

“Le Bleu et le Noir”: New Zealand Perspectives on French Rugby

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New Zealand’s connections to France, via its national game, Rugby Union, extend over 100 years.¹ To the extent to which New Zealanders read about France at all, much of it comes from sports reporting in the media, tour books and player biographies. Aspects of the sporting relationship between New Zealand and France have been commented on in a number of accounts, but there are few detailed surveys. *New Zealand and the French: Two Centuries of Contact*, first published in 1990, did not include a chapter on sport among its nineteen chapters, although editor John Dunmore made some allusions to rugby in his chapter on “French influences in New Zealand life.”² This brief survey of New Zealand’s rugby encounters with France commences with a historical summary of four key periods: early contacts (1906-53); the era of mutual discovery (1961-68); the era of near parity (1973-1986); and France as nemesis and source of redemption (1987 to the present). It then considers New Zealand perceptions of French rugby and the way the game has promoted social and cultural ties between the two nations.

Viewed purely in statistical terms, New Zealand’s rugby relationship with France may appear one-sided. Since the All Blacks first played France on New Year’s Day in 1906, New Zealand and France have played 54 international matches against each other. New Zealand has won 41 of these games, France 12 with one match drawn.³ These statistics do not, however, reveal the character of matches between the two nations, in particular the ability of French teams to win vital games against the All Blacks, such as

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¹ For an overview of the role of Rugby in shaping New Zealand identity see, Jock Phillips, *A Man’s Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male – A History* (Auckland, 1987), 82-130.

² John Dunmore, “French Influences on New Zealand Life,” in ed. John Dunmore, *New Zealand and the French: Two Centuries of Contact* (Waikanae, 1990, reprinted 1997), 193-194.

³ Accessed 20 September 2012, <http://stats.allblacks.com/>.

their semi-final and quarter-final encounters at the 1999 and 2007 Rugby World Cup Tournaments. The ability of French teams to win such matches, the flair and physicality with which they play the game, and the “otherness” arising from their perceived “Gallic difference” has given them a distinct place in the consciousness of sporting-minded New Zealanders.

New Zealand easily won its early encounters against France, but by the 1950s French rugby had developed the forward strength and backline artistry which enables them to beat the best in the world. New Zealand’s first encounter, which they won 38-8, was the last game they played in Europe on their 1905-06 tour. Manager George Dixon commented in his tour diary that while the Frenchmen had “a lot to learn yet regarding the finer phases of the game....there can be no mistake regarding the vigour which they infuse into their play.”⁴ The New Zealand captain, Dave Gallaher, who was killed on active service in Belgium in 1917, now personalises rugby links between the two nations. The Dave Gallaher Trophy has been contested in series between New Zealand and France since 2000.⁵ The link to Gallaher is particularly resonant given the revival of public interest in ANZAC day since the 1990s and the conscious linking of national identity to military achievements by successive New Zealand governments.

Matches against France in the interwar and immediate post-war periods furthered connections between the nations. The 1924-25 All Black team, known as the “Invincibles” on account of winning every match on their tour, defeated France by 30 points to 6 in their international, while the New Zealand Maori team won 14 of their 15 matches in France on their 1926-27 tour, including a 12-3 victory against France at Paris.⁶ New Zealand Maori toured Europe as guests of the French Rugby Union, and the development of open, running rugby among French teams has been identified as a legacy of their tour.⁷ After the Second World War, French teams proved tough opponents. The Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force team, known as the “Kiwis,” defeated France in two internationals on their 1945-46 tour, but needed two tries by their burly winger Jim Sherratt, who had the title *le beau grand cheval* bestowed upon him by French crowds, and a late try to win the first international 11-9 and an intercept try to win the second 13-10.⁸ The All Blacks lost both matches when they toured France, in 1954, losing 8-11 to South-West France and 0-3 against France at Colombes Stadium in Paris. Under the captaincy of Jean Prat, France mastered the art of defensive rugby. Indeed Terry McLean believed they might have defeated the All Blacks more convincingly had they not been so intent on securing their first victory over New Zealand.⁹

New Zealand restored its dominance during the 1960s when it was unbeaten against French teams. These victories were, however, hard won. When France embarked

⁴ George H. Dixon, *The Triumphant Tour of the New Zealand Footballers 1905* (Wellington, 1906), 140.

⁵ Dennis McLean, “Gallaher, David – Biography.” from the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1-Sep-10. Accessed 11 October 2013, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3g1/1>.

⁶ Arthur C. Swan, *History of New Zealand Rugby Football 1870-1945* (Wellington, 1948), 493.

⁷ Malcolm Mulholland, *Beneath the Māori Moon: An Illustrated History of Māori Rugby* (Wellington, 2009), 60.

⁸ Mike Whatman, *Khaki All Blacks: A Tribute to the “Kiwis” — the 2nd NZEF Army Rugby Team* (Auckland, 2005), 73-83.

⁹ Terry McLean, *Bob Stuart’s All Blacks* (Wellington, 1954), 95-96.

on their first tour of New Zealand in 1961, they could claim to hold Rugby’s “World Crown” because they defeated South Africa in South Africa in a two-test series in 1958 (a feat which would elude the All Blacks until 1996) and had won the Five Nations Championship outright in 1958-59 and the Grand Slam in 1959-60 and 1961.¹⁰ New Zealander’s were well aware of their achievements. Denis Lalanne’s book on the 1958 tour, *The Great Fight of the French Fifteen* (published in France under the title *Le Grand combat du Quinze de France*), sold 40,000 copies in France in only a few months and was translated into English for New Zealand audiences by Edwin Boyd-Wilson, then Patron of the Victoria University Rugby Club and Professor of Modern Languages at Victoria University.¹¹ Terry McLean, the doyen of New Zealand sports journalists, rated *The Great Fight of the French Fifteen* as “the finest tour-book in Rugby history.”¹² New Zealand won all three test matches in 1961, thereby reasserting their claim to world rugby supremacy. France was, however, desperately unlucky to lose the second test, which was played in a Wellington gale, being defeated five points to three after Don Clarke miraculously converted a late try. The tour greatly raised the profile of French rugby in New Zealand. Two books, *Cock of the Rugby Roost* and *La Melée Fantastique* by Terry McLean and Denis Lalanne respectively, were written about the tour and the matches attracted large attendances.¹³ The All Blacks defeated France 12-3 and 21-15 on their European tours of 1963 and 1967. When France toured in 1968 New Zealand again won all three test matches, but match reports and player biographies emphasise that each international was a very hard game.¹⁴ The tours of 1961 and 1968 allowed New Zealanders to see firsthand the skill of French rugby, elevating players such as the Boniface brothers, Jo Maso, Walter Spanghero and Pierre Villepreux to enduring renown in New Zealand.

Having lost all eight internationals against the All Blacks during the 1960s, French teams quadrupled their tally of wins during the 1970s, winning 13-6 against the 1972-73 All Blacks and sharing the home and away series in 1977 and 1979. Many players regarded the 1977 tour to France as a seminal moment in New Zealand rugby. Having lost the first test 13-18 against France, a loss exacerbated by the indignity of an All Black forward pack being dominated by its opposition, New Zealand adopted a fast-paced game to win the second test 15-3. Reflecting on the game, All Black lock Andy Haden wrote, “a young New Zealand team *found* itself in Paris that day. Not only was the tour rescued, but in winning with such accomplishment, Mourie and many of his men were able to establish the nucleus of All Black teams for several years to come.”¹⁵ Two years later, France won their first international in New Zealand. Victory could not have been more auspiciously timed, occurring on Bastille Day, July 14, 1979 at Eden Park. Only eight days before, France was comprehensively defeated 23-9 in the first test match

¹⁰Terry McLean, *Cock of the Rugby Roost: The 1961 French Tour of New Zealand* (Wellington, 1961), 11.

¹¹Denis Lalanne, *The Great Fight of the French Fifteen*, trans. E.J. Boyd-Wilson (Wellington, 1960), endpapers.

¹²Terry McLean, *All Black Power: The Story of the 1968 All Blacks in Australia and Fiji and the 1968 French Team in New Zealand and Australia* (Wellington, 1968), 181.

¹³Lalanne, *La Melée Fantastique: The French Rugby Tour of New Zealand 1961* (Wellington, 1961).

¹⁴Alex Veysey, Gary Caffell and Ron Palenski, *Lochore: An Authorised Biography* (Auckland, 1996), 95-100; Veysey, *Colin Meads: All Black* (Auckland, 1974), 135-140.

¹⁵Andy Haden, *Boots 'n All* (Auckland, 1983), 164 [Italics in original].

at Christchurch and, three days after that, they lost 11-12 against Southland. At Auckland, however, they played inspired rugby. Jerome Gallion, Alain Caussade, Jean Luc Averous and Didier Cordorniou scored tries as France won 24-19. The tour was also notable for the warmth of the relationship between respective captains Jean-Pierre Rives and Graham Mourie, both of whom were vigorous open side flankers renowned for their intellectual approach toward rugby. New Zealand won all test matches on the 1981 tour of France and Romania and the two-test series against France in New Zealand in 1984, but, in two encounters in 1986, French teams played a significant role in New Zealand's rugby history. In June, the so-called "Baby Blacks," a team which fielded 11 test debutants, most of whom were selected because 30 leading players had been suspended for participating in an unauthorised tour of South Africa, recorded a celebrated victory when they defeated France 18-9 in Christchurch. When New Zealand made a two match tour of France at the end of the season however, they were comprehensively beaten 16-3 in the second test at Nantes. Here they encountered a French effort of such intensity they were simply outmuscled. "Remember Nantes" became the catch cry of the All Blacks as they prepared for the 1987 World Cup.¹⁶ Nantes came to symbolise both a warning against complacency and the necessity for New Zealand forward packs not to be dominated.¹⁷

The advent of the World Cup in 1987 changed rugby forever. Whereas Rugby supremacy had previously taken the form of an unofficial "World Crown," the new competition hastened the professional era (ushered in during the 1995 World Cup) and created a four-yearly yardstick against which rugby nations measured themselves. For New Zealanders, the fortunes of their World Cup teams were accompanied by morality plays, in which non-sporting explanations were often advanced for on-field results. Matches against France have served as metaphors for redemption and failure in All Black Rugby. Initially, France featured in a redemptive capacity. In the inaugural 1987 tournament New Zealand defeated France 29-9 in the final, eclipsing the sceptre of Nantes. Equally significantly, in the eyes of many of the team, they also received the unqualified support of New Zealanders for the first time in several decades, during which the image of rugby had been damaged by continuing contact with South Africa.¹⁸ Seven years later, in 1994, France won their first series in New Zealand, and their 2-0 victory was the catalyst for intense criticism of coach Laurie Mains, particularly from supporters of Auckland coach John Hart. The debates on the merits of the two coaches represented a wider split in New Zealand society: Hart, for many, epitomised the brash, upwardly mobile, commercial elite of Auckland while Laurie Mains was viewed as a representative of New Zealand's humble and increasingly marginalised provinces.¹⁹ The manner in which the French sealed the second test epitomised the finest qualities of their rugby. Trailing 16-20 with one minute to play, France scored a "try from the end of the world" which started with Philip Saint Andre fielding a kick in his own 22 metre zone and finished seven passes later by Jean Luc Sadourny.²⁰

¹⁶Veysey, Caffell and Palenski, 204.

¹⁷John Matheson, *Buck Shelford. The Man, The Story, The Truth* (Auckland, 2008), 23-24.

¹⁸Veysey, Caffell and Palenski, 230.

¹⁹Murray Deaker, *Just an Opinion* (Auckland, 2004), 75-76.

²⁰The try is available on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=jTwTi-UeQ7s>

France was installed in the sporting public's consciousness as New Zealand's nemesis when they defeated the All Blacks in the semi-final and quarter-final of the 1999 and 2007 Rugby World Cup tournaments. In 1999 the All Blacks surrendered a 14 point lead to lose 43-31. It was not simply the failure to close out a match New Zealand seemed to be firmly in control of which incensed New Zealand Rugby supporters. The perceived surrender to over-vigorous French forward play in the second half saw the defeat attributed to a deficiency of masculinity on the part of the All Blacks as much as poor tactical planning.²¹ In 2007, the All Blacks were defeated 20-18 in the quarter-final, their worst ever result in the Rugby World Cup. New Zealand reports of the match paid little credit to the staunch French defence and their skilful play, focusing instead on the alleged deficiencies of referee Wayne Barnes, the selection and preparation errors of the coaches and the failure of the senior players, most notably the decision not to attempt a dropped goal late in the match when New Zealand had plenty of opportunities to do so.²² The defeat lent added weight to the perspective that while All Black teams in the professional era won most of their matches, they were “chokers” in the games that really mattered at Rugby World Cups and these defeats were a consequence of abandoning the patterns that had served New Zealand Rugby so well for so long: consistently selecting the same team and playing safety-first, percentage rugby.

Given the fallout accompanying the quarter-final defeat against France in 2007, particularly the intense debate surrounding the reappointment of the coaching team from that tournament, the 2011 World Cup contests between France and New Zealand were especially significant because they afforded the opportunity for redemption. New Zealand easily accounted for France 37-17 when they met in pool play, but when the two teams met again in the final (something which appeared highly improbable after France lost to Tonga 14-19 in their last match in pool play) New Zealand had the opportunity to exorcise painful memories of their 2007 defeat. In a climate of sporting nationalism arguably unmatched since the 1956 South African tour of New Zealand (New Zealand was unashamedly promoted as “a stadium of four million” in World Cup publicity), the All Blacks prevailed 8-7. Their victory restored the popular narrative that the All Blacks were the best team in the world. That they had prevailed over France, the team who had defeated them unexpectedly in 2007, was especially significant for the players and the sporting public.²³

Numerous analyses of French rugby have been published in newspapers, player biographies and tour books. The intellectual merits of these have been questioned in some quarters, but their reach and influence cannot be denied. Rightly or wrongly, many New Zealanders turn first to the sports pages when reading newspapers, and, historically,

²¹Greg Ryan, “The End of an Aura: All Black Rugby and Rural Nostalgia in the Professional Era,” in *Tackling Rugby Myths, Rugby and New Zealand Society 1854-2004*, ed. Greg Ryan (Dunedin, 2005), 155-158; Anton Oliver and Brian Turner, *Inside* (Auckland, 2005), 104.

²²See, for example, Bob Howitt, *Graham Henry: Final Word* (Auckland, 2012), 178-211; Greg McGee and Richie McCaw, *Richie McCaw: The Open Side* (Auckland, 2012), 15-30; Deaker, *Henry's All Blacks* (Auckland, 2011).

²³McGee and McCaw, 261; Howitt, *Graham Henry: Final Word*, 282-290.

player biographies and tour books have been among the largest selling genres of books in New Zealand.²⁴

In these works, France is generally characterised as a rugby nation of unrealised potential, with a recurring subtext that if they allied their natural talent to the discipline and selfless commitment to the team purportedly characteristic of Anglo-Saxon countries, they would be virtually unbeatable. Terry McLean's statement from his 1968 book *All Black Power* is representative of this view: "In many respects, French Rugby is the finest in the world. It has an élan, a quickness, a flair, a panache and, not least, an intelligence superior to the Rugby of the British countries, and the three great Rugby countries of the Southern Hemisphere."²⁵ He went on to observe, however, that they lacked discipline and were unwilling to commit themselves to mastering the basic skills of forward play.²⁶ All Black halfback Chris Laidlaw echoed the views of many when he argued French Rugby was paradoxical, contrasting the "copiously technical outpourings of the Rugby Press in France" and the undoubted skill of its players with the disorganisation and individualism which often lead to "utter confusion, each individual functioning in total contradiction to his fellows in word and deed."²⁷

Accounts of French teams in New Zealand works resemble a morality play, in which either New Zealand refined Anglo-Saxon virtue of teamwork prevail over inconsistent individualism or French teams are rewarded for displaying flair against unimaginative opponents. Don Cameron encapsulated the latter in his account of France's 1979 victory over New Zealand in his tellingly entitled book *Retreat from Glory*, when he wrote, "I doubt whether any future touring team in New Zealand can win, and deserve, the glory that Jean-Pierre Rives' men achieved on that sunny Auckland afternoon; whether any other team can in eight days lift themselves from a shattering defeat to one of the noblest victories of them all."²⁸

Whereas most of New Zealand's rugby opponents are members of the British Commonwealth, French relationships with New Zealand are marked by their perceived "otherness," a view reinforced by virtue of their different language and perceived "Latin temperament."²⁹ Indeed, former All Black captain David Kirk argued, "they have the Latin temperament against which all other Latin temperaments are measured."³⁰ Precisely what constitutes a "Latin temperament" varies between authors, but in a rugby context it generally alludes to a heightened state of emotionalism, variously expressed in on-field violence, emotional behaviour and dramatic fluctuations in form. For New Zealanders who have played in France and have been raised in a society where emotions were restrained and men expected to be staunch, the sight of French team-mates crying after

²⁴For example, *Richie McCaw: The Open Side* had sold 120,000 copies by 15 December 2012. Accessed 15 October 2013, <http://www.allblacks.com/news/21269/Richie-McCaw-the-best-selling-author..>

²⁵Terry McLean, *All Black Power*, 161.

²⁶Terry McLean, *All Black Power*, 41-43, 161.

²⁷Chris Laidlaw, *Mud in Your Eye. A worm's eye view of the changing world of Rugby* (Wellington, 1973), 174.

²⁸Don Cameron, *All Blacks: Retreat from Glory* (Auckland, 1980), 104.

²⁹ Denis Lalanne, *The Great Fight of the French Fifteen*, 20.

³⁰ Bob Howitt and Diane Haworth, *Rugby Nomads* (Auckland, 2002), 163.

matches, whether they had won or lost and the act of greeting each other with handshakes and kisses has been a novel experience.³¹

From both French and New Zealand perspectives, violence is characteristic of each other's rugby. To some extent the incidence of violence is a reflection of the fact that in both countries' rugby is perceived as an expression of masculinity, some would say hyper-masculinity. The latter refers to a culture of exaggerated “manliness,” one form of which is the use of violence against opponents.³² Perceptions of what constitutes “unacceptable” violence as opposed to the “hard play” inherent in a contact sport differ among nations. From a New Zealand perspective, violent acts committed by French rugby players have often involved actions outside rugby's unwritten code of social behaviour, such as kicking players and eye-gouging. During the 1924-25 tour of Britain and France, fullback George Nepia was kicked on the bottom against Selection Francaise at Toulon, in retaliation for which his team-mate Irvine punched the perpetrator.³³ Other incidences include Colin Meads being kicked in the head in the test match on the 1967 tour, a match captain Brian Lochore described as “the hardest, most gruelling test I have played in.”³⁴ Gary Knight left the field with what *Men in Black* referred to as an “eye injury” in 1977, and Wayne “Buck” Shelford had his scrotum torn during the test match at Nantes in 1986.³⁵ Summing up French rugby in 1967, Terry McLean commended the intellectual approach their players brought to the game but lamented how “disappointing and saddening it was to turn from this inspiring quality to the dangerous element, the lethal assault on opposing players, which was latent in all French play.”³⁶ It must be emphasised that acts of violence have not been one-sided. Observers of French tours to New Zealand noted that they too encountered acts of thuggery, including punching and kicks to the back. Terry McLean openly criticised the brutality meted out by New Zealand players during France's 1961 tour, particularly the match against New Zealand Maori.³⁷ He levelled similar criticisms during France's 1968 tour of New Zealand, noting that the French players particularly resented being obstructed at line-outs.³⁸ Rucking, a distinct feature of the New Zealand game, involving the use of the feet against prone opposition players to propel the ball backwards to the half-back, also aroused resentment. Jean Bourrier, manager of the 1968 French team, neatly summarised the differences between the two styles of play when he said “the only difference between the All Blacks and the French is that they use the boot backward, where our players use it forward.”³⁹

New Zealanders who have played club rugby in France often comment on the brutality they encountered. John Daniell, a New Zealander who played professionally in France between 1996 and 2006, devoted nearly one chapter in his book *Inside French*

³¹ Howitt and Haworth, 163, 169, 175..

³²Phillips, 82-130; Richard G. Pringle and Christopher Hickey, “Negotiating Masculinities via the Moral Problematization of Sport,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27:2 (2010): 115-138.

³³George Nepia and Terry McLean, *I George Nepia: The Golden Years of Rugby* (Wellington, 1963), 120.

³⁴Wallace Reyburn, *The Unsmiling Giants: The Sixth All Blacks* (London, 1968), 140-141; Terry McLean, *All Black Magic*, 109.

³⁵Rod Chester and Neville McMillan, *Men in Black* (Auckland, 1978), 365; Haden, 160-161; Matheson, 21-23.

³⁶Terry McLean, *All Black Power*, 108-109.

³⁷Terry McLean, *Cock of the Rugby Roost*, 20, 69-77, 110-111, 144, 146-151.

³⁸Terry McLean, *All Black Power*, 59-62, 182, 214-216, 233-234.

³⁹ *Dominion*, July 29, 1968, cited in Veysey, *Rugby 1968: France in New Zealand* (Wellington, 1968), 54.

Rugby to the violence he experienced.⁴⁰ Scott Palmer, a prop forward who played in France between 1997 and 2002, observed, “when you play in France you’ve got to realise that violence is a big part of French rugby; it’s just part of the environment.”⁴¹ Another aspect of French Rugby: the emphasis teams placed on winning at home and a seeming resignation towards losing away matches also struck New Zealanders as distinct.⁴² Daniell identified French philosophies of *l’esprit de clocher*, “the collective credo of duty to the town, the team and the jersey” and *terroir* “the notion that a product draws its identity from the soil in which it is produced” as central to this phenomenon.⁴³

It would be wrong, however, to view New Zealand perceptions of French rugby solely through a lens of violence. For many New Zealanders, France gave them a life education as well as a rugby education. In the amateur era, France offered a rugby environment in which its strict regulations were circumvented. Chris Laidlaw, who played for Lyons in the early 1970s, recalled players might be paid 200 francs for a win, 100 for a draw and 50 for a loss.⁴⁴ Payments to players were regarded as essential to the survival of the game because “every other sport in France is semi-professional...and the youngster views sport in economic as well as social terms.”⁴⁵ Murray Mexted, who played for Agen between 1977 and 1980, wrote, “Agen and its people are part of my life - they sharpened my taste for life and then showed me how to savour it.”⁴⁶ Graham Purvis, who played for Ussel in the New Zealand off-seasons between 1985 and 1990, observed “as a cultural rounding it was bloody marvellous. When I first went to France, Marque Vue or Chardon was about my exposure to wine....By the time I came back here [New Zealand], I wouldn’t think of having a meal without a glass of wine.”⁴⁷ Playing for Paris University Club enabled Graham Mourie to understand how French culture influenced their play: “The French are individuals – in their lives and in their rugby, they function in the singular. While this makes them tremendously hard to organise, it also leaves them free to express themselves fully on the field.”⁴⁸

Visits to France at the conclusion of European tours were also memorable experiences for All Blacks. Terry McLean reported the 1953 All Blacks “blossomed into Continentals in a matter of hours,” buying black Provencal berets and enjoying the red and white Bordeaux. “By Paris, a few days later, schoolboy French was tottering back...the Eiffel tower was being invaded and the Louvre was being scoured for Venus de Milo and Mona Lisa.”⁴⁹ For the 1972 All Blacks, their visit to France was especially welcome. Their tour was mired in controversy, especially when Keith Murdoch became the first All Black to be expelled from a touring team following the test match against

⁴⁰John Daniell, *Inside French Rugby: Confessions of a Kiwi Mercenary* (Wellington, 2007), 42-54.

⁴¹Howitt and Haworth, 166. See also Murray Mexted and Alex Veysey, *Pieces of Eight* (Auckland, 1986), 58-59. Peter Lampp, “There’s war and there is rugby,” *Manawatu Standard*, 6 June 2013. Accessed 12 July 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/manawatu-standard/opinion/8763317/Theres-war-and-there-is-rugby>.

⁴²Howitt and Haworth, 163. See also Mexted and Veysey, 58.

⁴³Daniell, 30-31.

⁴⁴Laidlaw, 177.

⁴⁵Laidlaw, 177-178.

⁴⁶Mexted and Veysey, 68.

⁴⁷Howitt and Haworth, 180. See also 170. Marque Vue and Chardon are cheap New Zealand sparkling wines.

⁴⁸Graham Mourie and Ron Palenski, *Graham Mourie. Captain* (Auckland, 1982), 118.

⁴⁹McLean, *Bob Stuart’s All Blacks*, 86.

Wales. “After the claustrophobic atmosphere of Wales,” Terry McLean observed, “France seemed as free as the air.”⁵⁰ Players visited a variety of attractions from the central massif to the Folies Bergère. They also witnessed an example of the connections between French and New Zealand rugby when, at the dinner following the test match, four members of the 1968 French touring team to New Zealand sang a Maori song they had learned during their tour.⁵¹

From the 1970s, All Black tours to France were arranged in their own right, two-test tours occurring in 1977, 1981 (when the All Blacks also visited Romania), 1986, 1990 and 1995. These tours were generally enjoyed by the players but highlighted cultural differences between France and New Zealand. In 1977, the problem lay with communication, the translators supplied by the French Rugby Union being, in Haden’s assessment, “two dunces from the English class.”⁵² Dining arrangements proved problematic, especially for New Zealanders used to well-cooked steaks.⁵³ During the 1981 tour, the team had to travel for four hours by train between La Rochelle and Paris after being misinformed as to the departure time of their flight, and there were recurring difficulties with obtaining the team’s allocation of match tickets.⁵⁴ Murray Mexted believed this was not simply coincidental, asserting “the French intentionally appoint a nincompoop as a liaison officer with a touring team. And when the touring team tires of his ineptitude they replace him with an idiot.”⁵⁵ These issues seemed to be resolved in later tours, although some players engaged in low-key protests about French Nuclear testing in the Pacific on the 1995 tour, one of the rare occasions international politics influenced rugby connections between the nations.⁵⁶

Cultural differences aside, New Zealanders respect the ability of the acumen French as rugby analysts. Terry McLean approvingly quoted Jean Prat’s observation on halfback Kevin Briscoe “that Briscoe is a very funny man. But he does not play with humour.”⁵⁷ David Kirk announced his decision to retire shortly after the World Cup in 1987 in the French newspaper *Libération*, partly because he “doubted a French paper would be translated” but also because he “thought the French would understand” his reasoning, a perception which proved accurate.⁵⁸ Rugby is one of the few areas in which the French acknowledge New Zealand expertise. During the 1980s French Coach Jacques Fouroux controversially modelled his team on the All Blacks, adopting a more conservative, power-based game.⁵⁹

France has provided a distinct “other” against which New Zealand Rugby has defined itself. Yet while New Zealand representations of French rugby have highlighted perceived differences between the two nations approach to the game, there is also

⁵⁰ McLean, *They Missed The Bus: Kirkpatrick’s All Blacks of 1972/73* (Wellington, 1973), 91.

⁵¹ McLean, *They Missed the Bus*, 91-92.

⁵² Haden, *Boots ‘n All*, 156.

⁵³ Haden, *Boots ‘n All*, 157-60; Mourie and Palenski, 113.

⁵⁴ Haden, *Boots ‘n All*, 168-80; Mourie and Palenski, 191-211.

⁵⁵ Mexted and Veysey, 65.

⁵⁶ Bob Howitt and Robin McConnell, *Laurie Mains* (Auckland, 1996), 198.

⁵⁷ Terry McLean, *Willie Away. Wilson Whineray’s All Blacks of 1963-64* (Wellington, 1964), 23.

⁵⁸ Kirk, 132.

⁵⁹ Kirk, 120, 148-49.

significant common ground. In both nations rugby is allied to masculinity and is a subject of serious sporting analysis by both players and the sporting-minded public.