

The Battle of the Colours: Irish Catholic Identity, St Joseph's Nudgee College, and Rugby 1891-1914

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Abstract

In the years either side of Federation in 1901, Australia's Irish Catholics balanced two often contradictory impulses: their determination to retain their cultural and religious links with Ireland in the face of an often unsympathetic Protestant majority, and the desire to become 'good' Australians in order to make 'a go' of their lives in the new land. This paper explores how this process played out at St Joseph's Nudgee College, a Christian Brothers' day and boarding school in Brisbane, the capital of the Australian state of Queensland, and how sport played a central role in satisfying both imperatives. This discussion will be framed by the intersection of the social/political/economic context of Queensland during the period 1891-1914. It will focus on the educational context in which the Irish Christian Brothers operated as they struggled to make the College a bastion of Irish Catholicism and a vehicle for the socio-economic advancement of their community.

Keywords

Australia, Catholic education, Christian Brothers, education, Irish Catholics, Queensland, rugby, sport, St Joseph's Nudgee College

Introduction

In 1991, St Joseph's Nudgee College¹, a Christian Brothers' day and boarding school in Brisbane, Australia, published a scholarly history of its first hundred years written by Father Tom Boland, a respected Church historian. In spite of Boland's credentials as an historian, it is unlikely that it was the most influential College publication of the year. That honour probably belongs to the commemorative rugby programme produced for the annual match between Nudgee and its brother school, St Joseph's Gregory Terrace. Although it has some pretensions to being a work of history, it is in fact deeply ahistorical. In particular, it perpetuates a number of myths, the most enduring of which is the 'Battle of the Colours':

Before Nudgee existed, Terrace colours were those currently worn by Nudgee today - Blue and White. A popular story, especially at Nudgee, is that when Nudgee began and had to choose its colours, there was great debate as to whether the original school, Terrace, or its extension school, Nudgee, should have the Blue and White. No amount of debate could solve the dispute so it was decided to rest the colour dispute on the first ever Nudgee-Terrace footy match. Nudgee won and then Terrace chose colours diametrically opposed to those of Nudgee.

(Nudgee College Centenary Rugby Program 1991, 1)

Far from being defensive about the questionable authenticity of the story, the author of the programme actually chose to revel in it, seeing in it a truth that did not need to be *literally* true. He was not even dissuaded by the fact that the first ever game between the two colleges was in 1918 and Terrace changed its colours to cardinal red and black in 1924. At Nudgee, though, the story is widely accepted as fact, and indeed, some new students arrive at the College already familiar with it. In contrast, the Terrace community just ignore it, acknowledging only that they changed their colours to avoid confusion.

There is no evidence whatsoever that such a match was played; indeed, it is inconceivable that such a decision would be allowed to rest on the outcome of a game of rugby, particularly given that it would have been played during a period of Nudgee sporting dominance. Yet it does offer a rich insight into the pre-occupations of Queensland's Irish Catholic community during Nudgee's formative years either side of Federation in 1901.

¹ Although the college's full title is St Joseph's Nudgee College, it is almost universally referred to simply as Nudgee. The authors will use Nudgee from this point onward. St Joseph's Gregory Terrace, the college's brother school, is usually referred to as Gregory Terrace or Terrace.

During this period, they balanced two often contradictory impulses: their determination to retain their cultural and religious links with Ireland in the face of an often unsympathetic Protestant majority, and the desire to become ‘good’ Australians in order to make ‘a go’ of their lives in the new land. This paper explores how this process played out at Nudgee and how sport and rugby in particular played a central role in satisfying both imperatives. This discussion will be framed by the intersection of the social/political/economic context of Queensland during the period 1891-1914 and the educational context in which the Irish Christian Brothers operated as they worked to make the College both a bastion of Irish Catholicism and a vehicle for the socio-economic advancement of their community.

Background and Methodology

The lead author was employed at Nudgee for thirteen years, first as a classroom teacher and then as the Head of Information Services and the inaugural curator of the College Museum. During this time he was commissioned by the College to write *Of great & good men: a history of St Joseph's Nudgee College 1st XV and 1st XIII* (2010) and *Nudgee a life: a history of St Joseph's Nudgee College. St Joseph's Nudgee College, Brisbane, Australia* (2014) a history of the College. In the course of his early research in the College archives, he found numerous instances in Nudgee’s early history where rugby was regularly the vehicle for an often belligerent expression of Irish Catholic identity. This was particularly evident in the rugby reports that appeared in the Annuals from 1896 onward and in other official sources such as a commemorative book, *The Golden Jubilee Annual*, published on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the College in 1941. Outside the match reports, the Annuals explored a surprisingly diverse range of topics, including speeches delivered by visiting dignitaries, speech night addresses by the headmasters or prominent members of the clergy, commentaries on local political developments, and news from Ireland. When viewed in tandem with the other Annual contributions, the rugby reports certainly did not appear any less belligerent, but they more readily took their place within the broader efforts of the College to engage, though not assimilate, with the Protestant majority while retaining its Irish Catholic identity.

The determined pursuit of rugby premierships is therefore best understood as the interplay between the actions of individuals and the nature of the society in which they operated. The authors have adopted an historical sociology approach using archival material such as College Annuals from 1896 – 1914, photographs, and match reports, and previous

College histories. Philip Abrams (1983, xiv) characterised this approach as ‘finding a way of accounting for human experience which recognises simultaneously and in equal measure that history and society are made by . . . more or less purposeful human action and that individual action, however purposeful, is made by history and society’. In Abrams words, the teachers and students at Nudgee made their own history but under definite circumstances and conditions. By exploring the interplay between individual choices, which in this case led to the near veneration of rugby at the College, and the structural contexts in which those choices were made, helps to ‘make sense of the unfolding of unintended as well as intended outcomes in individual lives and social transformations’ (Skocpol 1984, 1). This interplay, as Popkewitz (2013) argues, connects individuality, in this case the agency exerted by the Christian Brothers and their students, with the impetus for social transformation, which is the context in which they operated in the years between 1891 and 1914. By conceiving of them as part of the same phenomenon, this research explored rugby’s place in the College’s history, which on its own is of limited broader significance, within the context of significant national and international trends in education.

Nudgee College and the Queensland Context - 1891 – 1914

The Irish Christian Brothers who founded Nudgee in 1891 were always more than just classroom educators. They were motivated by an intense and unrelenting ambition to ‘open up the social and economic opportunities of the new land to the children of the Irish, while cultivating a Catholic, non-materialist spirit’ (Boland 1991, 2). Though a sizeable minority of the College’s first intake came from metropolitan Brisbane, the target demographic were students from regional and remote Queensland and northern New South Wales. As some of its early detractors observed, it quickly became a ‘bush college’, not just in terms of its clientele, but also because of its location on the then outskirts of the capital city Brisbane, and the sense of insularity that this subsequently encouraged:

Ten miles from town on a bush track, the sole transport being by infrequent trains at the station and accessible only through the scrub, the first boys and the Brothers were their own country. The college stood on its mound over its 300 acre kingdom . . . At Nudgee they had the space to be themselves. (Boland 1991, 17).

‘Being themselves’ was grounded in a quest for socio-economic advancement, an ambition consistent with broader currents in evidence across Queensland. For whatever hopes

the Christian Brothers may have entertained regarding the inculcating of a non-materialist spirit, they lived among a people who had adopted the aggressive pursuit of material advancement as their *raison d'être*. Queensland's early immigrants, as Ray Evans (2007) observes, were intensely materialistic and ambitious. The petty bourgeois ideology that he credits them with creating led to a pronounced cultural mediocrity and a high level of social conformity. In his study of Brisbane in the 1890s, Nudgee's first decade, Ronald Lawson (1987) also identified an anti-intellectualism and a preference for the utilitarian over all other considerations. This preference was applied just as readily to the human capital:

Migrants were judged according to their physical usefulness, youth and vigour, and enjoined to work hard and reproduce rapidly. Those who fudged the utilitarian test or who fell into infirmity or upon persistently hard times were destined to be harshly judged and treated. (Evans 2007, 87)

While the religious foundations of the state's Catholic education were laid by the Christian Brothers after their arrival in Queensland in 1875, they at first neglected the educational implications of this utilitarianism:

The Brothers had failed to realise that the Queenslander, whatever his religious beliefs, was essentially a practical man, moved by utilitarian motives. If they were going to communicate with him, to get through to him their religious and educational ideas, they would achieve this only by being in the world and of the world. (Goodman 1968, 150)

It is no coincidence that Nudgee's true founder, Brother Paul Ambrose Treacy, did not make that error. He 'wrote no charter, elaborated no philosophy'. He was a practical man driven by a simple creed - faith, formation, and opportunity (Boland 1991, 2). Of those, it was opportunity that best aligned with the ambitions of Queenslanders in 1891.

Migration both created and then sustained this culture of utilitarianism. Between 1860 and 1879 approximately 114 000 British and European migrants arrived in Queensland, a proportional population growth greater than anywhere else in the country. By 1881, almost 70 percent of colonists had been born overseas; the figure for Australia as a whole was 40 percent (Murphy *et al.* 1970, 29). Most of them were poor and seemingly destined to swell the ranks of unskilled manual labourers in what was still a comparatively primitive economy. Yet there was the promise of advancement, for as Mary MacGinley (1974, 15) posits, as they 'started so nearly as equals, the able and enterprising amongst the newcomers found a fluid

context in which their capabilities for leadership in politics and commerce could surface'. It was a precarious and highly contested environment, however, for not all would make their fortune in the new land. A culture of masculinism, further entrenched by a marked gender imbalance, was both 'omniscient and unrelenting' (Evans 2007, 87). This was a fertile environment for a boys' boarding school that came to revere rugby as the ultimate sign of one's masculinity and proof of the Irish Catholic determination to make it in the new world.

Queensland politics also reflected this drive for material advancement. Samuel Griffith's Liberal Party believed in balancing development with 'mild regulatory frameworks' that at least paid lip service to the principle of equality of opportunity. Even this was too generous for some of his opponents, who saw an individual's success or failure as a matter for them alone (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2009, 37). Across the political spectrum, however, development trumped all other considerations. Sir Thomas McIlwraith, three-time Queensland premier (1879-1883; 1888; 1889) spoke for many when he observed that:

What were they all trying to do but to accumulate capital? What was the best of the workmen ... doing but trying to accumulate capital? Capital meant comfort and happiness in the world; and why should they blame the planters in Mackay or any other place for trying to accumulate capital? (Queensland Parliamentary Debates 1882, 194)

Education was not immune to this focus on development either, geared as it was to providing the human capital necessary for a developing economy. Underwritten by the wealth generated by gold rushes and a mineral boom, Queensland's *Education Act 1875* established a free, secular, and compulsory system of primary education for children between the ages of six and twelve. To the considerable anger of Queensland's Catholic population, state assistance to denominational schools, such as Nudgee, was subsequently withdrawn in 1880. Greg Logan and Eddie Clark (1984, 2) saw this state intervention in education as part of a 'new spirit' sweeping the state, one imbuing the people with a sense of democracy and national purpose. In reality however, the state system of education, and many of the denominational schools, were 'flagrantly inadequate' and 'pre-industrial' in character (Lawson 1987, 154). They were demonstrably ill-equipped to supply the needs of an economy that was in fact expanding and diversifying.

If they were to be in a position to take advantage of the opportunities on offer, Queensland's Irish Catholics required access to a secondary education, even if it was a

narrow one focused on literacy and numeracy. There were, however, significant barriers. In contrast to the other states, immigrants to Queensland landed at a variety of ports other than Brisbane. As the majority lacked the financial resources to then travel overland, many of the new arrivals stayed put. By 1891, 54 percent of Queensland's population of 226 759 (a quarter of whom were Catholic) lived outside of Brisbane, were heavily involved in primary production, and spread across 1.73 million square kilometres. For the state's Irish Catholics, who were over-represented in the lower working class, it was even tougher again. They needed a boarding school in Brisbane, but whatever their middle class aspirations, there was no place in their world for a high class, prestigious private or Catholic school (Goodman 1968).

Nudgee College and the Irish context: 1891 – 1914

The drive for integration and separation which animated many of the state's Irish Catholics helps explain why a religious order with no traditional affinity with team sports embraced rugby with such fervour. Like the community they served, the Christian Brothers' world view was shaped by a nationality and a religion that created and sustained a sense of apartness, as Cecilia Hamilton observes:

There emerged a rather distinct Irish Catholic self-picture as follows: Nationally, unjustly oppressed as transportees for political reasons and discriminated against as free immigrants; religiously, persecuted first by the authorities and subsequently by organised Protestant elements; socially, a subordinate class, allowed no proportional influence in the community; economically, filling the ranks of unskilled labour, the society's 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'. (Hamilton 1957, 9)

This 'self-picture' reflected a deep sectarian divide that remained a blight on Australian society for decades, one later brought into sharp relief by the domestic divisions exacerbated by wartime pressures between 1914 and 1918, particularly the bitter conscription plebiscites in 1916 and 1917 and the British government's response to the Easter uprising in 1916 (Kerby and Baguley 2020). Central to the College's articulation of this mindset were the Christian Brothers themselves; almost all Irish born, they were 'flaming agitators for Ireland's rights' (Boland 1991, 38). They were products of nineteenth-century Ireland and in some cases, literally children of the Famine, which had seen Catholicism invade the 'vacated cultural space and solved an identity crisis by offering a powerful surrogate language of

symbolic identity in which Irishness and Catholicism were seen as reciprocal and congruent' (Whelan 2005, 137). This inheritance was not lost on their students, many of whom had at least one Irish-born parent, and who through the twin influences of family and school were acutely aware that Ireland was their spiritual Home. Indeed, as researchers such as Stephanie Burley (2012), Patrick O'Farrell (1987), and Tom O'Donoghue (2009) have argued, the efforts of the Irish Catholic teaching Orders not only contributed to the spread of the British Empire, but also a second empire, the Catholic/Irish Empire. This Empire had no more loyal servants than the Christian Brothers.

Edmund Rice, who founded the Order in Ireland in 1802, had a vision for Catholic education in that country that was unashamedly Irish, and this helped to shape the education offered by the Christian Brothers at Nudgee. Yet Rice's approach, as Denis McLaughlin contends, was not anti-English or anti-Protestant. It was the second generation of Brothers led by Br Paul Riordan from 1838 to 1862, who would have guided the education of many of Nudgee's first Brothers, who adopted that outlook:

This, in one way, was to be expected, since as the nineteenth century progressed the identification of education with Church and national aspirations became inevitable, with the power of the Church to harness and command political power becoming more overt. (McLaughlin 2008, 66)

One contributor to the 1899 College Annual probably spoke for many when he criticised the English for their 'grim determination which conquers everything that can be conquered'. He described their rule of Ireland as being nothing short of 'tyranny' (Nudgee College Annual 1899, 7). Yet in reality, Australian Irish Catholics with their middle class aspirations could not afford the type of ghetto mentality that such an open antagonism might encourage. A sense of 'apartness' was certainly sustained by a separate schooling system, Catholic newspapers, and a range of clubs, societies, and religious festivals, yet these were often balanced by an equal and opposite force which encouraged an engagement with the world outside the Catholic community. Robert Dunne, the second bishop (1882-1887) and the first Archbishop of Brisbane (1887-1917), was a committed proponent of this approach. On his return to Brisbane in 1882 he made it clear that he wanted Catholics to:

... take more than they do to Australia; to help them to appreciate its glorious Constitution, its social and political atmosphere, and to cherish a full hearted brotherly feeling towards their fellow colonists of every creed and country. In one

word, I would be glad that to every one of them, Australia were as much as it is to myself—it made thoroughly theirs, and they thoroughly of it. (*Week* March 25 1882, 4)

Having made the case for integration, he was quick to add that this did not mean ‘disloyalty or infidelity to Ireland’. Indeed, the disloyal were those who used the name of Ireland to pursue ‘personal interests, personal spites, or personal prejudices’. By all means, he assured Australian Catholics, ‘sympathise with her, be proud of her, never by word or act deny her’ but do it as ‘high-minded, successful colonists’ (*Week* March 25 1882, 4). In the main, they heeded the call, none more so than the Christian Brothers at Nudgee. They reassured both those inside their community, and their potential critics outside of it, that their ‘love of Ireland is second only to our love of Australia’ (Nudgee College Annual 1897, 68). As Patrick O’Farrell (1987, 31) observes, rebels were able therefore to conform in peace, ‘setting up a marvellous tension between myth and reality which gave the Australian Irish the best of both worlds – the proud and fearsome reputation for rebellion, heroism, and devotion to principles of freedom; and a quiet profitable stake in the new country’.

Early College Annuals engaged with their own version of the Celtic Revival by celebrating Irish music, politics, and history. This reached its apogee in 1911 when the Irish envoys visited the College in the wake of the British government’s promise of Home Rule for Ireland in return for the support of the Irish Party in the Parliament Bill. The Choir sang *A Nation Once Again* and finished proceedings with a moving rendition of *God Save Ireland*. In his address, the headmaster Brother Barrett argued that Ireland should have Home Rule just as Queensland did, boasting that ‘eighty percent of those present were descendants of Irish ancestors and inherited their patriotic spirit from the old land’. The Envoys invited all those present to ‘come home’ for the inauguration of the Irish parliament (Nudgee College Annual 1911, 32). The same Annuals showed a remarkable capacity for cognitive dissonance, for the Nudgee community, like Australian Irish Catholics generally, was well aware that they were Australian and members of an Empire in a manner different from the Irish in Ireland. For though they might not have been as fervent devotees of Imperialism as their Grammar school counterparts, they could be unashamedly jingoistic, content to accept the ‘manifest destiny of the British races to hold dominion over palm and pine’ (Boland 1991, 38). As Eoin Hahessy observes:

Prior to 1916 the leaders of the Irish community in Australia followed fastidiously the footprints of John Redmond's Home Rule movement, who desired for Ireland to remain within the British Empire. This was an Irish community a generation removed from the harrows of the Irish famine. A generation that savoured a different flavour to English rule, striving in a colony where rigid social classes, while defined, could be punctured by following the social playbook of the time. (Hahessy 2016)

The students might not have understood it entirely, but they instinctively recognised these dual imperatives. In 1904, they presented two statues to the College that still reside in their original locations on the college's front lawn. St Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland, and St Francis Xavier, his Australian counterpart, stare at each other across the lawn, symbols of the twin calls on the loyalty of the state's Irish Catholics. They are the story, written in stone, of a people who sought both inclusion and separation, and the College that catered to that desire, both in the classroom and on the rugby field. This approach left no room for half-heartedness. The Christian Brothers needed hard men, practical men, to face the challenge. For both teachers and parents whose fees helped maintain the College, the end could too readily justify the means, as is evident in the widespread use of corporal punishment. It was foreign to Rice, who instead valued a mix of firmness and mildness (Keogh, 2008; Coldrey, 1992). Nevertheless, the leather strap was widely used as a 'teaching aid' (Nangle, 2014, 38), an approach to education that a delegate at the 1947 General Chapter of the Christian Brothers believed left the Order with a 'most unenviable reputation' (Coldrey 1992, 277).

The middle class aspirations of Australian Irish Catholics and the Brothers at institutions such as Nudgee who catered to them mirrored developments in Ireland. Though they never abandoned their commitment to Ireland's poor, within a generation of Edmund Rice's death in 1844 the Christian Brothers had shifted at least some of their focus to educating the children of the middle class. It was a development commented on as early as 1867 when an Assistant (Royal) Commissioner for the Powis Commission into Irish Primary Education noted after visiting schools in southern Munster that there was a strong 'middle-class element' in the Brothers' schools, drawn there by 'the excellence of the moral training' which they gave and 'the superior quality of their instruction' (Coldrey 1990, 64). In the 1890s, the decade that Nudgee was opened, the Brothers actually established two middle class schools in Waterford in the heart of Edmund Rice country, and Cork, now Ireland's

second largest city. As Coldrey (1990, 71) asserts, however, this increasing engagement with the middle class, which occurred concurrently with a significant move into secondary education, was rarely driven by the Brothers themselves. There was a confluence of site specific pressures and circumstances driving the process, not the least being the decision of the Bishops to use them as ‘shock troops’ in their confrontation with the Model Schools and the government.

The issue of class was not of as great a concern at Nudgee, indeed as one of the Brothers noted in 1875, there was a ‘very great want felt by a large class of settlers [for] a middle-class boarding school’ (Brother J. Barrett to Brother Hoare, 17 July 1875. Quoted in Boland 1991, 4). Far from obfuscating about their ambitions, the Brothers at Nudgee quite openly sought to provide a forward education appropriate for an upwardly mobile people (Boland 1991). This was not entirely antithetical to Rice’s vision, for he never saw schools as ‘ends in themselves but as a means toward the fulfilment of the mission of the poor and their liberation from the poverty trap’ (Cardinal Edward Clancy, quoted in McLaughlin, 2007, p. xv). This characteristic permeated schools like Nudgee, which though imbued with an Irish Catholic culture, also “introduced their boys to a pragmatic curriculum that promoted a robust social mobility” (McLaughlin 2007, p. xviii). The ultimately successful campaign to allow students to use government scholarships to attend Catholic schools was an early example of how robust the Brothers were prepared to be in their demands for an equality of opportunity.

Nudgee College and rugby: 1891 – 1914

Although from its earliest beginnings in Australia, rugby was closely associated with the universities and the Great Public Schools (GPS), by the time Nudgee opened in 1891 rugby was on its way to becoming a mass-spectator sport in the eastern states, one that crossed the class divide and attracted considerable crowds, press coverage and public interest (Collins 2009, 439). As it was administered by Brisbane’s middle class, rugby subsequently adopted their attitudes and ethos (Horton 2006, 1362), a development consistent with the Brothers’ ambitions for their students. Following the split between rugby, an amateur sport, and rugby league in 1908, working class Irish Catholics shifted their allegiance to the professional game for reasons that often had little to do with the nature of the sport itself. As Horton observes of the Irish Catholics living in Sydney’s inner suburbs, rugby ‘reeked of English imperialism’. In contrast, rugby league became an expression of class identity and a symbol of the workers’ struggle, first in New South Wales and then later in Brisbane’s working class inner city

suburbs such as Fortitude Valley, Toombul, North and South Brisbane. Nudgee, however, remained steadfast. It was not until the collapse of rugby in 1918 that Nudgee, rather reluctantly, played league, though they returned to rugby as soon as was practicable in 1928.

The rugby reports published each year in the college Annuals regularly betray their student authorship, yet they nevertheless provide a valuable insight into the community's mindset, even if it is expressed in the most jingoistic of terms. These reports are pervaded by a sustained attempt to assert the Irish Catholic identity of the college, one which displayed a marked sensitivity to any discrimination, either real or imagined. For the college, these early seasons were marred by the absence of a school-based competition until 1918, which compelled it to enter teams in open competitions playing against adults. The 1897 Annual, the second one published, shows how quickly the student authors committed themselves to creating a tradition rather than allowing one to emerge organically. It would set the tone for the reports in the years that followed:

The football season of 1897 both began and ended gloriously. A good beginning is said to be half the battle won, so our first game being an easy victory, placed us half the way on the road to glory and success. No doubt the team we put into the field this season was as fine a combination as was ever turned out. (Nudgee College Annual 1901, 35).

The subsequent reports display much the same tone, characterised by an unrestrained celebration of success coloured only by the perception that there were dark forces at work: fears of the size of Nudgee players led to a rule change that compelled the College to enter an Under 14 side into the u/15 competition, while there was 'great dissatisfaction' at the 'unfair decisions of the umpire', teams competing not merely against the opposition, but also 'Dame Fortune herself' (Nudgee College Annual 1903, 67); umpires whose 'partiality was evident' and the college's nemesis, Valleys, who it was feared had a 'big influence on the committee, arranging matches' (Nudgee College Annual 1905, 53). There was even the threat of violence.

College boys were forced to meet teams that were composed of players whose conduct and language were to say the least, often rude. The barrackers were sometimes of the lowest class. Rows were frequent and, only that it was well

known that Nudgee fellows knew how to use their fists, they would very often have been badly treated. (Nudgee College Annual 1911, 73).

Though in a modern context, student complaints about referring decisions are unremarkable, it is worth noting that as they played in adult competitions, it was not unknown for teachers to take the field as well in College colours. In a community where even the letters between students and parents were censored, any public statement would have inevitably reflected the views of the College's administration. Yet there was glory to be had: the 1904 1st XV was 'equal, if not superior, to any former team' (Nudgee College Annual 1904, 67), the 1909 1st XV was 'the best that ever donned the Blue and White', and sought only 'Victory or Death' and whose opponents found 'in our champions, foemen worthy of their steel' (Nudgee College Annual 1909, 54).

Yet when considered in tandem with broader currents evident in Queensland, these reports are as much about engagement as they are about asserting a separate Irish Catholic identity. Nudgee's pursuit of sport generally, and rugby in particular, was a process driven by both pragmatic and philosophical concerns. It permitted what both Johnes (2008) and Jarvie (1993) characterise as a safety valve for the expression of national sentiment that might otherwise find a political voice, an important consideration for an Irish Catholic minority often accused of disloyalty. Yet far from being an 'occasion of division and conflict', as the language in the Annuals might suggest, sport for the State's Irish Catholics was in fact 'a crucial means of social and cultural integration and assimilation; a unifying feature of colonial society' (Light 2012, 4). It intertwined expressions of 'ethnicity, religion, and community: in itself, it is a communal, social, performative action of belonging' (5). For as Johnes (2008, 131) observes of sport generally:

... few other cultural forms have been as well equipped to express national identity. Sport's emotions, national colours, emblems, songs, and contests all make it a perfect vehicle through which collective but often otherwise abstract ideas of nationhood can be expressed'.

There was a distinctive Irishness in the approach to rugby at the College and the importance placed on the performance of the 1st XV, the flagship team. In the early years of financial struggle, long forgotten by modern students who now attend one of the State's elite

educational institutions, it was a potent symbol of the College's efforts to both integrate with the wider community and assert a distinctive identity. For though the rivalries were intense and sometimes quite bitter, sport is at its core, a communal experience, one that is 'intrinsically relational, defined by the interaction and experience between individual players, spectators, teams, and opposition (Light 2012, 24). Not all sports were equal in this process, however, with the relative absence of Gaelic games being a case in point. For as O'Farrell (1987, 187) notes, 'enthusiasts for specifically Irish games were not numerous in Australia, but they were energetic and saw that the only way to ensure a future for such sports was to gain their acceptance by Catholic schools'. However, as he also observes, the proponents of hurling and Gaelic football made virtually no headway in Catholic schools against the English games of cricket and rugby. As Bairner (2009, 487) asserts, 'in sport as in much else, the principle of Australianise or perish applied, thereby establishing the foundations upon which the hegemonic power of cricket and rugby could be built'. Sport needed to be a bridge rather than a barrier for the Irish minority:

The Irish in Australia were for the most part ready and willing to become Australian almost as soon as they disembarked. One way of doing so, at least for male immigrants, was to embrace popular sports such as cricket and rugby. In terms of the maintenance of embodied Irishness, however, it was hugely important that they learned these games in Catholic schools and colleges that were often run by Irish brothers and were redolent of evocations of the 'old country'. (Darby and Hassan 2008, 138)

There was also a philosophical pressure to embrace physical activity which emanated from the English boarding school system. Driven by the concern that industrialisation was leading to a moral and physical decay, English educators, particularly in public schools, embraced a philosophy from the mid-nineteenth century onward that was a pastiche of athleticism, patriotism, classical teaching and religion. Its impact was not confined to sport, because it also shaped Britain's national outlook, culture, and imperial political imperatives (Huggins 2001). The graduates of these schools who became headmasters and teachers in Australia spread the ideology, as did the graduate teaching Brothers from Apostolic schools such as Mungret College in Limerick. This idealisation of a 'muscular Christianity' saw sport become less of a diversion (Watson, Weir, & Friend, 2005). It was progressively organised, codified and made compulsory. When this unlikely philosophy, at least for an Irish Catholic

school, was transplanted to the frontier lifestyle of Queensland in 1891, it found fertile soil in Nudgee's monk-like asceticism and spartan living conditions.

It was not all about philosophy, for there were also pressing practical reasons for rugby's almost immediate emergence as the College's flagship sport. Rugby requires fewer facilities than cricket or swimming, is comparatively cheap to play, and permits a wide participation across all ability levels. These were important considerations at an institution devoted to the education of students from rural areas whose families were often struggling financially and at the whim of drought, fire, and flood. In addition to helping fill the long hours at a boarding College, rugby was also particularly suited to the Queensland sporting context as it then stood. It was both administered and conducted in a decidedly pragmatic manner, one characterised by competition, parochialism, intense rivalry, and a focus on premierships (Horton 2009). These four attributes might well have served as a secular catechism for Nudgee's rugby players, particularly in the first few decades of its existence.

Conclusion

Peter Horton (2009, 66) might be describing Nudgee rugby when he observes that 'Australian sport was, and is, a wonderfully potent expression of the nation's soul'. The soul of the College in the 21st century would be unrecognisable to the Christian Brothers who founded Nudgee and the students who took the field wearing their school's colours between 1891 and 1914. As the influence of the parish and the schools as the central institutions binding Irish Catholics together began to wane, so too did the sense that sport was an expression of Irishness. Each member of the modern 1st XV has a St Mary's medal sewn inside his jersey, evidence still of her importance to the Christian Brothers charism. The belligerent side of this celebration of apartness is evident in the regular all College 'cheering practices' which are attended by 1500 students led by the Nudgee 'Spirit Committee', however the wider use of rugby as a vehicle for to engage and achieve acceptance in Queensland society is no more (Kerby, 2010; Kerby, 2014).

Yet for the Christian Brothers and students at the College between 1891 and 1914, rugby was indeed a potent expression of what Queensland's Irish Catholics valued in the decades either side of Federation. It was never merely a hunt for premierships disguised as school spirit, any more than it was a narrow statement of fidelity to Irish Catholicism. As a community,

Australia's Irish Catholics did indeed oppose any demand, real or imagined, that they 'reject their consciousness of distinctive national origin and differing religion, or, in other words, abandon their identity' (O'Farrell 1987, 9). Yet just as surely, they recognised that an insular, ghetto mentality would condemn them to playing the role of disenfranchised outsider in perpetuity. As a result, Australia's Irish Catholics generally sought to balance their cultural and religious links with Ireland and their desire to become 'good' Australians in order to claim a share of the colony's wealth. It left them, in O'Farrell's memorable words, 'ambivalent, ambiguous people thinking Irish, talking English; hating the tyranny yet serving the tyrant' (5). Yet for Nudgee, rugby offered the best of both worlds. A masculine competitive endeavour in which the 'them versus us' paradigm could survive, with the added lustre provided by premierships, but which never seriously threatened the ambitions of an upwardly mobile people. The 'Battle of the Colours' foundation myth serves a different, more celebratory purpose in the modern College, but in its longevity we see just how important rugby was to Irish Catholics at the time, and to the Christian Brothers who taught them.

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