

They gained a following; they already had the name

Being a Welshman and a journalist, John Buttery would surely have had a fine sense of humour, the gift of eloquence and a good deal of cynicism. Had he lived, Buttery would have chortled at the various stories that grew up about his being responsible for the New Zealand rugby team being known as the All Blacks.

But Buttery died not long after the 1905–06 tour, on 23 August 1906, at the age of 39, from complications after an appendix operation (the same cause of Bob Deans's death two years later).¹ Buttery figures large in tour stories, and is sometimes given the credit for coining the name 'All Blacks', because he worked for the *Daily Mail* and it was at the forefront of the 'popular' newspapers which cashed in on the tour.

Buttery was born in Usk in Monmouthshire, about 15 kilometres north of Newport and far enough from the English border to be definitively Welsh, in late 1866 or early 1867. But he did not long remain in Wales, showing up on Census returns in Buckinghamshire in 1871 and Derbyshire in 1881. He joined the Institute of Journalists in 1889, but his first identifiable newspaper jobs were with the *Evening Star* in Sheffield in 1893 and then he moved to the Sheffield morning paper, the *Telegraph*, in 1896. He went to South Africa before the Boer War and worked for a newspaper financially supported by the Transvaal government, *Standard and Diggers' News* in Johannesburg. When the war began in late 1899, he branched out and wrote for papers in Britain as well as writing a book, *Why Kruger Made War*.² He was back in London the following year, 1900, when he

found lodgings in the Strand – just along the road from the New Zealand Government office – and gained the job as rugby and cricket writer for the *Daily Mail*. The *Mail* had been started four years before and by then was well on its way to sales of a million copies a day, making it for a time the biggest-selling paper in the world. Its market was unashamedly – and successfully – the newly literate lower middle class.

Buttery did not see the All Blacks' opening matches against Devon on 16 September or Cornwall five days later; the *Daily Mail* report of the Devon match was written by Leonard Tosswill, a doctor who had played for England.³ Dennis Lawry, the county secretary, filed a report of the Cornwall match.⁴ Buttery soon joined the tour, however, and wherever the All Blacks went, he was sure to follow. He and the *Daily Mail* became so identified with coverage of the tour – even though other newspapers also covered it extensively – it was probably inevitable that exaggerated stories of his influence arose. Buttery knew little of that, though. His last reporting assignment seems to have been the Olympic Games in Athens in May 1906 – known as the Intercalated Games as they were outside of the four-year sequence but gained official recognition because they marked the tenth anniversary of the first of the modern games in Athens. His verdict: '... for nearly a fortnight we have had a daily jumble of chaotic mismanagement which would have been amusing had it not been so irritating'. Buttery wrote that he did not expect to go to another Olympic Games.⁵ He didn't; he died two months after going home.



Billy Wallace reminisces about the 1905–06 tour in 1958 when he was 79. EP-1958-2523, *EVENING POST* COLLECTION, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY

His mark had been made on rugby. It was through Buttery, though not necessarily his idea, that Bob Deans sent his telegram to the *Mail* on the day after the Welsh match, proclaiming that he had scored. The telegram was reproduced not in the paper itself, but in the paper's booklet about the tour that was edited by Buttery and published soon after the tour (and was available for sale in New Zealand before the players arrived home).⁶

Buttery has been the main person singled out as the inventor of the name 'All Blacks'. The myth says he called the team 'all backs' because of the way they played and a printer inserted an 'l'. The story has been so persistently repeated it has survived the publication of contrary evidence.

The naming of the All Blacks has become one of rugby's two great myths (the other being the flawed tale about William Webb Ellis).

Whatever happened or did not happen in 1905, the team was known as the All Blacks when it arrived in Britain. There is no other way to explain this sentence in the report in the *Exeter Express and Echo* the morning after the opening match: 'The All Blacks, as they are styled by reason of their sable and unrelieved costume, were under the guidance of their captain . . .'⁷ Clearly, the phrase could not have been the invention of Buttery (who was not in Exeter anyway) or anyone else in Britain. Teams in the nineteenth century were frequently popularly known by their colours – 'the Blues', 'the Blacks', 'the Blue and Whites' – and 'All Blacks' was a natural step. The first known published reference to All Blacks was in relation to the Natives who in mid-1889 were on the last leg of their 119-match odyssey. The weekly Sydney sports paper, the *Referee*, had this to say the morning after the Natives beat New South Wales (*italics added*): 'When I say that NSW led by 9 points to love up to the first few minutes of the second spell, it can be imagined how *the all blacks* played up during the last term to turn the tables as they did.'⁸

Two months later, the name was applied to the Wellington provincial team which used to have a uniform of black jersey and black shorts (or knickerbockers). Before a match against Auckland in 1889, a reporter wrote: 'I think the all blacks should be pleased if they can obtain a draw against the blue and whites [Auckland].'⁹ Four years later, when the first official New Zealand team was in Australia, an Auckland journalist wrote of a pending match against New South Wales: 'I expect to see the all blacks come out on top with a substantial majority.'¹⁰ There were other references to the national team as the All Blacks before 1905.

The name, perhaps because of its novelty and because it was redolent of ethnicity, became popular with the British press and so the tour

gave it a much wider currency. Billy Wallace, the longest-lived of the 1905 players, believed the name came from the *Daily Mail*. He recorded in memoirs published in 1932 that when the players arrived in Taunton in Somerset, they saw posters exhorting people to 'see the wonderful All Blacks play'. Wallace wrote: 'The name 'All Blacks' had now stuck to us. It is the name with which we were christened by the *Daily Mail* and it caught on with the general public, though quite a number were misled into thinking we were a team of black fellows.'¹¹ In 1955, Wallace mentioned at a reunion of the 1905 team that the *Daily Mail* referred to the team as 'all backs' after the match against Hartlepool because the forwards could run and pass as effectively as the backs. 'You coves don't know,' Wallace said. 'I was on the committee and know about it. We played Hartlepool and we beat them 63–0 and the *Daily Mail* . . . wrote the New Zealand team were all backs. So we were. All our forwards could pass as good as any backs and it was headed up, "The New Zealand All Blacks".' Wallace's memory was that a subeditor or printer must have inserted a rogue 'l' and the name was born.

A nice story maybe, but not one supported by the facts. When Wallace recounted this at the 1955 reunion, one of his teammates, Alex McDonald (who was sitting alongside Wallace), interjected: 'An 'L' of a difference.' Laughter filled the room at the Midland Hotel in Wellington.¹²

The *Northern Daily Mail*, the edition printed in Manchester to get an early exposure to the northern market, mentioned the name All Blacks – for the first time – after the Hartlepool match, but not in the context Wallace recalled. The match report went fourteen paragraphs

before it said: 'A glance at the undermentioned weights of the invincible "all blacks" will convey some idea of the calibre of the team.'¹³ The main paper, printed in London, said of the 63–0 win: 'This is a record in the tour, which is yet barely a month old, exceeding as it does by eight points the 55 points the "All Blacks", as the Colonials are dubbed, piled up against Devon.'¹⁴ There was no mention in either edition of forwards running and passing like backs. The *Daily Mail*'s first usage of the name came about a month after it had first appeared in the Devon paper.

Buttery was unwittingly involved in yet another story about the naming. One of the players, Ernie Booth, was later a journalist and he recalled in 1927 that he and Buttery chatted during a training session at Ealing in London.¹⁵ The captain, Dave Gallaher, and George Gillett both wore black belts and had elastic kneelets and anklets that had been dyed black. Buttery was said to have asked why. 'Oh,' Booth's reply was recounted, 'just to be all black.' According to Booth, Buttery said the name was a great idea and 'he boomed the name every day in the *Daily Mail* and other papers followed'.

In a cine film of the 1953–54 New Zealand tour of Britain, the narration begins with an unidentified voice saying the name has always been something to conjure with in Britain. 'The original Maori team paid a visit in 1905; calling themselves the All Blacks, they went again in 1924.' So much for pictures not telling fibs.

Just to show that myths are easier to find than evidence, the *Daily Mail* carried an online story during the World Cup in New Zealand in 2011 repeating the assertion about 'all backs' and pesky printers.