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EMA for A329: The Making of Welsh History

Dissertation

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**Was Rugby Union in Wales truly ‘A game democratic and amateur’ –
Or did middle-class hegemony preclude working-class agency within
the sport between 1880 and 1914?** (*Welsh Outlook*, 1914, p.18-19)

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7552 words

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Abbreviations:

C&DFU – Cardiff and District Football Union.

N.U. – Northern Union (from 1922 Rugby League).

R.F.U. – Rugby Football Union (England).

S.W.D.N. – South Wales Daily News.

S.W.F.C. – South Wales Football Club.

W.F.U. – Welsh Football Union, (later W.R.U. – Welsh Rugby Union).

Introduction.

The national sport of Wales, Rugby Union, has often been extolled as ‘a unifying, inclusive force’ that brought people together in a way that Liberal politics, non-conformism and the Welsh language could not (Holt, 1989, p.250). The overarching question to be focused on here is whether, through their control of the sport, the Welsh middle-classes limited working-class agency within it, therefore allowing their own values to take precedence and calling into question the extent to which rugby was able to create cross-class unity. Originally a game played at English public schools, rugby was introduced into Wales by returning middle and upper class former pupils who formed teams and encouraged Welsh schools and others to take it up (Williams, 1991, p.16). Inter-club competitiveness was an early feature of the Welsh game, competitions such as the South Wales Challenge Cup, launched in 1877, raised rugby’s profile and playing standards while generating ‘intense local rivalry’ (Smith and Williams, 1980, p. 2-3). Middle-class support and the boost to available player numbers provided by migrant workers from England’s rugby playing West Country, combined with the sport’s exciting appeal, fast made it equally popular among the diverse inhabitants of congested, industrial valley settlements, and the more cosmopolitan, coastal towns (Williams, 1991, p.16). The middle-class leaders of South Wales liked to characterise rugby’s popularity as a symbol of a united people and society, a game enjoying mass cross-class support, untainted by professionalism, played by all classes and so unique to Wales (Johnes, 2007, p.96). But, despite the sport gaining mass popular support among working-class people by the 1890s, both as spectators and players, in terms of control it never became ‘the people’s game’, it was the small middle-class group, just

three percent of the population, who 'would retain a firm grasp of the running of its (Wales') rugby' (Williams, 1991, p. 16-17). The period, 1880-1914, encompassed both the confident, buoyant period of the Welsh Edwardian High Noon, 1890-1914, and a period of industrial strife, strikes and riots known as The Great Unrest, 1910-1912. Although Liberal politics and ideas remained ascendant, the working-classes, whose interests were often not served by those ideas, were becoming increasingly aware of their collective power, making investigation of working-class agency seem particularly relevant to this period (Morgan, 1980, p.273).

Social cohesion and a 'lack of homogeneity' within the 'cultural melting-pot' populations of newly urbanised and industrialised South Wales caused concern for the middle-class leaders of Welsh society, and seeing rugby as a unifying and civilising agent they encouraged it (Andrews, 1991, p. 336; Jenkins, 2007, p. 185). Martin Johnes, a Welsh historian of culture, sport and modern Wales, gives a broad overview of Welsh sport in its social context between 1880 and 1914, in his book *A History of Sport in Wales* (Johnes, n.d., online). Although he notes the game's intrinsic appeal for all classes Johnes suggests it was rugby's ability 'to promote community loyalty and identity in the burgeoning urban areas that won it middle-class support', (2005, p. 24). David Andrews, in his article, *Welsh Indigenous! and British Imperial?*, discusses rugby's role in Welsh national identity and aspirations within the British imperial context, and argues the Welsh bourgeois 'sought to create a united, harmonious, and liveable present' and so initiated a process which transformed Wales and made rugby Welsh (1991, p. 338). Johnes, writing later on national identity, produces a more nuanced picture saying that rugby helped 'to gloss over internal divisions' and the different meanings people attach to nationality, concluding that rugby offers a place 'even today, where people in Wales can unite if only temporarily' (2007, pp.

93, 109). Although central to their arguments, as neither historian's focus is the nature or universality of rugby's unifying ability this is not fully explored and seems, to a degree, to be assumed. Also both suggest that, as the middle-classes favoured the sport as a vehicle for social control, diffusion of rugby to the lower classes came from above rather than through their own agency.

Ex-rugby playing Cardiff native and historian of rugby and WWI, Gwyn Prescott's more detailed study on rugby's early history, *'this rugby spellbound people' The Birth of Rugby in Cardiff and Wales*, allows him to challenge the ideas presented by Andrews and Johns (Prescott, 2011, back cover). He argues, although control at higher levels remained in middle-class hands, many working men 'were drawn into the sport, first as spectators, then as players', the large number of grassroots clubs springing up suggesting they also arranged their own playing opportunities (Prescott, 2011, p. 225). Barry Rees, in his study *Sport, Class and Identity at Swansea, 1870-1914*, discusses the importance of the town team's rugby successes in shaping 'a distinct and broadly inclusive civic identity' (Rees, 2019, p. 596). He raises the question of working-class agency within the sport but comes to no firm conclusion on this, instead suggesting working-class heroes of the game were simply accorded a higher social status, and crowd behaviour issues were not necessarily confined to a single class, so were tolerated because of rugby's importance to the town's civic status. That Rees asks this question but it goes unanswered, and, according to Prescott, working people did exercise their own agency within the sport at a more local level, suggests that at the higher levels class tensions and divisions may well have existed. This dissertation intends to challenge the premise that Welsh rugby was an arena within which all classes were treated democratically, arguing instead that middle-class hegemony within the sport perhaps

precluded creation of cross-class unity among its devotees, restricting this more to unifying those with differing cultural backgrounds within classes.

Gareth Williams argues the ideology of amateur sport with its emphasis on 'playing for the game's sake and rejection of money prizes did not square easily with the lower classes, 'who 'literally highly prized' physical prowess, and for whom financial reward, gambling, backers and spectators had long been part of their leisure activities (Williams, 1991, p. 140-41). Williams, a self-confessed Welsh rugby fan and historian of Welsh society and culture, has written extensively on rugby and states, due to this clash of ideologies, rifts between middle and working class sporting values 'began to deepen in the 1890s and can be seen as part of a wider working-class hostility to middle-class ideas' (1991, p.141). Martin Johnes concurs, arguing that from the turn of the century increasing industrial unrest, the rise in trade unionism and Labour politics signified a 'gradual fragmentation of the Liberal middle-class vision of Wales', the limitations of that vision being 'also evident in sport' (Johnes, 2005, p.34). Both historians note regular abuse of rugby's amateur rules, but that many working-class players still succumbed to temptations offered by the English professional Northern Union (NU) clubs, and also that Rugby Union's supremacy in Wales was being challenged by another professional sport, association football (Johnes, 2005, pp. 28-29; Williams, 1991, p.165-166). Johnes' study is a broad overview of Welsh sport and Williams', although an in depth discussion of the 'shamateur' nature of Welsh rugby, concludes on social inclusivity and how this made the Welsh game distinct from those of the other unions, so neither addresses the extent of working-class agency within the sport. However, the actions of working-class players and spectators that they describe suggest that, due to middle-class control of the game, working-class people may have looked outside Welsh rugby in order to exercise their own agency. It seems discussion of working-

class influence, or its lack, within the game's organisation has been limited, an issue this study hopes to address.

Victorious teams became a 'popular cause for civic pride' making rugby clubs 'treasured symbols of civic and cultural unity' which the middle-classes liked to feel reflected their own sophistication and contemporary progress (Rees, 2019, p. 608). Chapter one will consider the values underlining civic pride, and the rivalries it generated, asking if these were shared, or if the hegemony the middle-classes enjoyed over the sport allowed them to impose their own values and limit working-class agency within the game. In order to do so, team formation, spectating and the threat that association football posed for Welsh rugby later in the period will be considered. Contemporary newspaper articles, often responsible for honing inter-club rivalries, will be the main source informing this discussion, and chapter two will ask whether these offered their middle-class proprietors and sports commentators another avenue through which to promote their own class' values. This chapter will also question why the sport's middle-class organisers and rule makers were keen to maintain rugby's amateur status in Wales. Salient to this, if any anomalies in the way the rules were applied raised or lowered barriers against participation in the sport for working-class players will be investigated. Along with the aforementioned newspapers, the rules, as laid out in the *Han(sic)book of the Welsh Football Union, 1894-1895*, will help to inform this part of the study. As there appears to be a level of tension between the values each group subscribed to, and one retained control over the sport's strict amateur rules, organisation of the game and its public narrative, early conclusions suggest that any perceived cross-class unity Welsh rugby created during this period was perhaps more a middle-class construct than a reality, transient in nature and not deeply felt.

Chapter one.

As the coal industry boomed during the 1880s and 1890s in South Wales a newer more vibrant society emerged, one in which rugby football became the preferred sport of both the middle and working classes. It seems this offered the middle-class leaders of Welsh society opportunities to impose their own values onto the sport's mass of working-class supporters. Rapid urbanisation in South Wales meant that many towns and villages lacked sources of community identity, and as rugby clubs became seen as a unifying focus the game was 'portrayed as something different and unique; a symbol of the cross class harmony the middle-classes liked to believe characterized this [...] region' (Rees, 2019, p.598). The arguments made by Johnes, Prescott and Williams make clear the pivotal role that inter-club rugby competitions played, the attention they brought to the game attracted thousands of spectators, which in turn meant greater coverage for the towns in the press, and so the clubs became viewed as suitable vehicles with which to encourage civic pride and loyalty. In the words of one newspaper correspondent, referring to an 1881 challenge cup tie, Llanelli's part in the competition meant 'raising her name and her fame among the towns. It tends to bring more trade, a more vigorous public spirit, and a healthier social life' (*South Wales Daily News*, in Smith and Williams, 1980, p.5). Another commentator from Newport attributed that team's success to there being 'no class distinctions', which meant all the town's football talent was then available 'to win reputation for the town' (Johnes, 2005, p.25). Victorious teams were often met by crowds and brass bands that feted them through the streets on their return, attesting to the broad appeal the game enjoyed among

the diverse inhabitants of South Walian towns and villages (Rees, 2019, p.594). Thus a premium was placed on winning, 'success on the field became more important than social exclusivity', and working-men were included to strengthen teams (Rees, 2019, p.603). But, it seems, although rugby was able to provide means through which people could identify with and feel pride in their towns, raising a town's profile was more likely to benefit the commercially minded middle-class and inclusion of the working-classes was to support their interests and ideals.

As rugby's popularity grew, the Welsh middle-classes, determined to distance this new Welsh society from its historic reputation as an uncivilised, immoral and backward nation, had incorporated the sport into their vision of 'a Wales ideally respectable, orderly, clean-living, educated,(and) democratic,' they wished to portray (Williams, 1991, p.73). The game's upper middle-class roots coupled with its amateur ideology, purported to emphasise character building and desirable behaviour, allowed it to be seen, by its middle-class devotees at least, as a civilising, organised and disciplined pastime (Williams, 1991, p.140). Sentiments that were expressed by Swansea MP and patron of the town's rugby, Sir John Llewellyn, in his speech at a civic banquet given to honour the Swansea team in 1900, he congratulated them for bringing the town 'some little recognition by reason of the remarkable season' their 'Good temper, temperance, (and) discipline' being to what 'they owed their victories' (*The Cambrian*, 1900, p.3). But, as Williams argues, if Wales' middle-class social improvers thought that rugby was going to, in their eyes, civilise the 'feckless working-class, whose apparent obsession with gambling, drinking and fighting they abhorred', it was not 'an unqualified success' (Jenkins, 2007, p.210; Williams, 1991, p. 73). The sport often incited violent and disorderly behaviour both among players and the rather partisan crowds, gambling on matches was common and despite claims that the 'tanner'

working men paid to watch a match was not spent on drink, the public house was to where many repaired after a game, especially as these often served as club head-quarters and provided changing-rooms for players. It would seem, that within the cross class support of Welsh rugby, there was a clash of cultures, and despite the efforts of the middle-classes, many of the game's working-class devotees continued to enjoy their sport in the ways that suited their own concerns. Besides bad behaviour was not necessarily confined to one class, as Prescott notes, the early introduction of the S.W.F.C. challenge cup, in 1877, which resulted in the competitiveness and inter-town rivalry that fuelled disputes, disruptions and sometimes 'violence by both players and supporters', predated significant working-class involvement (Prescott, 2011, p.225).

This in turn meant that rugby was not without its detractors, 'the contemporary denominational Welsh language press regularly castigated rugby football as a worthless and dehumanizing activity', members of the Temperance movement were concerned with the game's connections to the demon drink and Nonconformist ministers warned of the moral dangers of the game (Williams, 1991, p.87-88). Members of the general public also voiced their criticisms, the friend of one newspaper contributor declaring 'Football' to be 'a mania ... an epidemic. It leads to gambling, it promotes bad language, [...] drunkenness and debauchery', others cited 'rough horseplay', responsible for 'numerous accidents' some of which maimed for life or were fatal (*Cambrian*, 1890(a), p.3; *Cambrian*, 1890(b), p.7). Clearly there were many in Wales who did not share in the wide spread passion for rugby found among their fellows, and, given the groups involved, it seems opposition to the game was not restricted to one class. But, although a useful line of inquiry, investigation of the sport's naysayers will remain beyond the scope of this dissertation. However many of those voices did quieten once "Gallant Little Wales", whose players the Welsh press imbued with

superior, Celtic, racial qualities, had recovered British honour in 1905 against New Zealand, and became more accepting of rugby's position in Welsh culture (*Evening Express*, 1905, p.2).

The Welsh elite concerned that rapid urbanisation and the massive influx of migrant workers it brought threatened social cohesion, emphasised the sport's 'inherent ability to bring to together mine owners and workers in a communal passion for both local and national sides' (Howe, 2012, p.184). Social control has frequently been raised as a middle-class motivation for encouraging the working-classes into the sport, and it seems some industrialists and elites, hoping to steer their workforces away from less salubrious and political activities, were happy to patronize rugby (Johnes, 2005, p.24). This was often in the form of land to play on, Penarth's ground being provided' by Lord Windsor', or financial help for smaller teams who, like 'the large number of junior teams' that approached Sir John Llewellyn for 'some little help', were unable to generate much income through gate money and struggled to meet their expenses (Johnes, 2005, p.24; Prescott, 2011, p.159; *Cambrian*, 1900, p.3). Numbers of these smaller teams had names that may have meant a connection to a workplace, such as 'Bute Engineers', a Cardiff team, or 'Furnace United' from the Llanelli area, that were possibly founded at the behest of or with the help of industrial employers (Prescott, 2011, p.118; *Llanelly Star*, 1910, p.3). But a name could be misleading and other clubs with names suggesting they were connected to public houses, streets, local areas and churches far outnumbered them. At times up to two hundred such clubs operated in Cardiff alone, and commiserate numbers existed throughout South Wales, making it likely, as Prescott argues and his in depth research of Cardiff clubs during the period shows, that, having been introduced to the game through spectating, ordinary people from working and 'lower status middle class backgrounds' set up and 'administered' these clubs 'not the

well intentioned middle class' (Prescott, 2011, p.229). Unfortunately such clubs left little behind in the way of records, often the only evidence of their existence being match fixture and result lists published in the press, making it impossible to judge whether many were founded purely by working-class people, but the numbers involved strongly suggest that was the case. Prescott, building on Stuart Barlow's work on rugby in Rochdale, agrees with Richard Holt's argument 'that the impact of churches and employers was limited [...] hence there was no effective imposition in the name of social control' (Prescott, 2011, p.143). Introduction of the game originally came from above, but as rugby diffused downwards, at grassroots level where the majority of working people played it seems they developed their own enthusiasm for the game and were able, at that level at least, to exercise some agency within the sport.

The junior clubs supplied the more prominent ones with new talent, which probably created loyalty towards both, but it was at these lower levels where among working people rugby really contributed towards social cohesion. Smaller local clubs 'plausibly provided foci for local identity', as, fulfilling an important bonding function, they provided 'recently arrived citizens with a simple way of quickly identifying with their new community and integrating into its social life' (Williams, 1991, p.74; Prescott, 2011, p.109). These smaller clubs were less likely to raise social barriers against membership, whereas admittance to the higher tier clubs for working-class players probably relied on displaying superior playing ability.

However, the middle-classes, through their control of rugby at the higher levels were able to limit working-class agency even at the level of junior clubs. There was a need to organise the mushrooming numbers of smaller clubs, and the league and cup competitions

these generated, a function the W.F.U. alarmed 'it might become swamped by "junior" clubs' was unwilling to take on (Prescott, 2011, p.147). As rugby became 'increasingly popular and competitive' local organisations, such as the Cardiff and District Football Union, inaugurated in 1892, were founded to administer the game at lower levels and deal with; 'disputes, foul play, crowd control, player transfer, referee appointments and competitive structures' (Prescott, 2011, p.146). But the W.F.U., finding it had 'no jurisdiction over the transfer' of players from 'district unions' into its own clubs, encouraged these local organisations to affiliate as umbrella organisations, and thus in this way subtly extended its control over clubs it would not accept as members in their own right (Prescott, 2011, p.153). This move cemented and extended middle-class control over club and regional level rugby, and as the W.F.U. restricted which clubs could affiliate directly, also ensured the selection of players for national teams, a source of pride for a chosen player's town, remained firmly in their hands. An issue newspaper sports correspondent Old Stager complained about in 1898, he wrote 'few men have been given chief honours until they joined the premier clubs', but 'as the minor organisations have no direct representation injustice is frequently done' (*South Wales Daily News*, 1898, p.6). It seems, if playing for a lesser club, regardless of their talent, a working-class player was likely to be completely overlooked until he came to the attention of one of the larger clubs, ones in which working men were not voted onto committees nor became club delegates to the W.F.U., so they lacked a voice at the higher levels. Meanwhile the middle-class controlled W.F.U. had positioned itself as the final authority over disputes, and was able to mete out discipline to the smaller clubs most working-men played for, thus limiting their agency.

Broadly speaking the underlying motivations that encouraged those higher up the social scale to join or start rugby clubs appear similar to those of the working-classes, they

also sought to create networks of like-minded individuals of a similar social status, thus 'moulding and re-enforcing their respectable lifestyles' (Reid, n.d., in Rees, 2019, p.598). But this was an aspirational class that wished to differentiate themselves from the rest of the urban masses, and, not wanting to be mistaken for their inferiors, had little inclination to increase social contact between themselves and the proletariat. Also many senior clubs, particularly those based in urban centres with larger middle-class populations, such as Swansea, Newport and Cardiff, had better facilities at their grounds, most erecting grandstands which meant physical divisions, enforced through pricing, segregated the classes effectively limiting social mixing and arguably reflecting middle-class desires to avoid mingling with 'the great unwashed' (Rees, 2019, p.602; Old Stager, 1885, in Prescott, 2011, p.205). Although local junior teams, acting as 'nurseries for [...] working-class talent', fed into the major teams, making for greater social diversity on the field, and the thousands of spectators enjoying the same thrilling pursuit probably equally viewed their team's successes as cause for civic pride, it seems unlikely that this increased unity across the classes in a meaningful way (Rees, 2019, p.603).

Rugby was a sport hemmed in by middle-class convention and their determination that it should remain amateur, the latter vitally important as it allowed that class to prove themselves against their peer groups outside Wales thus demonstrating their civility and social progress, something professionalization of the sport would preclude (Williams, 1991, p.79). To maintain the game's high social status, the middle-classes richly endowed it with their own values, as shown in an article published by leading Welsh figure Thomas Jones (1870-1955) in 1914. Written in support of rugby against the perceived threat that Soccer

then posed to its supremacy in Wales, this article claims; 'Rugby is [...] the game of the Welshman' one in which 'the Principality can hold an equal if not superior hand', and due to its lack of 'commercialism' occupied an 'immeasurably higher' moral plane than any professional sport (*Welsh Outlook*, 1914, p.18-19). But whether the working-classes subscribed to these lofty ideals and accepted the values the middle-classes were attempting to impose on them is debateable.

For working-class people rugby offered; an absorbing counterpoint to the drudgery of their working lives, an exciting spectacle, the opportunity to have a bet, a topic of conversation while drinking in the pub, perhaps also an excuse to indulge in fighting, and so they were perhaps less than concerned with whether or not the game induced social cohesion and a respectable, moralistic population. It seems no accident that working-class support for rugby really took off in earnest after the innovative four three-quarter back system was introduced into the Welsh game around 1885-6 (Prescott, 2019, p.106). This new '[Welsh System]' was the successful combination that rivals outside the borders found difficult to beat and produced the free-flowing play that characterised the Welsh game and was enjoyed by so many spectators (Williams, 1991, p.80). In light of which it seems far more likely that it was the appeal of the sport itself that attracted more and more working-class people, even if they did also appreciate its ability to promote Welsh prowess.

The years between 1880- and 1914, despite Wales' buoyant economy and increasing confidence, were riven with strikes, industrial disputes and riots. After the defeat inflicted on communities devastated by 'The Great Lockout' of 1898 the South Wales Miners Federation was formed to promote solidarity among the workforce, Keir Hardie was elected in Wales as the first independent Labour MP in 1900 and the violent Tonypany riots took

place in 1910. Working-class people, becoming more politically aware and dissatisfied with the middle-class Liberal political agenda that did little to address the issues they faced, started to move away from it to pursue their own goals. Which makes it seem unlikely that through sport they would adopt values that otherwise rang hollow in their experience, and this can perhaps be seen in the lack of loyalty towards the national sport some displayed by changing their allegiance to soccer.

By 1900, possibly weighed down with the need to uphold civic pride, the clubs had adopted and assiduously practised the new four three-quarter system, but with its perfecting, rugby at club level was suffering from 'foul and defensive play', which led to less than exhilarating displays on the pitch, and a few years later, scandals involving the covert payment of players caused problems off it (Johnes, 2005, p.36). The following years saw association football, or soccer, start to gain a popular following among the working-class, it offered the more open play Welsh rugby now lacked and the new challenge cup competitions it generated provided the same exciting entertainment and bonding opportunities its sister code had previously. "Rip", a sports correspondent for the *Llanelli Star*, in 1914, followed his complaints about a 'mud-larking' competition masquerading as a rugby match, with the comment 'There is a wave of 'Socceritis' passing over the town Everybody is affected' and have 'a most marked tendency to talk of nothing but of Soccer' (1914, p.3). This sport, whose top flight was that anathema to the middle-classes, professional, and according to Thomas Jones was 'the game of the alien of the valleys', went from a small base in 1906 to an explosion of 262 affiliated clubs in South Wales by 1912 (*Welsh Outlook*, 1914, p.18; Smith and Williams, 1980, p.177). Although Thomas Jones claimed the spread of association must be resisted because it was 'new and alien' the real problem was that professionalised sports were seen as working-class, and to represent their

values (*Welsh Outlook*, 1914, p.18). His article perhaps shows that the Welsh middle-classes still felt a level of insecurity in their position within the wider British context, and so any threat to the sport that allowed them to claim equality with the other three nations had to be resisted. But it seems that threat had been around for some time as “Free Lance”, discussing the waning support for local rugby teams in Aberdare, wrote in 1896 “Socy” is knocking Rugby into a cocked hat at “Sweet ‘Berdare.” The prospects of Association were never brighter at that town than they are to-day’ (*Merthyr Times*, 1896, p.5). It seems Welsh working-class people were happy to support a professional game if it fulfilled their requirements. Not all abandoned rugby, as the enormous crowds still attending major matches shows, but, denied a part in its control, working-class loyalty to the game was not assured, and unable to demonstrate their agency within the sport many took their allegiance elsewhere. A situation that did not go unnoticed by those arbiters of public opinion, press sports commentators, some castigating the W.F.U. and the bigger clubs for ignoring the plight of smaller clubs who were disproportionately effected by soccer’s increasing popularity (*Evening Express*, 1910, p.1).

Chapter Two.

Due to the paucity of club records, even those of the W.F.U. whose earliest surviving minutes date from 1892, contemporary newspapers have played an important part in the piecing together of Welsh rugby’s history (Smith and Williams, 1980, p.489). Originally the press were rather indifferent towards the sport and had not “cottoned on” to football’, until public interest in the game became obvious, but around 1877-8 ‘Pressmen of the old school tumbled to the fact that a game that was attracting the attention of

thousands week after week was worth shedding ink over' (*S.W.D.N.*, 1892, p.6). As both Rees and Prescott note, a network of close relationships existed between rugby clubs, newspaper proprietors, journalists and the wider social elite, many sport's correspondents turned out to be rugby club committee men, ex-players or otherwise involved in the organisation of the game. 'Welsh Athlete' who wrote for the *Western Mail*, was revealed to be H.W. Wells, the first president of the C&DFU, the *South Wales Daily Post's* 'Freelance' was Swansea rugby club's committee member J.T. Gwynne and J. Allen Williams combined his roles as Llanelli club committee man and delegate to the W.F.U., with others as proprietor, editor and rugby correspondent at the Llanelli *Guardian* (Prescott, 2011, p.202; Rees, 2019, p.610). This group along with others such as "Old Stager" and "Muddied Oaf" often filled their columns with 'highly provocative views on W.F.U. conduct, team selection, player performance and the behaviour of clubs, players and spectators', putting many of the middle-class men involved in rugby's organisation in the unique position of being able to shape and influence public opinion in relation to the game (Prescott, 2011, p.202). Andrews argues that rugby 'was made to be Welsh by the interpretive actions of the Welsh populace', but it seems, it was within the pages of the press that much of that interpretation was made, arguably placing middle-class newspapermen as the main drivers behind those actions (Andrews, 1991, p.338).

By the early 1880s the coverage of rugby was extensive, blow by blow match reports sat alongside team lists, the opinionated writings of this new breed of sports correspondent helping to fuel the partisan support behind keen inter-town rivalries, resulting in a steady stream of complaints and disputes among those who 'perceived slights to local honour', even people who were not involved could hardly fail to notice the attention the game received (Prescott, 2011, p.203; Rees, 2019, p.609). Although the press

was initially led by public interest into dedicating column inches to rugby, their pages soon became the principle means through which the population evaluated the sport, presenting the middle-classes with a powerful way to colour public perceptions of the game. The more dangerous, violent and divisive aspects of the sport were often down-played, one commentator claiming, as many did, rugby was responsible for 'drawing young fellows away [...] from all sorts of deleterious indulgence of appetite', teaching 'endurance [...] pluck, it promotes friendly rivalry' and was an 'enthusiasm' giving the population a common interest 'which is certainly not degrading' (*Cambrian*, 1890, p.3). The last point important because it rationalised the link these commentators made between 'contemporary progress', 'Celtic characteristics' and success on the rugby field, allowing the middle-classes to place the sport they liberally infused with their own values at the heart of Welsh culture and thus further their own nationalistic ambitions (Andrews, 1991, p.339). 174

Rees states that 'violence and unruly behaviour were routinely condemned by the press and authorities alike' but when trouble broke out among spectators or players, evidence from the sample of newspaper articles studied here suggests that rugby commentators tended to cast the working class element as the aggressors (Rees, 2019, p.609). 'Welsh Athlete' traced the abuse of an unfortunate referee to 'the ruffianly section' who 'taking a cowardly advantage of their number, attempted to brutally illuse' him, language he was unlikely to apply to middle-class individuals (*Western Mail*, 1895, p.6). "Argus", writing about on pitch violence claimed; 'The great county and other first-class teams are, of course, free from such vices – or nearly so', he blamed 'second-rate players who hope to develop into professionals [...] The "win, tie or wrangle" element', for 'the frequent casualties [...] reported in the provincial papers', claiming these incidents to be 'the products of either callous brutality or of deliberate design' (*Cambrian(c)*, 1890, p.7). It

seems newspapers that appealed to a middle-class readership, such as the widely circulated and politically Conservative or Liberal leaning publications the *S.W.D.N*, *Cambrian* and *Western Mail*, were the ones more likely to attempt to distance their own class from any rugby generated anti-social behaviour and to blame unpleasant incidents on rowdy 'unsophisticated mob(s)' of the lower classes (*Western Mail*, 1881, p.4). But, slightly hypocritically the middle-classes also portrayed rugby crowds as 'very good-tempered, as football crowds usually are', when it suited their political aims and the occasion, in this case Wales' victory over New Zealand in 1905, although this commentator's mention of a heavy police presence keeping 'conduct resembling rowdyism [...] severely repressed' rather undermines his original statement (*Evening Express*, 1905, p.2). Additionally, some employed stereotypes like 'big Rhondda types' or 'backward Rhondda mountaineers' to illustrate a 'perceived cultural division between urban coastal towns and their inland Valley hinterlands' and to express the lack of civility they felt characterised Valley towns (*Western Mail*, 1900, in Rees, 2019, p.614-15). Through their editorials, it seems, newspaper correspondents had ample opportunity to sway the views of a wide audience, forward the middle-class values they deemed superior and use the court of public opinion to encourage working-class rugby devotees to behave with decorum.

However, the more provincial papers, especially those catering for the working-classes, although equally partisan and likely to cast aspersions on the behaviour of their local team's opponents and supporters, were, it seems, less likely to use divisive language. A correspondent reporting on a match between Pontypridd and Treforest, blamed a 'noisy altercation' and pitch invasion on the visiting 'Treforest spectators' who he hoped would in the future 'conduct themselves properly, even when away from home' but does not differentiate between classes (*Pontypridd Chronicle and Workman's News*, 1889, p.5). It was

within the pages of provincial and more Labour leaning publications, for example the *Rhondda Leader*, that greater attention was paid to covering the smaller local clubs and reporting of association football started to rival coverage of rugby. All newspapers were businesses, the main stimulus behind their decision to report on rugby so extensively being the increased sales this brought, and, although owned and staffed by middle-class individuals, still needed to tailor the content of their sport's pages to suit their respective customers' loyalties and values.

Analysis of numerous articles from a range of different contemporary newspapers, serving various Welsh locations and classes, appear to make clear that violence on the pitch and undesirable behaviour off it was not restricted to any one class, location or level of rugby played. But publications likely to have a larger middle-class readership, particularly those that circulated outside the borders of Wales as well as within, often wished to distance that class from the not infrequent objectionable incidents that marred the Welsh game, or if they could not, to blame these on excessive keenness and a desire to uphold local honour. Papers that circulated more locally, and perhaps had a predominately working-class base, appear to have been more even handed in their reporting, and on occasions even to push back at the double standards displayed in middle-class publications, as the correspondent sickened by the 'hypocritical friendliness assumed by opposing teams' appeared to do (*Rhondda Leader*, 1899, p.4). But it cannot be doubted that the direct connections so many sports correspondents and newspaper proprietors had with Welsh rugby's organisation, and premier clubs, put these middle-class men in a privileged position allowing them to shape public perceptions of the sport and promote their own values through it.

One issue that filled many newspaper articles, generating comment and consternation in Welsh middle-class rugby circles, was the danger of allowing professionalism to creep into their supposedly amateur sport. For the middle-classes rugby's amateur status was all important because it was that which connected it to the British upper classes, and the aura of sophisticated, morally superior respectability that implied. To allow rugby to become professionalised risked the sport being dominated by the working-class, which would preclude middle-class support and so could not be countenanced, but Welsh rugby was not quite as amateur as many of them liked to believe. Often alongside florid press reports of rugby matches lay articles describing extreme poverty and the frequent strikes that beset the region, and it seems the 'shamateur' nature of Welsh rugby concealed a class based conflict of interests (Williams, 1991, p.159). The rules were comprehensive and, to stave off rumours of abuses, Wales had agreed to a common set with England in 1900, after which they became increasingly draconian, designed to deny any sort of monetary or other material benefit to players under any conceivable circumstance (Williams, 1991, p.154). The English Rugby Football Union (R.F.U.) tightened restrictions out of a snobbish desire to completely remove working-class influence within their sport (Collins, 2006, online). Their obdurate refusal to sanction 'broken-time payment, i.e. compensating working men for the wages lost through travelling and playing', resulted in 'the Great Schism' of 1895 when the socially inclusive northern clubs broke away from the R.F.U. and formed the N.U. to allow their working-class players to be compensated (Williams, 1991, 143-4). But, despite having a similar social mix in their rugby, the Welsh middle-classes were unwilling to follow the example set by the N.U., because to allow open payment of working-class players would result in ostracism from the 'international amateur

game' thus jeopardising rugby's symbolic role as the unifying national sport, so it was imperative that this be resisted (Williams, 1991, p.170).

The W.F.U.'s refusal to allow 'broken-time payment' did raise barriers to participation for those of meagre means, and many Welsh players were enticed away by financial incentives offered by N.U. scouts, much to the annoyance of the Welsh clubs losing good players (Williams, 1991, p.151). Percy Bush, the famous Welsh half-back, described the situation of one working man 'in our pack' with a wife and family who 'never gets a penny out of the game.' and said 'You cannot blame a man like that if he chooses to go up North' (*Evening Express*, 1907, p.4). He was speaking at a time when the sliding-scale tied wages to fluctuating market forces, a miners average weekly earnings in England and Wales being approximately one pound and eleven shillings, with unskilled workers getting less, and slumps in demand for coal meant continuous employment was not assured (Williamson, 1982, online). A young single man may have been able to prioritise his rugby and stay in Wales, but for a family man an offer of steady employment and a good wage coupled with the opportunity to continue playing must have been hard to ignore.

However, the situation in Wales was different from that in England, the competitiveness that had popularised Welsh rugby and nurtured civic pride and identity, had placed a premium on winning and in order to be competitive the small pool of available middle-class players required the addition of fit, tough working-class men. This suggests that the latter group may have enjoyed a level of agency within the sport, and the rumours and suspicions of 'veiled professionalism' thought, particularly by members of the other three British unions, to be 'rampant in South Wales' appear to support that (*Evening Express*, 1903, p.4). Not without reason, the competitiveness, that brought huge numbers of income

generating spectators, provided Welsh clubs wishing to strengthen their team with both the means and incentive to offer covert payments, usually in the form of the 'reasonable expenses' ambiguously allowed in the rules. It was this emphasis on winning, 'most at odds with the amateur ethos of merely playing for its' own sake', that created a climate, within the clubs at least, in which working-class players could find financial reward for their playing, but even then such arrangements remained under middle-class control (Williams, 1991, p.142).

Of course, if underhand payment was suspected, it induced scandalised comments in the press, one correspondent asking 'Is this sport? Most certainly it is not', in his opinion to allow 'a man to play for money' prevented 'another playing for love of the game' which for the middle-classes raised the spectre of a game dominated by the working-class (*Evening Express*, 1900, P.3). The W.F.U. tried to 'check abuses', clubs and players were suspended for infringements and permission for transfers from one to club to another was refused if the distances involved raised suspicions that money must be changing hands (Williams, 1991, p.154, 158). That so many middle-class individuals were violently opposed to allowing broken-time payment, and were suspicious of excessive expenses, suggests that these arrangements probably involved fairly limited amounts and, despite rumours to the contrary, working-class players could find better prospects elsewhere. The steady stream of Welsh players, including some household names like the James brothers who played for Swansea and were capped for Wales, going to play for the professional N.U. clubs seems to bear this out (Williams, 1991, p.153).

Williams argues that the W.F.U. believed allowing 'an element of tacit professionalism' within the Welsh game would keep in check working-class demands for

broken-time payment, and that the N.U. clubs would act as a safety valve allowing those wishing to be paid to go north, and thus prevent full professionalization of their sport (1991, p.159). However, not all agreed, one press commentator in 1896, a year after the N.U. was formed, predicted that N.U. style rugby 'must surely come' and feeling that players were 'meanly treated' by the W.F.U. asks 'Why should we not force something out of this niggardly committee?', he believed as 'the stupidly-blind rules [...] of amateurism' were already being evaded, legalisation of broken-time payments was the only way to 'combat the North' and professionalism (*Evening Express*, 1896, p.1). It took eleven years for his prediction to materialise, but in 1907, when E.H. Rees, ex secretary of Aberdare Rugby club, 'made a direct charge of professionalism against the majority of clubs in Wales' claims he was 'prepared [...] to prove [...] by documentary evidence' and which were corroborated by Merthyr players who wanted to professionalise their club openly, the worst fears of the W.F.U. were realised (*Cambrian*, 1907, p.2). Forced to take action, the W.F.U. dragged out their investigation allowing time for 'discrepancies' in financial accounts to be hidden and, although the committees of Aberdare and Treorky were suspended on a charge of match fixing and several players were banned for life, the matter was largely glossed over (Williams, 1991, p.165). But the result of Rees' revelations was that, by 1908, 'six professional sides' were formed in Wales, at 'Ebbw Vale, Merthyr, Aberdare, Treherbert, Mid-Rhondda and Barry', notably all in predominately working-class areas and because those involved had become disenchanted with not being able to operate honestly (Williams, 1991, p.166). It seems the matter not only attracted public debate but that it was sympathetic towards working-class players, Percy Bush, who was not himself working class, told his 1907 interviewer 'I agree with the 'Man on the Street' [...] the player who cannot well afford it, should be able to obtain payment for broken-time' (*Evening Express*, 1907,

p.4). Perhaps it is not surprising that these developments occurred at this time, as Williams notes, such actions were probably symptomatic of the rising political tensions and strikes of that era, and were simply another issue that denoted working-class desire for more agency over their lives. But, it seems, unable to combat middle-class control over the sport to any appreciable degree, working-class people had to look outside rugby in order to exercise their own agency, because their interests clashed with those administering the game.

Conclusion.

Rugby football in Wales was unique and distinct from the game in the other three British unions, because unlike theirs it was socially inclusive on the field and enjoyed mass popular support across the social spectrum. At a time when the principality lacked for other markers of nationhood, the game became an icon within which the Welsh people could unite at national level and provided the diverse population with a shared sense of identity. But underlying that were the values the middle-classes had subscribed to it, and the control they exerted over the administration and rules of the game, which meant the game's ability to create cross class unity was more limited. Social control seems not to have been imposed through the game, but, although working-class players could enjoy some agency within the smaller clubs, the W.F.U kept a firm hold of control at the higher levels of the game and managed to extend that to the smaller clubs as well.

The influence the middle-classes had over the public narrative of the sport through the newspapers, and the close alliance that existed between the press and the administrators of the premier clubs and the W.F.U, meant it was their class who shaped public opinion of the game and those who took part. Middle-class insistence that rugby

remain amateur in Wales, also exposed class divides, and their control over the direction the sport took meant working-class people, in order to exercise their agency, had to look outside the game. It could be argued that the covert payments that were apparently rife within Welsh rugby were a sign that accommodation was made for working-class needs, but as this was also dependent on serving the ambitions of the middle-classes perhaps that was not necessarily so. In conclusion, it seems, despite the claim made by Thomas Jones in 1914 that Welsh rugby was 'A game democratic and amateur' it was not truly amateur nor democratic, and its ability to unite was limited to bringing together those from differing cultural backgrounds within the same class, rather than creating unity across the classes (*Welsh Outlook*, 1914, p.18-19).

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