways which offer valuable insights into the cultural narratives that surround rugby league.

‘A perfected model of an imperfect world’ Dominant Cultural Narratives of Sport and Rugby League.

Sport in general and rugby league in particular provide fertile and relatively unexplored ground in which to examine the tensions between collective and individual memory.¹³ Indeed it can be argued that a rich discourse has developed among both academics and non-academics which is itself influential in the construction of numerous prominent cultural narratives. Largely due to the circumstances surrounding the division of the sport in 1895 the two codes of rugby have each become the subject of a separate but interrelated public discourse which has proved remarkably enduring. Rugby became two separate codes when the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU) was formed in 1895 following a bitter dispute over the issue of payment to compensate players for time spent away from work, widely referred to as ‘broken time’. But more importantly the division of rugby reflected deepening social and cultural divisions in late nineteenth-century Britain which underscored conflicting approaches to sport among the middle and working-classes.

In the middle of the nineteenth-century these differences were articulated through the construction of a distinctive cultural narrative which played a pivotal role in the subsequent development of modern sport. In the context of middle-class life sport was invested with a kind of moral purity that encapsulated the ideals of Amateurism which

were cultivated in the public schools where football had been formalised during the middle decades of the nineteenth-century. Centred on the importance of physical recreation and the principle that the true value of sport was to play in the 'right' way rather than to win or to watch matches, these ideals were largely constructed in order to reform what had come to be seen as undesirable longstanding sporting traditions. The new values played a central role in public school reform and were spread outwards into wider society by former pupils who continued to play sport in adult life, where they became equally important to the new middle-class ethos of 'respectability'.

In the developing urban industrial areas, however, where improvements in working conditions and the relative economic stability of mid nineteenth-century Britain had seen a huge rise in interest in sport a very different approach prevailed. These rapidly changing communities were most commonly found in northern England. Here sport was one of few familiar cultural landmarks and clubs and teams quickly attracted considerable popular support in a way which celebrated the traditional recreational values that Amateurism actively sought to discourage. In this context sport continued to revolve around popular spectacle, competition and personal reward for playing success. Playing sport also offered opportunities for self expression that were denied in other aspects of life and enabled some to acquire a level of status and relative financial prosperity which would otherwise have remained out of reach.

This conception of sport was powerfully embodied in the formalised competitions which became popular in association and rugby football during the 1870s. By the end of the 1880s such competitions were dominated by teams of predominantly working-class players representing clubs in urban industrial towns and cities where their matches attracted large crowds of spectators. So as Tony Collins has identified, by the 1880s,

Although not articulated as such, rugby football had become a site of conflict between the expression of working-class cultural practices and the dominant cultural codes of the public school ethos.¹⁴

In 1886 these conflicting values were reflected in a response by a Yorkshire Post correspondent to the question 'why are so few public school and clergymen found in our leading (sic) Rugby fifteens?' He declared,

It is because the associations of the game are now becoming thoroughly distasteful to any gentlemen of sportsmanlike feeling. They do not care to be hooted and yelled at as part and parcel of a sixpenny show or to meet and associate with men who care nothing for the game other than as a means to an end. We have nothing to say against the mechanic, the artisan or the labourer, who, as long as they indulge in the game for sport and not for profit, are an ornament to the game.

In other leading sports, such as cricket and association football, different resolutions were found. Professional players had a much longer history in cricket and, despite the growing domination of amateur values, they were accommodated in the elite form of the sport albeit within a restrictive framework of regulations. In 1885, however, a more open form of professionalism was accepted in association football which, like rugby, gained a large popular following in the last third of the nineteenth-century. So despite the role which the public schools had played in its development as an organised sport, professional teams quickly came to dominate association football and stimulate the growth of cup knockout and league competitions with a vigorous national profile.

But the staunch defence of amateurism by the Rugby Football Union (RFU) resulted in a schism which is still seen to encapsulate fundamental social and cultural divisions in British society. In an editorial published by the *Daily Telegraph* in 2003 William Langley contrasted the values upheld by rugby union players with those of 'boys from working-class backgrounds' who hope that 'football will toss them £50,000 a week, a mock-Tudor mansion and a Malibu-guzzling blonde in a Bentley'. More than a century after the split and eight years after rugby union itself had become a professional sport, he could still claim that

The game's extraordinarily high standards of sportsmanship, discipline, camaraderie and valour survive, indeed thrive, because only a relative few are ever likely to aspire to them. These are unfashionable values. They may be burnished on the field of play, but they are forged elsewhere; around the hearths of solid, traditional families, and in those schools - mostly, but far from exclusively, in the independent sector - where rugby is cherished....Rugby (Union),....is a part of an education. The schools that foster it will almost

certainly be among the best of their kind. The boys that play it are more likely to grow up confident, well-behaved (at least when sober), popular and trusted.¹⁵

The social exclusivity that Langley looked to protect in rugby union and his disdain for what he perceived as the greed of working-class professionals remain at the heart of popular perceptions of rugby league's roots. For many the establishment of the NRFU by 22 clubs from industrial towns in the north of England was an act of defiance against the hypocrisy of the middle-class southern establishment in the form of the RFU. The perceived failure of the RFU to recognise the different needs of the northern clubs reflected a well-established view of the way similar attitudes towards the north prevailed amongst southern based political and economic institutions.¹⁶ Indeed while most clubs in the south had voted against the principle of remuneration for working-class players who took time off work to play rugby some saw nothing wrong in paying generous expenses to their own middle-class players.¹⁷

These sentiments were expressed almost immediately after the division of the sport in a letter that appeared in the *Yorkshire Post* on 21 September 1895 which declared

I say with Mark Twain's bold bad boy, that we glory in the sentence of outlawry pronounced on us, as freeing us from the tyrannical bondage of the English [Rugby] Union, and we breath pure air in being freed from the stifling atmosphere of deceit in which we previously existed.¹⁸

To many of its supporters the NRFU subsequently became an emblem of growing northern working-class identity and independence which reflected the distinctive culture of the urban industrial communities where it had originated.

As Karl Spracklen has noted, despite the major social and economic changes which have taken place during last 116 years this view has continued to dominate perceptions of rugby league. Along with the impact of new commonwealth immigration and the rise of multiculturalism, communities across the north of England have been transformed in the last 50 or so years by the decline of those structural industries upon which they were built. Yet in 1986 Thomas Keneally could still write when describing rugby league in his novel *A Family Madness*, which was set in Sydney, Australia, how

A sport could be to people like Delany not merely a sect, but a cosmology, a perfected model of an imperfect world. Rugby league was a game whose laws had been codified by workers in the forlorn north of England who were invaded by that peculiar genius which concerns itself with the serious business of human games, and produced what was to Delaney the supreme code, a cellular structure composed of thirteen players which mimicked life and art and war so exactly that it became them'.¹⁹

Spracklen has identified how in both written and spoken narratives perceptions of rugby league in the present are often articulated in terms of the past. To many of its followers the sport continues to symbolise an idealised working-class way of life and sense of community that characterised the traditional industrial north of England in which rugby league first developed, but which has now disappeared. The main focus of Spracklen's work has been how these dominant perceptions of rugby league perpetuate exclusion particularly along lines of gender and ethnicity.²⁰ According to him, through this cultural narrative of rugby league the traditional industrial north has been replaced by an 'imaginary community' which '(re) constructs northern-ness as white, working-class and male'. But he also identified that

the problematic of community – both in the sense of a social group in a larger society and of a group or team within a sport – was the key to deciphering the myths and claims and arguments that had shaped the forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1968; Bloor, 1983) that the people in rugby league used to understand themselves and their surroundings.²¹

Of central importance to this discourse is the perception that the sport has always engendered a strong communal bond between those who play and watch it. One of the fundamental components in the construction of this cultural narrative is the fact that until the 1990s professional rugby league only provided part-time employment for its players and even the sport's biggest stars also worked in full time jobs, often in the communities they represented on the field of play. Indeed for most professionals who fail to reach the game's highest level, rugby league still offers only a supplementary income to full-time employment outside the sport.

As a sport that in part owes its very existence to the issue of ‘broken time’, the working life of players outside rugby league is clearly a highly symbolic issue. Ironically, rather than symbolising an act of defiance the proposed legalisation of ‘broken time’ payments was an attempt to reach a compromise. Through this measure the northern clubs sought to reassure the RFU that players were to be recompensed only for the time they spent away from work whilst participating in matches and would not become full time professionals. Indeed even following the division of the sport, it was not intended that the NRFU should adopt open professionalism and enable rugby to provide the sole source of income for players. To reinforce this principle a series of ‘work clauses’ were added to the rules of the game in 1898 which specified that players were required to hold ‘bona fide employment’, which did not include jobs such as ‘billiard makers, waiters in public houses, or any employment in connection with a club’.²² The administrative demands of enforcing the ‘work clauses’ caused them to be abandoned in 1905. However, the financial realities which faced the sport meant that most players had to balance work outside rugby league with the demands of a professional playing career until the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the requirement for players to work in jobs outside rugby league has had an impact which penetrates far beyond the sport’s economic structure. It became part of the discourse around which, as Karl Spracklen has noted, an idealised conception of rugby league that was based upon popular perceptions of traditional northern working-class life came to be formed. To many it helped to create and continually reinforce a strong bond between rugby league players, clubs and the communities they represented. This view became one of the key cultural narratives around which the sport’s collective discourse has been developed. It was reflected by Stanley Chadwick who, in a 1948 edition of the *Rugby League Review*, explained that, for its supporters, the game

...forms part of their very existence....to them the players are Tom, Bill or Jack; often they work alongside them in workshop or office, and are members of the same club; their wives meet in food queues and at the child welfare centre.²³

‘We were buddies’ - Oral Histories, Individual Memory and Dominant Cultural Narratives.

The working life of professional players outside the rugby league also featured strongly in the memories of people who were interviewed for the 'Up and Under' Rugby League Oral History project. The continued importance of the cultural narrative which Stanley Chadwick articulated was demonstrated by Geoff Wright, a Halifax supporter who was interviewed for the project in 2008. He grew up living in the town and recalled that during the 1950s most players

...worked in local jobs, I mean Alvin Ackerley he was a dray man for Whitaker's brewery and when we were going to school Alvin would be there on the dray wagons and we'd see him. You'd see them in the streets. So there was a local affinity because they were working people. Alright they came from Wales, Les Pearce, Ronnie James, Jon Thorley, but they married and made their homes here and they became local people.

They were part time pros but they played in big stadiums, played at Wembley; what a fantastic thing to play at Wembley. Maine Road, Manchester when you could get 50,000-60,000 for a championship final yet they were working alongside you, they worked in engineering shops. I never actually worked with any of the players but I knew Charlie Renilson very well because he came in the pub. We watched Match of the Day on a Saturday night and his wife Thelma and my wife Val they'd be in one corner having a natter and we'd be in the other corner watching ... we were buddies.²⁴

The nature of work in which most professional rugby league players found themselves was also significant. The occupational background of players often mirrored that of the predominantly working-class communities in which the clubs they represented were based. Most were employed in manual jobs as skilled, semi skilled or unskilled labour. As Tony Collins identified the cultural world of manual labour was built around a distinctive concept of masculinity that was central to the traditional self image of working men. It encapsulated notions of strength, endurance, the ability to withstand pain and to triumph over adversity which also came to be seen as fundamental characteristics of rugby league players.²⁵

These qualities are central to one of the most symbolic events in the history of rugby league, which took place on 14th July 1914, just less than 19 years after the sport's inception. Despite protests from administrators and players, at the end of its second tour to Australia the England side was forced to play a third test match in seven days. Most of the second half was spent without three injured players, one of whom was Douglas Clarke. He initially played on despite breaking his thumb, but was eventually forced to leave the field after dislocating his shoulder. Yet England held on to win the match 14-6 and regain the Ashes, which they had lost two years earlier. As a result of the England team's heroic triumph over adversity, the game became known as the 'Rorke's Drift' test match.

Few players had a reputation which conformed more closely to the inherent characteristics of rugby league forwards than Clarke. Also a champion wrestler he had been a member of Huddersfield's team of all talents, which won all four of the sport's major trophies in the 1913/14 season and ran a coal delivery business in the Birkby area of the town. Lifelong Huddersfield supporter Reg Cannon, who was interviewed for the 'Up and Under' project in 2006, grew up in Birkby. Then in his 80s, he was too young to have seen Clarke play and could remember little about the rugby league matches he watched as a boy. But he was still able to relate stories about Clarke's physical prowess and vividly recalled how, years after the Cumbrian's career had finished, he would regularly lift two full 100 weight bags of coal onto his wagon, one in each hand.²⁶

Perhaps the most famous example of this association between manual labour and rugby league can be found in the coal mining districts of Lancashire, Yorkshire and West Cumbria. In a number of prominent rugby league localities coal mining was by far the dominant industry and a high percentage of the players worked in local pits. Former England international Mick Morgan played for Wakefield Trinity, Oldham and Carlisle and he recalled that working in the mines around his home town Featherstone in the late 1960s

At Acton Hall, there was me, Bridgey [Keith Bridges, Featherstone Rovers], Jimmy Thompson [Featherstone Rovers and Bradford Northern], Vince Farrar [Featherstone Rovers and Hull FC], our Arnie [Arnie Morgan, Featherstone Rovers] and lads at Acworth [Colliery] they had down t' pit, there was Dale Fennell [Bradford Northern], Jackie Fennell [Featherstone Rovers], David Hobbs [Featherstone Rovers and Bradford Northern] they all worked at t' pit.

Everybody worked at t' pit, Peter Smith [Featherstone Rovers] worked on t' pit top.²⁷

The physical demands of mining have clear similarities with those of playing Rugby League. In his autobiography which was published in 2001, some years after the industry had been decimated, former Wakefield player and Castleford coach Dave Sampson explained

Years ago men worked down the pit and came up to play rugby. We don't appreciate this when comparing eras of rugby and making analogies of hard physical labour(sic)the toughness of mind and body was made by repetitive hard work and tough occupations that the people of the past had to endure.²⁸

The career of Frank Wagstaff, which began with Hunslet in the 1930s and ended at Batley in the 1950s, illustrates the physical demands that were faced by miners who played rugby league at professional level during this period. When interviewed for the project in 2006 Frank explained that, after starting work down the mines at the age of fourteen, he was employed in the industry throughout his Rugby League career. He recalled 'during the war I used to work every Sat'day morning and play rugby in t' afternoon, day shifts started at six o'clock in the morning 'til two'.

Perhaps more importantly, however, some former players who were interviewed for the project also recalled events which offer an insight into how working in the mines provided a context in which strong communal bonds were forged between those who played and watched rugby league. Former international Keith Bridges explained how while playing for Featherstone Rovers in the early 1970s with the compliance of their workmates

Jimmy Thompson (who) worked with me as well, (sic) what we used to do was, if you've ever been to Featherstone, the Pit was on one side of the lane and there was a bridge across and Post Office Road was on the other side of the road. When we were on afternoons we used to, in us overalls, nip across the railway line, on to the training pitch (sic) do us training and put us overalls back on and nip back over the railway line and go back to the pit.²⁹

As Mick Morgan recalled, similar allowances could also be made for players as they recovered from the rigorous physical demands of the game. He explained that

[The other blokes who worked there] oh they looked after you, yeah. You could always get your head down [and have a sleep] on a Monday if you'd been playing. The speccies [who you worked with] they loved it and that's why they looked after you.³⁰

Sleeping during a shift underground was a serious offence which could result in dismissal. However, as Jackie Blackburn, who played for Featherstone Rovers in the 1940s and 1950s, explained it was often not just their workmates who looked out for rugby league players in the mines. He recalled how getting time off to play was 'no problem, they were all Featherstone supporters, you see, the manager was a Featherstone supporter.'

'I used to have to go to work and face them guys working on another machine' - Alternatives Perspectives on the Dominant Cultural Script.

But alongside and sometimes within memories recalled during the project which serve to underscore the cultural narratives that have been constructed around rugby league a variety of other perspectives were also offered. In some cases these become apparent through a closer reading of the 'text' and serve to question dominant assumptions in relatively subtle ways. As Susan Ostrov has identified, oral testimony can 'contain a multiplicity of positions that are contradictory'.³¹ So for example, rather than mythologize the physical hardships he faced combining a professional career in rugby league with work down the mines Frank Wagstaff chose to underplay its significance, commenting only that 'It was pretty tough really.'

Keith Bridges was equally reticent about the strong communal bond which was evidently forged between players and supporters of rugby league down the mines where he worked. Teamwork was essential at the coal face. All were expected to contribute fully and very few concessions were given to those who did not fulfil their responsibilities. So to place the preparation these players required in order to perform at their best for the local

rugby league club ahead of such concerns was an act of considerable significance from their workmates. Yet when asked if they knew that he and Jimmy Thompson were leaving their shifts to go training Keith Bridges simply replied, 'Oh yeah they knew, yeah. They were all right with it, yeah.'

As these understated reflections clearly suggest, many former players' recollections indicate that their relationship with supporters in the workplace was far less straightforward than the way it has been portrayed in the sport's collective discourse. Indeed other former players recalled experiences which challenge the cultural narratives associated with rugby league directly. Throughout their careers most players were constantly aware that working and living alongside supporters who watched them play each week meant their performances were always under close scrutiny from a very demanding public. So as Ken Senior who played for Huddersfield and Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s explained

You didn't like being dropped. Because I used to have to go to work and face them guys working on another machine. I took a lot of stick. A lot of it good banter, like, but you didn't like losing and you didn't like having a bad game.³²

Admiration and support for professional rugby league players from fellow workers was clearly far from unconditional in a way that serves undermine the mythologized relationship which features so strongly in the sport's collective discourse.

Yet as Melissa Walker has highlighted, oral testimony can also 'illuminate (sic) the infinite varieties of individual experiences of similar events' and Ken Senior's rather stark recollection is in contrast to the way Bryn Knowleden remembered a comparable occurrence.³³ He explained

I worked in the engineers department at Lever Brothers and everybody was rugby mad. I mean, if I'd played well, then when I went into work on a Monday and my bench was packed, 'well done' and all this. But if I'd played bad, or they thought I'd played bad, there was no one there! There was one little chap, a hell of a nice little chap and he came to our house where we lived in Warrington. He was thick set, very short and he kind of walked very strongly, Johnny Gresty he was called. We went to Belle Vue in Manchester and they had a rugby team, a

circus and fireworks and merry-go-rounds and everything. We played this match and won 13-8. But we didn't play well. They stopped us playing and when I went in to work on Monday, Johnny's standing there. He turned round and said "When I went to the match on Saturday" and he's talking to everyone. He said "Coming away from the match a chap stopped me and said did I want a ticket to the circus? 'No thank you' I said, 'I've just watched 13 bloody clowns.' That's how they were. You had to please them and if you were playing well they were great, wonderful supporters. But they let you know if you weren't playing well. (sic) You had to live with people, that was the main thing about our game."³⁴

While these events also serve to undermine the idea that a strong bond between players and supporters was forged in the workplace the colourful and evocative way in which they were recalled paints a harmonious picture of shop floor camaraderie that in many ways serves to support the accepted discourse. Its contradictory nature provides a fitting example of what Susan Armitage has described as the need 'for the scholar to historicize the narrative' and examine more closely the broader life experiences of the individual and the conditions of the interview in order to gain a deeper understanding of the story being told.³⁵

At 90 years of age and still possessing an exceptionally sharp mind Bryn Knowlden was looking back fondly at a rich and eventful life when the interview took place. He grew up in a small village near Barrow in Cumbria and had just embarked on a career as a professional association footballer when the Second World War broke out. His dreams of becoming a professional sportsman seemed to be over. But whilst working in the local shipyards during the War he started playing rugby league and gained an opportunity to play for the local professional club in the emergency wartime competition.

Bryn quickly built a strong reputation as a rugby league player and at the end of the conflict was selected to tour Australia and New Zealand in 1946 with the Great Britain Lions. The tour was a life-changing experience. Upon his return he signed to play for the Warrington club and went with his wife to live in the town. The immediate post war years were a golden era for the sport in Britain, with record crowds and a thriving club and international scene. Warrington became one of the leading teams during this period and the club enjoyed arguably the most successful period in its

history.³⁶ So within a few years Bryn had played in front of 70,000 people in the Challenge Cup final at Wembley and made two appearances in League Championship finals at Maine Road, Manchester. As well as the engineering department of Lever Brothers, he worked in various jobs and after retiring from rugby league became a civil servant before moving to the coast to enjoy a long and happy retirement.³⁷

Rugby league clearly shaped his life a very positive way and this was reflected throughout the interview which was one of very few to be conducted with more than two people present. Although only four people were in attendance, the dynamics of the interview were very different from the occasions when just the interviewer and the interviewee had been present. As is the case with many former professional sports men and women, Bryn Knowleden was an excellent story teller well versed in recounting experiences from his eventful life. The presence of a small but appreciative audience enabled him to convey the significant events which shaped his experiences of rugby league and life in general through a rich array of stories and anecdotes.

But rather than simply reflect the broader discourse which makes up rugby league's collective memory, when the context of his interview is considered Bryn Knowleden can be viewed in relation to a role that has been described by Melissa Walker as the 'memory bearer'. Late in life members of a generation which has experienced a remarkable period of change can become aware that they are amongst the last living witnesses to a particular way of life. This realisation influences their memories of the past and causes them to idealize the aspects of life that have now disappeared in a way which reflects critically on the present.³⁸ Bryn Knowleden's playing career spanned the wartime years and those which immediately followed. The people who lived through this period experienced a remarkable sense of togetherness which has since been lost.³⁹ So when looking back at these events 60 or so years later it is perhaps understandable that he remembered his relationship with the supporters who worked alongside him with a sense of affection despite the criticism they sometimes directed towards him.

Viewing the narrator and their narrative from within this wider context also enables individual memories of common experiences to provide perspectives on other aspects of the sport's collective discourse. Despite concerted efforts to find people from a wide variety of backgrounds to take part in the project the demographic of those interviewed largely reflected the dominance of white males within rugby league. But some opportunities arose to interview people from outside this group and on one such

occasion Bak Diabira, a half back of North African descent who was born in Marseilles and played for Bradford Northern, Blackpool and Keighley, recalled events which mirrored those experienced by Ken Senior and Bryn Knowleden, He explained.

I worked alongside the supporters and when you had a good game it was nice but when you had a poor game, these guys used to tell you about it. It was good in one way because you were all fighting the same cause, they were supporters and they didn't want you to have bad games They'd much prefer to come into work on a Monday morning and pat you on the back rather than kick you up the backside. And you enjoyed it, it made your working week a lot more pleasant when you'd had a good game on the Sunday because for the remainder of the week you were the king in the factory.⁴⁰

Even though support from his workmates was far from unconditional, the status and acceptance Bak gained through playing rugby league emphasises how, as Karl Spracklen has shown, narratives from those excluded from the sport's white, working-class and male 'imagined community' can address 'oversights' to the 'approved version of history'.⁴¹

The meanings which are embedded in individual oral history narratives can clearly offer multiple perspectives which address various aspects of the sport's dominant discourse in alternative ways. Life-long Huddersfield supporter David Thorpe's memories of how his family connection with rugby league came about also provides strong support for the idea that the workplace engendered a strong bond between players and supporters. The family first became interested in rugby league when Huddersfield player Mike Wicks began working with one of his parents. He remembered that after one match in which Wicks got injured at Featherstone

.. we went and waited behind the changing rooms, until we could ask somebody how he was. He wasn't seriously injured. But because he was a friend as well as a rugby league player, there was that concern about him.⁴²

However, rather than forming a friendship with Mr Thorpe in the workshop or coal mine, the former Devon Rugby Union player began working as a sales representative for the carpet and soft furnishings retailer Taylor and Hobson where Mrs Thorpe was employed

as a secretary. Karl Spracklen has also noted how interest in rugby league amongst both men and women is commonly perceived to be inherited from male members of immediate family in a way which serves to underscore the inherent working class masculinity of the sport.⁴³ So here again, recollections that seemingly serve to support the collective discourse, can also highlight the existence of alternative narratives.

It is also clear from these examples that those people interviewed during the project who had played professional rugby league remembered the issue of their working life outside the sport from a significantly different perspective to that offered by supporters. According to Aleida Assmann, episodic memory, through which personal experiences are remembered, is 'perspectival and idiosyncratic' and 'bound to a specific stance'. So, for example, 'the oldest child in a family has a different vantage point from any other sibling.'⁴⁴ Oral historians have also noted the significance of 'silences' which occur when key experiences remain absent from personal testimonies. These are often related to traumatic events, such as personal abuse or war atrocities, which the narrator may find too painful to re-live. But they can also reflect the perspectival nature of personal testimony and the fact that, as Alessandro Portelli noted, 'what the historian wishes to know may not necessarily coincide with what the narrator wishes to tell.'⁴⁵

The unstructured interview approach which was adopted during the project enabled former players to remember working life outside the sport in ways which they felt were important to their lives and some did not mention their relationship with supporters at all. A number offered perspectives which have largely been excluded from the sport's collective discourse and recalled their experiences in a way that provides a far from idealistic view of traditional working-class life. For example, Eddie Illingworth, who played for Batley in the 1950s, explained that balancing full time employment with a professional career in such a physically demanding sport was a considerable challenge. He was employed in a large-scale production industry where work patterns were structured around shift work and recalled,

I worked nights, twelve hour nights Humphrey carpets weaving, that was my job and Rugby came second....I've come off, Sat'day morning six o'clock after starting at six 'o' clock the night before, five nights a week, come off and go to Hull or Hull Kingston on the bus at ten 'o'clock Sat'day morning with no sleep when I've done 12 hours on t' machines....every week I'd go train, play, do me

best, 100%, you know many times it was how I felt...sometimes you'd feel good if you were on days and training, if I were on nights I didn't feel so good, I just couldn't put that extra in,... you could look the part but inwardly you're not the same....I think I had the ability, but I just couldn't get that 100% fit.⁴⁶

Eddie's career was consequently spent on the fringes of the professional game alternating between the first team and reserves at Batley, one of Rugby League's less fashionable clubs.

The memories of some former players who enjoyed more successful careers undermine more directly the idea that their working lives outside the sport helped created a strong communal bond between those who watched and played rugby league. A number recalled the difficulties they encountered fitting full-time employment outside the sport around their playing commitments and found the status they had in the community as leading rugby league players did little to protect them from the economic reality of the immediate post war years. After serving his time as plumber, Hunslet international Geoff Gunney remembered how he was asked to leave his job

...because I broke too much time to play football. If you got injured, of course, you'd be off work or if you got picked for a trip anywhere you'd say 'I'm having a few days off or I'm having a few weeks off' and I did two tours to Australia when I worked there... they asked me to leave after that.⁴⁷

When Geoff Gunney first went to Australasia in 1954 the journey was made by aeroplane and the tour lasted just over 3 months. However, previous parties had travelled by boat and in 1946 the tour lasted for almost 6 months.⁴⁸ Earnest Ward, who had also toured eight years earlier, was a member of the 1946 party and his son Trevor remembered how being away for so long 'took its toll financially' causing downfall of his fathers business as a builder.

Other former players, however, recalled experiences that highlight how a professional career in rugby league restricted their employment prospects outside the sport in ways which challenge the celebration of community and masculinity in the sport's key cultural narratives from a broader perspective. The demands of professional rugby league clearly limited opportunities for players to develop a career outside the world of

manual labour and an hourly wage structure. This was recognised by former international forward John Henderson who moved from his home town Workington, where he started his career, to Halifax in 1955. He explained

I'd to have a job where I could get off to go training. So I worked for Halifax Corporation, labouring, actually, on houses.⁴⁹

The limitations of the job were not lost on him. So he decided to end his career at the relatively early age of 30, recalling how,

The job I had was nothing really with the Corporation so it didn't take anything out of you, you'd no responsibility or anything like that, and the money was accordingly. So I thought I'd better get on with life.⁵⁰

In contrast, Trevor Ward, who himself played as a professional with Wakefield Trinity and Dewsbury, explained how he was one of few players to embark on a white collar career outside rugby league. But after studying at Art College and becoming a fine artist, his employers were unwilling to allow time off for work to train and play in matches and he drifted out of the professional game.

As Anna green has argued,

While the frameworks for understanding past experience are derived from their social and cultural context, most individuals in contemporary societies are exposed to a cacophony of conflicting ideologies, values and beliefs.⁵¹

This range of influences clearly has a significant impact upon the different contexts within which individuals frame their recollections of shared or common experiences. Like many former players Derek Hallas, a centre three quarter in the 1950s and 1960s with Leeds, Keighley and Australian club Parrammatta, worked on the factory floor when he began his career in professional rugby league. This background enabled him to reflect upon the repressive nature of working life in the factory and provide an alternative view of the impact the masculinity that was inherent in the cultural world of labour had on his experiences of playing rugby league. He explained that

[t]he game then, you've got to remember, there were engineers, there were miners, there were dockers, a lot of tough jobs and during the week the foreman told them 'you do this you do that' and a Saturday afternoon, it was their release. You know 'let's go out and hit somebody'. So you stayed out of the way.⁵²

Conclusion

The complex nature of individual memory has clearly been overlooked by some cultural theorists in a way which illustrates the importance of adopting an empirical approach in order to answer questions raised by theoretical debates in the social sciences. Yet the need to engage theoretical discourse on the study of memory with empirical evidence should come as no surprise. In 1998 Sherna Berger Gluck wrote as 'interested as I am in some of the more theoretical questions about memory, meaning, and representation, I also get impatient with what sometimes verges on navel-gazing'⁵³ In contrast, the need to view evidence critically from within its wider context in order to examine broader historical narratives has long been recognised as a fundamental component of serious academic studies. Indeed as early as 1942 Marc Bloch could write 'it has been many a day since men first took it into their heads not to accept all historical evidence blindly.'⁵⁴

The personal narratives which are created in oral history interviews have added dimensions which, as Alessandro Portelli noted, require 'specific approaches and procedures, adequate to their specific nature and form'.⁵⁵ In contrast to most historical evidence they are creations of the present which can provide insights into the way broader historical issues and events intersect with the personal lives of individuals who experience them. Yet they also reflect the context in which they are recalled and their distinctive nature therefore requires a methodology which embraces aspects of anthropology, cultural analysis textual criticism and a range of other disciplines. However, this type of interdisciplinary approach is now common to many forms of historical enquiry.

When viewed against this wider context personal testimonies from people who are linked by a common theme provide valuable opportunities to illustrate the different ways in which individuals are able to reflect upon shared experiences. The examples

which have been included in this short study demonstrate that when ‘framing’ personal experiences within their broader context individuals are able to engage with the variety of perspectives to which Anna Green referred in sophisticated ways. Collective memory plays a key role in providing a framework in which personal testimony is recalled. But when constructing their memories individuals have the capacity to reflect upon the collective discourse in a critical manner or offer new perspectives by viewing their experiences in relation to alternative narratives.

The ‘Up and Under’ project, clearly documented individual memories that relate to the working life of professional players outside rugby league in ways which provide a much broader range of perspectives than those offered by the sport’s collective discourse. Throughout much of the twentieth century the workplace provided rugby league supporters with a degree of access to the players they paid to watch each week which, it could be argued, was almost unique in professional sport. It was not unknown for players at the highest level of association football and cricket, the other two leading British professional team sports, to also find alternative forms of employment during their playing careers. But as these were full time professional sports, players only worked in other jobs outside their respective playing seasons. So they were not subject to the kind of close regular contact with supporters after each performance that rugby league players experienced. Through their relationship in the workplace personal friendships were undoubtedly developed between those who played and watched rugby league. These feature strongly in the memories of supporters in a way which reinforces the celebration of traditional working class community in rugby league’s cultural narratives. But working alongside the players also enabled supporters to vent their frustrations when events on the field of play fell below expectations and whilst this was recalled by former players it does not feature in either the memories of supporters or the sport’s collective discourse.

These contrasting narratives reflect the perspectival nature of individual memory. But they also demonstrate that collective memory is equally subjective and shaped to represent a specific view of the past which excludes alternative perspectives of common or shared experiences that individual memories are able to offer. The fickle nature of those who watched rugby league clearly tempered the way players remembered their relationship with supporters in ways that serve to undermine the sport’s key cultural narratives. Yet professional rugby league players faced a whole range of wider circumstances which are not fully reflected in the sport’s collective discourse. The

demands of combining a playing career with work outside rugby league clearly restricted opportunities for economic and occupational advancement and accentuated the economic uncertainties and physical hardships that were often faced by men with their social background. These narratives provide a more representative picture of traditional working class life and the world of manual labour than that provided by the sport's collective discourse. They featured most often in former players' memories of working life outside the sport and demonstrate how by revealing the hidden lives of those normally excluded from the historical record oral history can unlock individual memories which offer new perspectives on broader historical narratives.

¹ Interview with Harry Jepson recorded by Rob Light, 02/02/2008.

² Alessandro Portelli, *The death of Luigi Trastulli, and other stories : form and meaning in oral history*, Albany, N.Y, 1991, p 3.

³ Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review*, Volume 34, Issue 1, pp. 49-70, p 55.

⁴ Michael Frisch, *A shared authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany, N.Y, 1990, p 188.

⁵ Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and Collective Memory' *Oral History Journal*, Volume 32, Issue 2, Autumn 2004, pp 35-44, p 35.

⁶ Michael Roper, 'Remembering the Soldier Hero: the psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War.', *History Workshop Journal*, no 50, 2000, pp. 181-204, p183.

⁷ See also Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: theory, Politics, method', in Rob Perks and Alistair Thompson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, (Oxford 2008).

⁸ Michael Schudson, 'Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory', in *Memory Distortion: How minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel Schacter, Cambridge Mass, 1997, pp 346-47.

⁹ Green, 'Individual Remembering', p40.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 40.

¹¹ Ibid, p 41.

¹² Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice', *Oral History*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring, 1990. Thomson explained how Farrell found that immediately after the war his traumatic experiences could only be expressed through alternatives to the national narrative of the 'digger' as war hero and he developed a radical anti-war stance. While this was maintained in later life, however, the emergence of a revised national memory of the conflict which now included the narrative of the soldier as victim enabled him to reconcile his memories with the dominant cultural script, despite its continued promotion of the 'digger' hero and ANZAC legend.

¹³ For examples of works which have examined the role of sport as a focal point of individual and communal identity see Jeff Hill and Jack Williams, Eds., *Sport and Identity in the North of England*, Edinburgh, 1996, Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, Oxford, 1992 and Tony Collins, *Rugby's Great Split. Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football*. London, 1998.

¹⁴ Collins *Rugby's Great Split*, p 60.

¹⁵ William Langlely, *The Daily Telegraph*, 30/11/2003.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3599559/If-rugby-woos-the-soccer-fans-it-will-be-a-disaster-for-the-nation.html>

¹⁶ Dave Russell, 'Sport and Identity: The case of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, 1890-1939', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7, 2, 1996, pp 206-230, p 207-8.

¹⁷ Tony Collins, *A Social History of Rugby Union*, Routledge, 2009, p 31.

¹⁸ *Yorkshire Post*, 21/09/1895.

¹⁹ Thomas Keneally, *A Family Madness*, London, 2001, p 36

²⁰ For example see, K Spracklen, (2005), 'Re-inventing "the game": rugby league, 'race', gender and the

growth of Active Sports in England'. In *Sport, Active Leisure and Youth Cultures*, edited by J. Caudwell and P. Bramham, Eastbourne; Leisure Studies Association, pp. 153-167, and K Spracklen, 'Black Pearl, Black Diamonds: exploring racial identities in rugby league'. In *Racism and British Sport*, edited by I. McDonald and B. Carrington, London, 2001, pp. 70-82

²¹ K Spracklen, J Long and S Timmins, (2008), 'Remembering, telling and reconstructing: oral histories of the northern working-class at leisure in rugby league'. In *Recording leisure lives : histories, archives and memories of leisure in 20th century Britain* / Robert Snape and Helen Pussard, eds, Eastbourne, Leisure Studies Association, 2009, pp 113-128, p 115.

²² Tony Collins, *Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain: A Social and Cultural History*, London, 2006, p 5.

²³ *Rugby League Review*, 1948.

²⁴ Interview with Geoff Wright recorded by David Nichols, 16/03/2007.

²⁵ Collins, *Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain*, p 150.

²⁶ See Interview with Reg Cannon recorded by Rob Light, 24/11/2006.

²⁷ Interview with Mick Morgan recorded by Rob Light, 30/06/2008.

²⁸ Dave Sampson, *Fast Lane to Shangri-la*, Skipton, 2001, p 6

²⁹ Interview with Keith Bridges recorded by Rob Light, 22/08/2008.

³⁰ Mick Morgan interviewed 30/06/2008.

³¹ Green, 'Individual Remembering', p 41.

³² Interview with Ken Senior recorded by Gemma Robinson, 19/06/2007.

³³ Melissa Walker, *Southern farmers and their stories*, Lexington, 2009, p 38.

³⁴ Interview with Bryn Knowlden recorded by Rob Light and David Thorpe, 08/05/2009.

³⁵ Susan H Armitage and Sherna Berger Gluck, 'Reflections on Women's Oral History: An Exchange.' In *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 2006 pp 73-82, p 80.

³⁶ Of the clubs ten rugby league championship and challenge cup successes five were achieved between 1947 and 1954.

³⁷ Bryn sadly passed away a few months after he was interviewed for the project.

³⁸ Walker, *Southern farmers and their stories*, p 14.

³⁹ There is undoubtedly a degree of mythology about the British wartime experience and there is little doubt that negative aspects of life, such as looting, panic, bigotry and conflict did take place. See Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, London, 1992. However, as Robert Mackay has recently shown, there is ample evidence to suggest a strong sense of unity was formed. This featured strongly in the memories of Bryn Knowlden, especially those relating to the 1946 tour, and can also be seen, for example, in widespread support for the Beverage Report and fittingly the embargo on rugby league professionals playing rugby union in the Armed Forces. See Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle. Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War*, Manchester, 2002.

⁴⁰ Interview with Bak Diabira recorded by Rob Light, 02/09/2008.

⁴¹ Spracklen, Long and Timmins, 'Remembering, telling and reconstructing: oral histories of the northern working-class at leisure in rugby league', p 124.

⁴² Interview with David Thorpe recorded by Steve Kelly, 09/03/2009.

⁴³ Spracklen, Long and Timmins, 'Remembering, telling and reconstructing' p 118-9.

⁴⁴ Aleida Assmann, 'Memory, Individual and collective' in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Goodin, Robert E. and Tilly, Charles, New York, 2006, pp 210-226, p 212.

⁴⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *A Dialogical Relationship. An Approach to Oral History*, p1, www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions_portelli.pdf, accessed 17/01/2012.

⁴⁶ Interview with Eddie Illingworth recorded by Rob Light, 15/10/2007.

⁴⁷ Interview with Geoff Gunney recorded by Rob Light, 03/07/2007.

⁴⁸ The tour party embarked on 3rd April 1946 and arrived home on 22nd September 1946.

⁴⁹ Interview with John Henderson recorded by Rob Light, 24/01/2007.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, (Ed) Donald A. Ritchie, Oxford, 2010, p 105.

⁵² Interview with Derek Hallas recorded by Rob Light, 10/10/2008.

⁵³ Gluck, 'Reflections on Women's Oral History', p 75.

⁵⁴ Marc Bloch, *The Historians Craft*, Manchester, 2004, p 66.

⁵⁵ Portelli, *A Dialogical Relationship*, p 3.

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