

SEVEN

## Forging a National Identity Through Sport

*An identity is to be found in the embodied habits of social life.<sup>1</sup>*

About 10,000 people crammed into the Caledonian Ground in Dunedin on the first day of 1889 not just for the Caledonian Society's annual sports, but also to welcome home one of their own. As a precocious thirteen-year-old, slight of build but strong of will, Joe Scott had competed in a two-mile walking race at the same sports and was disqualified for breaking into a run (or so the judges said – race walking has always been a contentious event). But Scott's courage and readiness to compete against grown men twice his size gained him the support of the crowd, as well as of Dunedin's most distinguished visitor at the time, the Governor, Sir James Fergusson.<sup>2</sup> According to a report many years later, Queen Victoria's man in New Zealand patted young Joe on the head and said: 'Bravo little man, well walked indeed; some day you will be champion of the world.'<sup>3</sup>

On the equivalent day of the equivalent sports fourteen years later, Joe Scott entered the arena clad in his competition uniform of tights and singlet and wearing the silver champion's belt he had been awarded in London the previous May for the prodigious feat of walking 363 miles and six laps in the Agricultural Hall in London

over a period of six days.<sup>4</sup> The feat earned him the title of world champion, the first such crown to be won by a New Zealander.<sup>5</sup> The president of the Caledonian Society, James Barron, greeted Scott and made an impromptu speech, telling the crowd that Scott by his unparalleled deeds ‘had done honour not only to himself, but also to the colony at large’. Scott was led around the running track on a spontaneous lap of honour by the Ordnance Band – a mixture of pipes and brass, it appears – playing Handel’s ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes’.

This was not just a local event and an exhibition of parochialism. Scott’s career was widely and extensively covered by newspapers as he developed as a race walker and competed against the best New Zealand had to offer, then Australia and then Britain. In the words of the *Lyttelton Times*: ‘Joe Scott returns to New Zealand full of honours. His tour has, from first to last, been a great success . . .’<sup>6</sup> For 20 years from the late 1870s, Scott was the celebrated New Zealand athlete of his day. He was a professional pedestrian in an era of increasing amateurism and when the fad for race-walking long distances was on the wane; such factors should not detract from his standing in sport, however. A twentieth-century sports broadcaster and writer, Wallie Ingram, once asked a veteran athletics official and a former competitor, Dorrie Leslie, who was the greatest track athlete he had seen in New Zealand. ‘Without hesitation, he informed me that the palm should go to Joe Scott’, Ingram wrote.<sup>7</sup> This was in 1935 when Jack Lovelock was certainly known but his greatest achievement was still to come; Leslie’s compass would have included some early champions such as sprinter Jack Hempton, hurdlers George Smith and Arthur Holder, and sprinter Arthur Porritt, who was the only New Zealander to win a sprint medal at an Olympic Games.<sup>8</sup>

The tale of Joe Scott demonstrates how avidly New Zealanders followed the deeds of their compatriots on the sporting field, taking both pleasure and a vicarious pride in their achievements. Scott was the first in a long line of athletes of varying descriptions who

scaled the heights they set themselves and helped establish sport as a central part of New Zealand culture, a part of who and what we are. The role of sport in shaping national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been frequently debated by historians and writers.<sup>9</sup> Sport, as with other facets of life, was layered: there was the suburban bonding as manifested in club competitions; provincial loyalty through national sport; and national identity through the following of the endeavours of New Zealanders testing their skills against competitors from other countries. Sport in New Zealand, as elsewhere, became the vehicle for what Michael Billig called ‘banal nationalism’<sup>10</sup> – routine signs through which the sense of nation is daily communicated, as Jeffrey Hill put it.<sup>11</sup>

The role of sport in shaping national identity gains an added significance because it was driven by its participants and followers rather than imposed by a ruling clique; it is ‘bottom up’ history rather than ‘top down’. Governments, in New Zealand and elsewhere, could and did capitalise on the growth and popularity of sport for their own purposes, but in New Zealand, at least, politicians followed sport rather than led it.<sup>12</sup> As Scott Crawford observed: ‘For New Zealanders, the image of themselves as belonging to a country devoted to sport has been an important foundation for the development of national identity.’<sup>13</sup> Allied to that personal attachment to sport was the gradual adoption of symbols and colours which became significant markers of identity – the silver fern of New Zealand or the wattle of Australia.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, such has been its significance in New Zealand that the country should be, according to James Belich, a world capital of the historical study of sport.<sup>15</sup> It is not and could never claim to be: New Zealand is more a small village than a world capital when it comes to the historiography of its own sport,<sup>16</sup> as Charlotte Macdonald recognised: ‘For all the observations that New Zealand has been a “sports-mad society”, very little attention has been paid to the subject in existing general histories.’<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding a number of recent efforts,<sup>18</sup> the scholarly examination of New Zealand sport

history remains lean: there is no academic history of sport as a whole – although one is in preparation – and no general history of the sport that is most often credited with contributing to New Zealand identity, rugby union (the development and evolution of which into the New Zealand ‘national game’ and as a prime marker of identity is examined in the following chapter).<sup>19</sup> If New Zealand is indeed ‘sports-mad’, as Macdonald asserts, the affliction is not one shared by her academic colleagues, at least in terms of published output.<sup>20</sup>

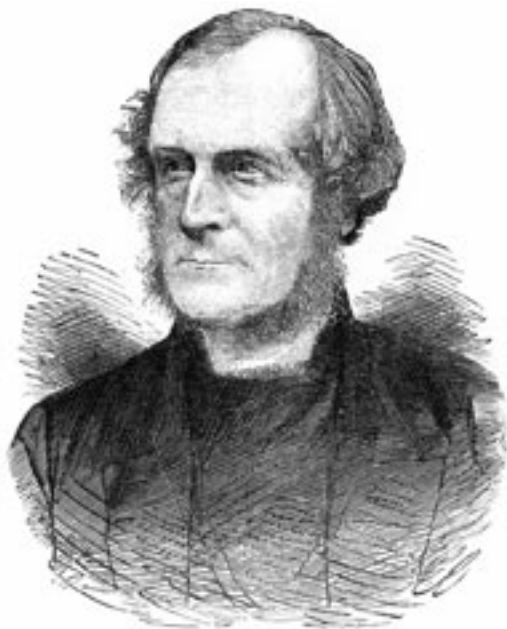
### *The beginnings of a ‘games revolution’*

Sport was recognised early as a marker of national identity; indeed, it preceded the so-called ‘games revolution’ that was partly caused by the industrial revolution in Europe, and especially Britain, in the mid-nineteenth century. One of the earliest British sports historians, Peter McIntosh, pointed out that the Swiss-born French philosopher of the eighteenth century Jean Jacques Rousseau proposed that ‘sport could and should be used for political and nationalistic ends’.<sup>21</sup> Giving advice to a reconstituted Polish government in 1773, Rousseau talked of the value of education in inculcating patriotism but added that sport had a special role to play in the production of patriots: games were to make children’s ‘hearts glow and create a deep love for the fatherland and its laws’.<sup>22</sup> Although the advice was tendered to Poland it was, according to McIntosh, taken and acted upon in Sweden, Denmark, Germany and the United States. The philosophy crossed the Channel into Britain in the nineteenth century where sport came to ‘promote solidarity and patriotism’.<sup>23</sup> Sport itself, in its multiple rudimentary folk guises, had in fact made the crossing earlier.<sup>24</sup> However, few modern sports had been developed or formalised before the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth, most had, and even modern sports such as triathlon or

BMX can trace their origins not to California but to nineteenth-century Britain.

Traditionally, sports had been the preserve of the British (usually English) aristocracy: horse racing, hunting, cricket, yachting, real or royal tennis, fist-fighting and fencing. Factors such as increased leisure time for the majority of the population, urbanisation and the railways brought about the ‘games revolution’. The playing of games ceased to be the preserve of the upper class and came to be associated with the middle class, especially at the public schools and the two great universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Football (before there was a distinction between its various forms) moved from the villages, where it had been a game of few rules and much violence, onto the more controlled, and controllable, spaces of village greens and purpose-built grounds at the schools and universities. Adherents set about establishing rules for their games. In the case of football, rules were associated with particular schools or universities – hence, rugby union stemmed from the rules at Rugby School and association football (or soccer) came from ‘Cambridge rules football’. In effect, as McIntosh also noted, the pupils and students took the games of the masses, redefined and codified them, then gave them back again.<sup>26</sup> They also gave them to Britain’s sprawling empire.

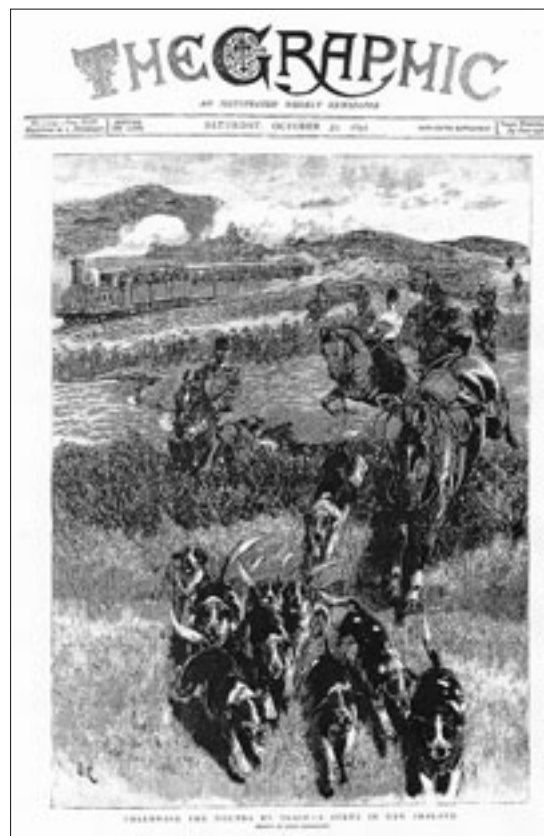
The received wisdom is that as games were developed and codified in Britain, especially at the public schools in southern England, they were infused with a wider Victorian ideology that included an assumption of moral and ethnic superiority and the notion of muscular Christianity which was expressed as *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body).<sup>27</sup> The newly regimented games were then distributed through the British Empire, along with language, parliamentary democracy and literature, by enthusiastic proselytisers, especially missionaries, soldiers and well-educated members of the upper middle class, all intent on establishing their forever England in some corner of a foreign field.<sup>28</sup> As Sir Charles Tennyson remarked: ‘One achievement of Victorian England has,



George Selwyn, an example of muscular Christianity in New Zealand. From an original published in the *Derbyshire Times*, May 1878

I think, not been adequately appreciated. She was the world's games-master.<sup>29</sup>

But the English manner of sport was not transferred *in toto* to its far-flung possessions, much less to those countries which it did not possess. Crawford noted: 'The characteristics of recreation and sport undergo considerable changes in situations which are inevitably different from those in which they were initially developed.'<sup>30</sup> Cricket, for example, one of the earliest of sports to develop on an organised basis in England, did not become a significant sport in North America; soccer as an evolved form of football did not take hold in the Empire's most populous country, India.<sup>31</sup> Fox hunting, a preserve of the upper middle class in England, found little popularity in many areas of the Empire if only because of a lack of foxes, although it did gain fleeting renown on one occasion in the Wellington area when, in lieu of a fox, a sheepskin soaked in kerosene was dragged over the course. Men and women followed the



Following the hounds. An English view of an English sport in New Zealand – when a train was part of the hunt. *The Graphic*, 31 October 1891, p. 1

hounds in the traditional manner on horseback, but some watched the action from horse-drawn carriages and a few even from railway carriages.<sup>32</sup>

While cricket was played early in New Zealand in European terms and horse racing was a popular form of recreation with the earliest settlers, at least until 1860 in towns and for longer in rural areas, 'the Protestant work ethic moulded the prevailing lifestyle'.<sup>33</sup> It was clear the imperial sporting template did not fit all of Britain's colonies. By the 1860s in New Zealand, missionaries were less active than they had been and the presence of British soldiers did not last beyond 1870 and, in any case, they had been confined to the