‘TAKING OFF THE GLOVES’:
SECTARIANISM IN NEW ZEALAND RUGBY IN THE 1920s.

Seán Brosnahan, Otago Settlers Museum.

This account of sectarianism in New Zealand sport represents the intersection of two stories. The first relates to Irish Catholic identity formation, specifically through the development of sports organisations based on religious affiliation and linked to the Catholic school network. The second relates to anti-Catholic feeling and activity by those in the Protestant majority population who contested Catholic claims to a separate space within New Zealand society. The two stories come together in Dunedin in 1922 when the boys of the Christian Brothers’ school were excluded from a primary school rugby competition. This was not the first time Catholic school boys had been the target of such exclusion in New Zealand and nor was it the last. But the Dunedin exclusion spread to other codes until Catholic school children were excluded from competitions against Dunedin state primary schools in rugby, soccer, cricket, athletics, swimming, netball, tennis and hockey. Moreover the exclusion endured, despite regular approaches to have it rescinded, until 1977.

Catholic rugby teams have long been an accepted part of the New Zealand rugby landscape. There are 28 ‘Marist’ clubs spread across almost all of the country’s provincial unions. They form one of New Zealand’s strongest rugby networks and have contributed significantly to the development of the game for over a century. Sociologists have made a number of observations about the function of sports teams based on sectional identities as a structural and cultural force for social integration. This reflects the paradox whereby such teams reinforce cleavages within society but help create social integration by preserving cultural diversity and allowing this to be expressed in a benign way. Geoff Fougere has applied this theory to New Zealand

1 A Wellington Public Schools Union had excluded Marist school boys from its rugby competition in 1906. The exclusion endured despite public opposition for a number of years but was no longer in force by 1921. In 1922, however, a Christchurch Primary Schools Association followed the Dunedin lead and excluded Marist school from all of its sporting competitions. Marist had won the school rugby competition in seven of the previous eight seasons. This prompted fears that the senior Marist Rugby Club – the top rugby side in Christchurch for five years in a row - would switch to rugby league in protest and there was much relief in rugby circles when it did not. A subsequent dispute in 1924, however, led to the Marist Club’s expulsion from rugby and it did then make the switch to league. The latter incident is analysed in depth by Judge W.F. Brown, ‘The Payne Trophy Dispute – Was Sectarianism a Factor?’ University of Canterbury M.A. Research Essay in History, 1988. There was also a school level exclusion in Auckland. The Marist School history records a temporary switch to soccer there around 1923. ‘[I]n Auckland in the ‘twenties discussion over Vermont Street’s pre-eminence and participation led to the school being debarred from the Primary School’s Rugby Competition.’ Pat Gallagher, The Marist Brothers in New Zealand Fiji & Samoa 1876-1976, Tuakau, 1976, p. 114. I have no further information on the Auckland situation and am unaware of how long the Christchurch school exclusion endured.

2 The name ‘Marist’ comes from the Société de Marie (Society of Mary) the Catholic religious order which introduced Catholicism to New Zealand in 1837. Marist priests and brothers subsequently established and staffed the Catholic schools out of which many of the senior Catholic rugby clubs developed.


rugby, demonstrating how what he calls the tribal unity principle comes into play. ‘I against my brother; my brother and I against my cousin; I and my brother and my cousin against the world’.  

Rugby thus reflects social or cultural differences but is also able to integrate these differences at a higher level. This is as true for spectators and supporters as it is for active players. Club partisanship emphasises differences, especially when aligned with social or religious alignments, but regional partisanship submerges this in a common bond at the next level of organisation, as does national loyalty on the international sporting stage.

Catholic sports clubs in New Zealand have also generally reflected an Irish ethnic dimension. They have traditionally worn some variant of a green jersey and usually been referred to as ‘The Greens’ in local sporting shorthand. In the early days, Irish symbols were also often worn as emblems. Christian Brothers’ School soccer teams in Dunedin had shamrocks on their green jerseys in the 1910s, while the all-conquering Christchurch Marist senior rugby teams of the early 1920s bore an Irish harp on theirs. ‘Celtic’ and ‘Athletic’ were often adopted as Catholic club names but ‘Marist’ eventually became the overwhelming favourite. On the face of it this suggests a French Catholic influence but in fact, by the time the sports teams were being established in the early 20th century the Marist teaching orders in New Zealand were largely staffed by Irish or colonially-born priests and brothers and the ‘Marist’ label had been symbolically hibernised.

Catholic rugby clubs have been ‘open’ in their membership criteria in most cases and times. The Invercargill Marist club ‘closed’ its membership to old boys of the Marist school circa 1935 but this was the exception rather than the norm. In parts of the country with a strong Irish presence, Catholic players would often be as common in rival teams as in the ‘Marist’ one. South Canterbury, for example, would find Timaru Celtic teams up against country teams from Temuka, Waimate or Geraldine, stacked with Catholic players. As recently as the 1980s the North Harbour Marist side was abused by an opposing player from Takapuna as ‘nothing but ‘Catholic scum’’. A later count-up in the dressing shed revealed that there were probably more

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5 Fougere quotes the example of Marist (Catholic) vs Zingari (Protestant) clubs from his boyhood in Timaru. In fact the Timaru ‘Marist’ club is actually called Celtic but the example is still valid. A subsidiary point of interest in the Catholic-Protestant dialectic of these two clubs is that they have traditionally combined during times of crisis, such as wartime. Moreover dissidents from either club have historically ‘gone over’ to the other to express their dissatisfaction. Thus one of Zingari’s most notable All Blacks was the devout Catholic Morrie Goddard, originally from Celtic but who left after a falling out with that club while his brother Jack (also an All Black) remained a Celtic stalwart.  

6 The Dunedin Rugby Club is one of the few Marist network clubs whose name gives no indication of its Catholic link. This is because the club which began in 1871 only took on a ‘Catholic’ identity during a crisis in 1919 when an alliance was made with the Christian Brothers’ school to save the club from losing its senior status. See Graeme Donaldson, Dunedin Rugby Football Club, 1871-1996: 125 years history of the Club, Dunedin, 1996, pp.19-20.

7 Timaru’s Fr Le Floch is the only Frenchman who is associated with the founding of a Catholic rugby club. For details see Seán Brosnahan A Century of Green: the Timaru Celtic Rugby Club 1906-2005, Timaru, 2006, pp.19-21.


Catholics in his Takapuna team than in the Marist side. Nonetheless his comments are part of a common thread in traditional rugby rivalries around the country that have particularly relished ‘a good old stouc with the Doolans’. The ‘Doolans’ have generally been just as keen to take up the challenge. Undoubtedly, such rivalries, safely absorbed within the broader unity of rugby, have provided something of a safety valve for ethnic and religious tensions.

Catholic club rugby grew out of the Catholic school system but the development of formally Catholic senior clubs only began in 1906 when Timaru’s Celtic Club was established. This reflected an important broadening of rugby’s player base in the early 20th century. Notwithstanding traditions of a democratic ethos in New Zealand rugby, more recent studies have exposed the de facto exclusion of working men from active involvement in the code in the 19th century. It was only with the gradual extension of rights to a weekly half-holiday in the early 1900s that working people could realistically participate in organised sport. Freed to play, however, there was an explosion in numbers of rugby players in particular, their enthusiasm further stimulated by the exploits of the 1905 ‘Original’ All Blacks, which helped lift rugby into a privileged position as New Zealand’s ‘national game’.

The expansion in player bases for popular sports like rugby was mirrored in the development of school level competitions. These had been traditional at boys’ secondary schools from a much earlier point but as few New Zealand families could afford to have their children educated to secondary level, these contests merely reinforced the de facto exclusiveness of sporting organisations. It was only in the early 20th century that primary school children were seriously targeted by sporting codes, looking to develop feeder systems to their senior teams. The first Rugby Union-organised competition for primary school teams in Dunedin, for instance, was held in 1898 but only a couple of city schools participated. Union representatives sought support from primary school teachers, urging them to play a greater role in promoting and organising the code but their appeals largely fell on deaf ears. Before the First World War, most state primary teachers believed they had quite enough to do in their schools without organising games as well.

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11 Knight, Clubs, p.148.
12 Donaldson, Dunedin Rugby Football Club, p.93.
13 There are anecdotes of Mackenzie Country rugby dividing sharply over the sectarian line in the 1920s. The Fairlie Club was ‘Green’ and a rival Aorangi Club was ‘Orange’. Likewise in nearby Albury, Protestant players found themselves struggling to win selection for the Catholic-dominated Albury team in 1921 so formed an ‘Orange’ rival in the Te Ngawai Club. ‘Thankfully for the MacKenzie Country these differences were generally vented on the football field rather than other places.’ John Button and Jeremy Sutherland, Leather and Tussock: a History of Rugby Football in the Mackenzie Country 1875-2003, Timaru: Corporate Print, 2003, p.19. Both pairs of rival teams eventually combined and old enmities were forgotten.
15 Interest in boy’s physical health was mainly directed to the Junior Cadet movement until its abolition in 1912. A new physical education syllabus was introduced in 1908 but this was still focussed on physical drill and gymnastics rather than organised games. In 1903 a group of Otago teachers issued a pamphlet decrying new demands being placed on them by manual training, technical education, physical education and military drill. Brian Sutton-Smith, A History of Children’s Play: the New Zealand Playground 1840-1950, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981, p.183.
Catholic schools were somewhat different. Staffed almost entirely by religious teachers – priests, brothers and sisters – the Catholic schools enjoyed an advantage over their state school rivals in having a workforce totally dedicated to the life of the school and its community. The religious teachers often worked in parlous conditions, with overcrowded and poorly equipped classrooms, and were not even paid. Their commitment was rooted in their vowed life of poverty, chastity and obedience. Many devoted enormous energy to extra-curricular activities for their pupils. Encouraging games, as well as cultural activities, had always been an integral part of the educational philosophy of the Marist Fathers, Marist Brothers and the Christian Brothers of Ireland, the three male religious organisations who staffed New Zealand’s Catholic schools. Priests and brothers were often superb coaches, occasionally verging on the fanatical, spending long hours training their boys and glorying in their exploits on the sports fields.

Unsurprisingly, Catholic school teams were frequently dominant in early primary school rugby competitions.\(^{16}\) This was important for the Catholic community for whom the independent schools were a heavy financial burden as well as a flagship of communal identity. Successes in any field made the sacrifices seem worthwhile and vindicated the raison d’etre of the whole Catholic church-school complex. The schools’ achievements on the rugby field boosted their reputations, both to their own community and to the wider society.\(^ {17}\) The *Tablet* newspaper never missed an opportunity to crow about Catholic school successes, endlessly boosting such achievements to promote support for the Catholic system. This inspired a relentless pursuit of success that could, however, be counter-productive. The hyper-competitive approach generated resentment from rival schools, particularly when Catholic teams seemed to push the boundaries of sportsmanship in pursuit of victory.

Around the turn of the century the Christian Brothers’ school in Dunedin was punching well above its weight in sporting competitions, especially rugby. In 1900 it won the primary rugby competition run by a Schools’ Football Association.\(^ {18}\) In 1902 the Christian Brothers provided the largest number of players for an Otago representative primary team.\(^ {19}\) Rugby was still struggling to win support from the city’s state schools. In 1903 the Christian Brothers’ principal Br Fogarty helped draw up the rules for a rugby competition but only seven of the more than twenty state schools in the Dunedin area were involved.\(^ {20}\) The competition was duly won by the Christian Brothers.\(^ {21}\) The following year there were rumblings about the size of some of the Christian Brothers’ players (at least two of the stars had been in the 1901

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\(^{16}\) This was the case in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, the West Coast, Wanganui, Napier and Timaru as the relevant school histories record and contemporary reports in the *Tablet* attest.

\(^{17}\) St Patrick’s College Wellington famously opened in 1885 with the 20 odd foundation scholars all chipping in a shilling to buy a football as their first task on the first day. Led by their diminutive halfback, Thomas O’Shea, the boys formed a rugby team that defeated all challengers. Its footballing success was credited with inspiring a boosted roll of over 100 in the second year. O’Shea went on to be Archbishop of Wellington and Metropolitan of the church in New Zealand. *Sectare Fidem: St Patrick’s College Wellington 1885-1985*, Wellington 1985, p.19.

\(^{18}\) *Otago Witness*, 2 August 1900. The team won 11 games and drew one, defeating a primary age side from the Otago Boys High School in the final

\(^{19}\) *New Zealand Tablet*, 28 August 1902. The team played one representative match, defeating a Southland side

\(^{20}\) *OW*, 15 April 1903.

\(^{21}\) *OW*, 2 September 1903. In a virtual repeat of the 1901 season ten games were won, one was drawn and the final was against Boys High.
There were other protests through the season about ‘cheating’ but the Brothers’ team once again took out the senior primary competition. In 1905, however, the other schools took a firm stand, demanding that the Brothers’ senior team move up to the next grade as half a dozen of the team were considered to be too big for school rugby and their presence was said to be killing off enthusiasm for the game amongst their state school opponents. The Brothers refused to comply, opting instead to withdraw from rugby altogether and switch to the rival code of association football (soccer).

This proved a significant loss to rugby, not least because Br Brady had been secretary of the Schools’ Rugby Committee and none of the state teachers was prepared to take on the role in his place. This threw the organisational burden for primary school rugby back on the Otago Rugby Union who once more bemoaned the lack of support forthcoming from primary school teachers. The chairman of the Union made a special point of this at the 1907 annual meeting but with no apparent result. Meanwhile the Christian Brothers’ boys proved almost as good at soccer as they had been at rugby. They won the senior championship in 1909 in a 27-team competition and were also regular winners of 5-a-side tournaments. Their success in local athletics competitions was even more dramatic. In 1906 Christian Brothers’ boys took 19 firsts and 12 seconds in the 3rd annual athletics championships for Dunedin and suburban primary schools. In 1908 they took twice as many first prizes as all of the other Otago schools combined.

Publicity about the Christian Brothers’ sporting triumphs was not universally welcomed in Dunedin. A correspondent to the newspaper, who called himself Ulster, suggested that the Christian Brothers’ boys should be excluded from the athletics competition.

‘I do not mind the boys winning a few prizes at the sports, but I do contend that there are many boys attending our schools who are in every way as good, and better, athletes than those boys whose names appear in the paper this morning, but who are too modest to come forward.

This notion, that the Catholic boys were somehow putting the state school boys off participating in sports, was a recurring one, in Dunedin and elsewhere. It seems to have been an earlier version of the contemporary complaint that large Polynesian boys are too physically powerful for their Pakeha contemporaries to compete with on the field.

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22 OW, 27 April 1904. The two players in question were Collins and Bryant. A photograph of the 1901 championship side includes two players with these names, presumably the same boys. Christian Brothers’ School Diamond Jubilee Magazine 1876-1936, p.45 (Hocken: MS-2797/145).
23 OW, 10 May, 17 May and 31 May 1905.
24 Soccer seems to have been the preferred form of football in many Dunedin primary schools at this time.
25 NZT, 9 April 1908.
26 Ibid., 16 April 1908.
27 The ‘bigger boys’ claim also featured in the earlier Wellington exclusion. The Evening Post was unconvinced: ‘Is the ‘big boy’ figure a bogey? If there are such terrible young giants at the Marist schools, surely it is possible to handicap them. To sustain this argument about size the union has to show that the average standard ages at the Marist schools are higher than the State schools’ averages.’ 26 April, 1911.
rugby field. It may well reflect a small number of Catholic athletes who stayed on at school, beyond the usual leaving age, to excel in sports.28

The generation of boys who played in these first rugby competitions at primary school were the same boys who went off to the ‘great game’ of war a decade later. Their teachers went too. In fact, the state primary school teachers proved to be amongst the most ‘patriotic’ of all groups of New Zealand workers, joining up in such numbers that the school system was subjected to significant strains coping in their absence.29 The losses sustained on the battlefield had an impact on school staffing for years to come, accentuating a gender imbalance toward female teachers and reducing the number of skilled and experienced men in the profession. Perhaps more apposite to the present discussion, attitudes to war service also sharply divided the state teachers from their Catholic equivalents. The Catholic religious teachers did not enlist and when conscription was introduced in 1916, the possibility that they might be forced into military service became a hugely divisive issue between Catholics and Protestants.

This controversy, well covered elsewhere30, did nothing for relations between the two groups of teachers. In Dunedin it seems to have left a particular residue of bitterness and an animosity toward the Christian Brothers that became quite personal to some key individuals in the local teaching profession.31 Men like (Colonel) George Macdonald, headmaster of the Macandrew Road School for instance, who was a former commanding officer of the 1st Regiment of the Otago Mounted Rifles and had acted through the war as embarkation officer for the Otago military district. John Moir was another. He served in the Otago Infantry Regiment and reached the rank of Major and second in command of his battalion. After the war he would become headmaster of Caversham School, and of the Normal School in 1922. Then there was David Forsyth, a younger teacher from North East Valley school, who served with the Fourth Otago Regiment in France and returned to a long and influential career in Dunedin schools.

These men were to play a key role in the development of the Otago State Primary Schools Sporting Association after the war. This was a new organisation, developed out of a number of fledgling bodies in athletics and swimming, which emerged in 1921 as an umbrella organisation to co-ordinate all sporting activities in Dunedin’s state primary schools. In itself, this reflected a sea change in the teachers’ attitude to sports, largely occasioned by the war itself, which had revealed a disturbingly low

28. This is impossible to test from the poor records that survive for Christian Brothers’ pupils in this period. Christian Brothers’ School Admission, Progress and Withdrawal Register, 1885-1934. (Hocken Collections, MS-2797/002).
29. An education conference held in August 1918 heard that the ‘the teaching profession at present was honeycombed with discontent, and the service conditions were fast becoming intolerable.’ Grey River Argus, 17 August 1918.
31. Matters were not helped by the personalities of the Brothers either. Brother Barnabas O’Ryan who was principal of Christian Brothers in Dunedin 1914-17 was a notoriously stubborn man who was also vociferous in his Irish nationalist sympathies. His successor, Brother Paulinus Bowler, offered little improvement on the diplomatic front; as a novice he was once reprimanded as ‘the champion grumbler of the [Australasian] Province’ and was noted for his fiery temper and forthrightness. Information from Brother Dominic Odbbens, Christian Brothers Archives.
level of general health among New Zealand’s young men. Team sports were now seen as an ideal way of preparing boys for the discipline required for war, as well as a way of having fun. The Dunedin Teachers’ College made participation in team sports compulsory for trainees in the 1920s and male teachers were also encouraged to become coaches. This new enthusiasm for sport also encompassed sports administration. The Otago State Primary School Sports Association aspired to total control of all sports in the schools. It could guarantee a huge pool of potential players to any sports body that was prepared to co-operate with it.

This did not of course need to have any implications for the Christian Brothers’ School which had co-operated with the state schools in sporting competitions for some time. The first indication that it would come in mid-1918 when the Dunedin and Suburban Headmasters’ Association approached the Caledonian Society, laying down a set of conditions for the running of the Society’s junior athletics competitions. Chief among these was a condition as to which schools could participate. It was immediately apparent that this was aimed simply at excluding the Christian Brothers’ pupils from the Society’s annual athletics championship. The Caledonian Society roundly rejected the Headmasters’ approach, notwithstanding that this might mean the death knell of its schools’ competition. ‘To do so’ declared the Society’s President: would mean the violation of the non-sectarian, non-political principles upon which the society was founded and the abandonment of the free and open policy which has characterised the conduct of sport throughout its history.

The Caledonian Society’s clear repudiation of the sectarianism implicit in the Headmasters’ Association proposal is an important reminder of how unpopular such approaches were in mainstream Protestant New Zealand society. Explicit sectarianism made polite New Zealand society squeamish. Quite simply, it was bad form to make distinctions based on a person’s religion, or at least to be open and frank about doing so. Public reaction to the Headmasters’ initiative reflected the strength of a countervailing tradition in New Zealand that rejected sectarianism as out of place and

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33 The OSPSSA President George Macdonald also referred to this ‘revolution which had taken place in State primary school education in the way of assisting the mental training by physical training and the introduction of games’ as one of the key reasons for the formation of his Society. ODT, 16 April 1923.

34 ‘That these sports be open to State Schools under the Control of the Otago Education Board, and the Board of Governors of the Otago Boys High School, Waitaki Boys High School, Gore High School, and the King Edward Technical College.’ Copy in Caledonian Society scrapbook, (Hocken Collections, MS 1045-31).

35 *Truth*, 27 July 1918. The Brothers’ boys had dominated the athletics competition the previous year and W B McEwan, a member of the Caledonian Committee suggested that the headmasters ‘had not got over the licking they received last year. They were still sore. He would be sorry to see the sports discontinued, but he would rather see the society go down altogether than accept the conditions.’ Sutton-Smith notes how the rapid expansion of sports competitions for primary schools in the 1920s was characterised by an excessive competitiveness between schools. By the 1930s this was being reigned in, with less focus on winning and greater emphasis on participation. *Children’s Play*, pp.236-238.

36 Ibid. The Caledonian Society was the first Scottish society formed in New Zealand, established in Dunedin in 1862. Its annual Highland Games on New Year’s Day was notable for attracting all sections of the community.
‘un-British’. The Caledonian Society’s James Brown appealed to this tradition in noting the Society’s ‘free and open British principles which had guided them throughout a long and honourable life.’ \(^{37}\) The Headmasters’ stand thus attracted considerable public opprobrium. They reacted by refusing to meet further with the Caledonian Society and organised their own school sports, independently. The Caledonian Society’s games also continued, however, attracting record entries from Dunedin schools in 1919, and with the Christian Brothers’ school maintaining its record of high achievement.\(^{38}\)

The sense of distaste, evident in this controversy, is one reason why sectarianism remains largely under the radar in New Zealand history. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that Catholics in New Zealand were subject to discrimination, including in employment. Yet such discrimination was seldom overt.\(^{39}\) It operated at a subterranean level – everyone knew where the sectarian boundaries were, nobody acknowledged their existence formally.\(^{40}\) Likewise there was the view, discussed by O’Connor, that saw New Zealand as ‘a Protestant country in which the Catholics should be grateful for mere tolerance.’\(^{41}\) When events conspired to expose some of these underlying attitudes, the customary response was to deplore the very idea that the evil canker of sectarianism might be found in New Zealand.\(^{42}\) This is why the push to exclude the Christian Brothers’ boys from Dunedin primary school sports is so useful. It lays bare some of the sectarian animosity that was usually cloaked in discretion.

While events like an annual athletics competitions could allow for co-existing systems – the public schools’ exclusive one and the Caledonian Society’s ‘open’ one -

\(^{37}\) Evening Star, 12 July 1918. Clipping in Caledonian Society scrapbook, (Hocken Collections, MS 1045-31).
\(^{38}\) Ibid. The 1918 games were cancelled in the general shut-down of schools caused by the influenza pandemic in November 1918. In 1919 the OSPSSA’s games were held (equally successfully) in October and the Caledonian Society’s in December. By 1922, however, only the Christian Brothers’ boys were entering the Caledonian Society sports. Thomas Hussey diary, 26 November 1922, (Hocken Collections, AG-545/005). Despite Tablet appeals to support the Caledonian Society ‘who had stood by our boys’, bad weather and poor crowds undermined the financial viability of the Caledonian games which petered out in the late 1920s (though they were later revived). Caledonian Society Scrapbook, (Hocken Collections, MS 1045-31).
\(^{39}\) See for instance Fr John Pound’s memoir of growing up with Dan Davin in Invercargill in the 1920s: ‘The Catholic/Protestant thing in Invercargill in the ’20s and ’30s was such that you would never get a job in the Crescent – among stock firms, banks and insurance companies – if you were a Catholic. I remember Whitcombe & Tombes advertising jobs saying, “Catholics need no apply!”’ Janet Wilson (ed), Intimate Stranger: reminiscences of Dan Davin, Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2000, p.27.
\(^{40}\) Steven Fraser applies this concept of ‘constant but subterranean currents’ of sectarianism being brought to the surface in his anlysis of the conscription controversy during the war. Steven Fraser ‘Religion as Ethnicity: Catholicism in New Zealand’, BA Honours long essay, University of Otago, 1989.
\(^{41}\) O’Connor, ‘Sectarian Conflict’, p.4. This view was echoed by an OSPSSA delegate to the Rugby Union meeting in 1923: ‘Surely the private schools must recognise that, by the very establishment of such institutions they must suffer certain disadvantages.’ ODT, 16 April 1923.
\(^{42}\) Typical of this inclusive view is an Evening Post editorial decrying the earlier exclusion of Catholic school boys from rugby in Wellington: ‘We do not suggest the factor of religion has influenced the [Wellington Public Schools] union, but we do know that such a suggestion has been made, and it is very unpleasant to have such allegations current, especially as the obstinacy of the union gives some excuse for the circulation… It is important to the public welfare to give the boys of the Catholic schools all reasonable facilities to meet lads of other schools on the field of play. Those who have to work together in the future will be better for some play together during school days.’ EP, 2 June 1913.
such an arrangement would not be practical for rugby (or soccer). This became significant in 1921 when, after repeated overtures from the Rugby Union, the Christian Brothers’ school applied successfully for re-admission to the Dunedin primary schools rugby competition. No problems were reported in the resulting games and in its annual report the Schools Rugby Committee assessed the season as ‘the most successful on record’ for primary school rugby in Dunedin.

Mid-year, however, the Otago Public Schools’ Amateur Athletic Association, the organisation established to exclude the Brothers’ school from athletics competitions, formally merged with a ‘Sports Association’ to form the Otago State Primary Schools Sports Association. Its aim was to take over the running of all sporting events involving primary schools. Central to its mission was restricting such events exclusively to the public schools.

Rugby and soccer, the two main winter sporting codes, now became the battleground to decide the nature of primary school sport in Dunedin. At the beginning of the 1922 season, the OSPSSA established primary schools competitions in both codes on behalf of the Otago Rugby Union and the Otago Football Association. The only catch was that these would only be open to public (state) schools. Objections were immediately raised at the Rugby Union, chiefly by its treasurer Julius Dunne, who was a well-known Dunedin Catholic. His position – that it was unfair and unsporting to exclude the Christian Brothers’ and John McGlashan College boys – received wide support from other Union delegates. The Association was therefore asked to re-consider its position.

Matters came to a head at a meeting of the Otago Rugby Union Management Committee on 10 April 1922. Delegations from both the OSPSSA and supporters of the Christian Brothers were in attendance. The Rugby Union was very keen for the school teachers to compromise their position on excluding the private schools so that fair play and good sportsmanship could be seen to prevail. The teachers didn’t see it that way. Their position was that an Association of public school teachers would logically only concern itself with public school pupils and that they had quite enough to do catering for the sporting needs of some 12,000 public school children without having to worry about those in private schools. Indeed, their leader (Colonel) George Macdonald, a former President of the Otago Rugby Union, got increasingly annoyed.

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43 ODT, 29 March 1922. Christian Brothers’ School won the ‘C’ grade in the three tier primary rugby competition. Soccer was still the dominant code in Dunedin primary schools, however, and the Christian Brothers maintained their links with this code too, winning two of the 1921 school grade competitions.

44 The ongoing importance of this ‘principle’ is clear from the Association’s annual reports. From 1929-30 these included a statement highlighted in bold type that could only refer to the exclusion policy: ‘Our Association is an unusual and a valuable one, which has grown through the past years to a proud position. This position has been gained after much hard fighting, and a tradition and a policy have been established of which the senior members are justly proud. As the number of the original and senior members decreases, the duty devolves more and more on newer and younger members to maintain the highest traditions of the Association, and to guard against the violation of any of those principles on which the Association was founded, and for which it has in the past so strenuously and successfully fought.’ The same statement was repeated as the closing ‘injunction’ of the Association’s Souvenir Historical Record in 1942. OSPSSA Souvenir Historical Record and Twenty-First Annual Report 1941-42, p.14 (Hocken Collections, 96-207/6).

45 ODT, 27 March 1922. Dunne’s full name was St Julius James Dunne, commonly ‘Julius’.

46 A petition circulated later in support of an ‘open’ competition was signed by all of the Dunedin rugby clubs, most of the senior players as well as the Otago Cricket Association. ODT, 16 April 1924.
as his Association’s position came under attack. Under pressure, he said some things that would better have been left unsaid; the sort of things that usually weren’t stated openly in New Zealand. The newspaper duly reported his comments in full.

Macdonald began by traversing the history of the Christian Brothers’ involvement with rugby; especially the contretemps in 1906 over their ‘big heavy boys’ which he said had ‘driven the bulk of the schools out of Rugby’. The resulting switch to soccer had caused similar ructions there, ‘at any rate there was always bitterness in the games’ such that the other schools came back to rugby to avoid the Christian Brothers’ School. Now his Association had been formed to organise all sports in the primary schools:

‘The head master of the Christian Brothers’ school had said that bitter sectarianism was at the bottom of this trouble. Well, it might be, but he could assure them that sectarianism did not come into their schools at all. They had boys representing all sects playing in their school games …’

He then got a little sidetracked, making a series of accusations against the Christian Brothers over events at a recent concert to celebrate St Patrick’s Day. Chief among his complaints was that the national anthem had not been sung – ‘as usual, the thing which the State teachers always treated with the greatest respect was not treated with respect’. Moreover, according to Mr Macdonald, Brother Bowler had made a jibe at this concert about the state teachers having to sign an oath of allegiance on 1 April, which being April Fool’s day was a very appropriate occasion to make such an oath. This prompted a diatribe on loyalty and war service, which exposed a smouldering sense of resentment at the ‘disloyalty’ shown by the Brothers during the recent war.

‘The State teachers taught loyalty to King and Empire, and the statement of the head of the Christian Brothers’ School was not teaching loyalty. They had been accused of want of sportsmanship, but in the great war the primary State school teachers held the record for the percentage in New Zealand of any profession, trade or organisation who went to the front. Yet they were accused of not showing sportsmanship, but they showed it when the great trial of sportsmanship came. What did the teachers of these denominational schools do? They applied for exemption all round – they shirked it – they did not go to the front. He was sorry to bring this forward, but when they were being attacked as they were it was time to take off the gloves and deal with the question without gloves. They had another test of sportsmanship. They had sent over 100,000 men from New Zealand to the front, and the greater majority of these had been trained in their primary State schools. And they had stood the test with the best men in the world. Surely that was a test of sportsmanship. Moreover they had trained the very large percentage of these boys. Loyalty was one of their strongest points in their schools. They had been loyal to the Ruby Union, and they had been loyal to the game right through. Were the Christian Brothers loyal? ‘No I say not’, continued the speaker. ‘They were disloyal.’ They would not abide by the ruling of the committee – they had gone out of the game, when they had driven the greater proportion of the boys out of soccer they had come back again. ‘And I say here’ went on Mr Macdonald, ‘that if you are loyalists if

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47 ODT, 11 April 1922.
48 Brother Bowler denied these allegations. He had not attended any concerts held on St Patrick’s Day nor made any such remarks as attributed to him about the school teachers’ oath of allegiance. ODT, 13 April 1922. The oath of allegiance was compulsory for state school teachers from March 1922.
you are loyal to King and Empire, if you are Britishers, you will uphold what we have done. And I say that if you are not prepared to uphold it you are not fit to sit on this committee.49

The rugby union delegates were not much impressed with what one called the ‘narrowmindedness’ of the teachers. Nonetheless, they could see that their interests, and the future of rugby union in the schools, would be better served by accepting the OSPSSA’s position than by standing out for the Christian Brothers’ boys and risk losing the teachers’ co-operation. As one delegate put it, ‘Were they going to throw over the association for the sake of 60 players as against 1000 players in the State schools?’ Faced with an ultimatum from the OSPSSA, the Union delegates voted to delegate the organisation of primary school rugby to the Association for the 1922 season. As a sop to their consciences they passed a second motion to form a committee to arrange football for the excluded schools. Julius Dunne could only record his opposition: ‘You have let the tail wag the dog. You have a treasurer and you won’t let his boy play football.’ The chairman asked for forbearance from the excluded schools and expressed the hope that ‘the present trouble might solve itself in due course.’50

With rugby duly under the control of the OSPSSA, the local soccer administration offered even less resistance. Its annual meeting had passed a resolution appointing two delegates of the OSPSSA to its management committee. This virtually ensured that its 1922 primary school competitions would be delegated to OSPSSA control. A countervailing deputation was received from the Christian Brothers’ supporters but to no avail.51 Brother Bowler then fought a rearguard action from within as a Vice President of the Otago Football Association, but each time he called a special general meeting to re-consider the matter, no-one but the Catholic supporters turned up and each meeting failed for want of a quorum. Nettled by these proceedings, Brother Bowler offended his fellow delegates with a strident letter, refused to apologise for its contents and was duly expelled as a member and official of the OFA.52 The Christian Brothers’ boys were now out of both football codes at primary level.

The question of Catholic ‘loyalty’, central to George Macdonald’s hostility to the Christian Brothers’ school, was particularly topical in early 1922. As the debate raged in Dunedin about schoolboy rugby, James Liston, the Catholic Bishop of Auckland and an old boy of Christian Brothers’ Dunedin, was defending himself against a charge of sedition over comments he had made at a St Patrick’s Day concert in Auckland. Dunedin Catholics had also caused offence in marking the same occasion, by failing to sing the national anthem, as noted by George Macdonald.53

49 ODT, 11 April 1922.
50 Ibid.
51 The prominent Dunedin Catholic lawyer J B Callan, later a Supreme Court judge, led this deputation. He referred to ‘largely-signed petitions which had been circulated among the various sports clubs’, which he suggested showed that public sympathy was with the Christian brothers. ODT, 11 April 1922.
52 Otago Football Association Minutes, April – September 1922, AG 709, Hocken Collections, Dunedin.
53 This was the second year in a row that this ‘slight’ to the Empire had been offered at a Dunedin St Patrick’s Day concert. In 1921 the anthem issue prompted an impassioned letter to the Otago Daily Times from ‘Patriot’ on ‘The Question of Irish Loyalty’ which stated the popular view that ‘There is no room in New Zealand for disloyalists.’ ODT, 19 March 1921.
Contemporary events in Ireland exacerbated these irritations, while the Protestant Political Association added fuel to the fire. It advertised a meeting in Dunedin just days before the Rugby Union hearing by proclaiming that there were only three classes of ‘responsible adult’ in New Zealand: ‘those working to destroy our glorious Empire’, ‘the indifferent doing nothing to safeguard a heritage bought by the blood of heroes and martyrs’ and loyal members of the P.P.A.  

Loyalty was a particular pre-occupation for the teaching profession. The war years cast a long shadow. As Roger Openshaw has noted in his study of patriotism in New Zealand primary schools, ‘Those who failed for one reason or another to take part in the patriotic rituals of a society at war were often regarded with suspicion, if not hatred … the emphasis on conformity bred a deep distrust of those who clearly stood outside the main body of society.’

This led in the immediate post-war years to persecution of teachers who had been military defaulters and a demand for outward demonstrations of ‘loyalty’. Flag-saluting ceremonies were one manifestation of this, as was the institution of a loyalty oath for anyone wanting to teach in the state system from March 1922. The fixation with loyalty in the school system reached a zenith in 1922. It was in part a reaction to fears of militant socialism and the threat posed by international unrest. Irish Catholics were a secondary focus; their apparent dissidence over Irish affairs compounded no doubt by growing Catholic enthusiasm for Labour politics.

How ‘loyal’ were the Christian Brothers? Clearly, none had gone to war, and according to the definition of loyalty espoused by George Macdonald, had thus proven themselves to be ‘shirkers’. But what of their pupils? Did Christian Brothers’ boys serve at the war at a rate comparable to their state school peers? It was the boys after all who were going to suffer more than their masters by being excluded from the sports. Considerable cross-tabulation of soldiers’ educational records would be required to provide a firm answer. A less robust analysis is possible, however, by examining First World War casualty rates for Dunedin primary schools, based on various Rolls of Honour prepared in the 1920s. Comparing the number of casualties recorded on such Rolls with attendance figures for the same cohort of school boys in the 1890s, provides a very rough index of the numbers who paid the ultimate price for ‘loyalty’. On this scale of sacrifice, an odious measurement to be sure, the Christian Brothers’ old boys compare more than favourably with their state school contemporaries. At least 83 of them died on war service from an average school attendance 1893-1895 of 256 boys. This gives a ratio of 32.42 per cent. Only four

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54 ODT, 1 April 1922. According to O’Connor the P.P.A. was particularly strong in Otago and Southland. O’Connor, ‘Sectarian Conflict’, p.10.


56 Ibid., p.2.

57 In 1925 the Auckland Primary Schools Association proposed that only those educated in state schools should be permitted to teach in them. This was clearly aimed to exclude Catholics from the profession and was prompted by the case of an Auckland Girls’ Grammar School girl who wanted to convert to Catholicism, supposedly proselytised by her Catholic teacher. New Zealand Truth, 4 April 1925.

58 This figure is based on an undated draft roll of honour prepared by the Christian Brothers [OSM Archives], while the school roll numbers are estimated from annual reports in the newspapers: NZT, 21 December 1893, school roll 312; NZT, 28 December 1894, 310 on the roll; ODT, 21 December 1895, ‘the number on the roll is the same as usual – about 300.’ This gives an average attendance of
Dunedin primary schools exceed this rate of ‘sacrifice’; most were well short of it, including George Macdonald’s Macandrew Road School.\(^{59}\)

None of this mattered much as the sporting issues were debated in 1922. Whatever New Zealand Catholics might have done in the war, some of their leaders were now clearly out of kilter with contemporary definitions of ‘loyalty’. For the state primary school teachers, or at least for the leaders of the OSPSSA, these questions over Catholic ‘loyalty’ had become entwined with older grievances over sport. The Catholic response to being excluded from rugby and soccer was bombastic – ‘if there was any question of taking the gloves off they would find a few to take them on,’\(^{60}\) claimed prominent Catholic layman Tom Hussey at a public meeting held to lambast the OSPSSA, the Rugby Union and Football Association – but ineffectual. There was really nothing to be done but to wait out the storm. The Rugby Union, true to its word, organised a secondary schools’ competition and invited the Christian Brothers to participate. Brother Bowler declined, somewhat churlishly, organising internal competitions within his school instead to provide rugby and soccer for all who wanted to play.

Julius Dunne was not prepared to let the matter go so easily. At the Rugby Union’s annual meeting in March 1923 he lost no time in putting up a proposal that ‘the Schools Primary Competition be open to all schools’.\(^{61}\) This motion was lost but the issue was deferred to a special general meeting to which the OSPSSA, the Christian Brothers’ School and John McGlashan College representatives would all be invited. This meeting once again demonstrated how unpopular the school teachers’ exclusive policy was among Dunedin rugby supporters. Representatives of many Dunedin rugby clubs spoke against it, as did the Otago Boys’ High and University Club delegates.\(^{62}\) The OSPSSA remained obdurate, however. George Macdonald revealed the roots of his hostility to Catholic schools lay in experience of endemic ‘bitterness’ with Catholic schools in sport during his youth in Australia.\(^{63}\) The Association was

\(^{59}\) State school average attendances are provided by an annual table in the Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives, E1, Table 8. The number of boys has been calculated at 50 per cent of these figures, assuming a roughly even gender split at each school. Casualty rates are derived from each school’s Roll of Honour, where these were compiled. The ratios for Dunedin primary schools in descending order are thus: Wakari 40.78 per cent; Mornington 39.79 per cent; Kaikorai 38.04 per cent; Andersons Bay 36.67 per cent; North East Valley 21.72 per cent; Green Island 19.7 per cent; Albany Street 18.37 per cent; High Street 17.05 per cent; Macandrew Road 15.83 per cent; Caversham 15.53 per cent; Forbury 13.98 per cent; Union Street 10.83 per cent. Insufficient data was available to make the calculation for George Street, Arthur Street, Kensington and the Normal School.

\(^{60}\) \(ODT\), 13 April 1922.

\(^{61}\) \(ODT\), 16 April 1923. \(‘[H]e was old enough to to have been in primary schools before free education came in. They had had all denominational schools in the town he had lived in in Australia – four of them. They never had a game between these schools that did not end in a fight. Then free education").
emphatic: it was going to run a rugby competition according to its constitution with or without the Rugby Union. Put to the vote, Julius Dunne’s proposal for an open competition was carried. Only the OSPSSA delegates voted against it.64

This apparent triumph for the Christian Brothers’ School soon proved to be a pyrrhic victory. The Rugby Union duly arranged its primary schools’ competition but the only entries received were from the Brothers’ school and it had to be abandoned. The OSPSSA went ahead and arranged its independent competition and demonstrated comprehensively its lock on primary school sport by attracting 52 teams.65 At year’s end, the OSPSSA applied to the Union for a grant to cover its costs. This was duly approved but the Union requested further negotiations to bring the primary competition back under its jurisdiction ‘and including all schools’.66 Having demonstrated its power so comprehensively in 1923, the OSPSSA was never going to accept the latter condition, although it was happy to co-operate with the Union if it accepted the Association’s position.

The Christian Brothers’ primary pupils had to be content with their intra-school rugby competition, while the older boys were able to play in the secondary school competitions organised by the Rugby Union.67 Over time, as secondary education expanded, these competitions became more significant. In 1930 the school applied to the Union for affiliation as a junior club, an important development that opened the way for senior school teams to participate in the Saturday rugby competitions alongside other club teams.68 John McGlashan College had adopted this course in 1923, while Otago Boys’ High School had enjoyed this status for many years. Dissatisfaction over the exclusion also led some Christian Brothers’ old boys to develop strong links with the rival rugby code of rugby league. This flourished briefly in Dunedin from 1925 and throughout its ten-year history rugby league competition in the city was dominated by the Christian Brothers’ Old Boys Rugby League Club.69

The exclusion of the Catholic schools from the whole gamut of sports that had come under the control of the OSPSSA became something of a forgotten issue as time went on. Periodically the Otago Rugby Union would approach the Association, asking it to open its rugby competition to all schools, but this was always politely rebuffed.70 As late as 1960 the OSPSSA regarded the exclusion of the private schools as integral to its operation. Following a further request from the Rugby Union at the OSPSSA’s

came in – Government schools were established, and the denominational schools were swept away. He never knew one game ending in a fight thereafter – all that bitterness was gone.’
64 Ibid. The report noted, however, that a number of delegates abstained.
65 Otago Witness, 14 March 1924. Later in the season the question arose as to selecting a representative primary school team to play a Southland side. The OSPSSA was quite happy to co-operate with the private schools in this and separate selectors were duly appointed to put together a team from the two groups. Brother Bowler accepted this arrangement ‘under protest’. ORFU Minutes, 13 August 1923.
66 ORFU Minutes, 15 October 1923.
67 The Christian Brothers’ School also began to organise its own competitions in other codes from which it was likewise excluded – athletics and swimming – as well as distinctive ones like boxing.
68 ORFU Minutes, 31 March 1930.
69 This story is well covered by Charles Little, ‘More Green than Red’. According to Little, the Christian Brothers’ Club seldom provided less than 25 per cent of the league players in Dunedin and won the senior competition in five of the ten years for which it was held. My thanks to Ron Palenski for alerting me to Little’s study.
70 The deputation in 1930-31 is detailed in OSPSSA Souvenir Historical Record, p.10.
40th annual meeting in that year, a special sub-committee was established to consider the matter. It took advice from one of the original architects of the policy, David Forsyth, Secretary to the Association in its founding years and by 1960 the headmaster of George Street Normal school. Forsyth wrote a report that reiterated all the main points made by George Macdonald back in 1922 and revealingly described ‘a violent “war” … waged within the Rugby Union, and between the Rugby Union and the O.S.P.S.S.A. over the question of the control of Schools Rugby.’

In a number of sports there were Club competitions, run on Saturdays rather than the OSPSSA’s Wednesday afternoon timeslot, which provided alternative options for Christian Brothers’ pupils. By the mid-1950s separate Catholic competitions were also an option, with an expanded network of Dunedin convent schools as well as the Christian Brothers’ and their new junior school ‘St Edmunds’. Arnold Manion, a Christian Brothers’ old boy and stalwart of the ORFU, began a Saturday morning rugby competition for Catholic schoolboys at Kettle Park under the auspices of the Dunedin Club. This endured until the 1980s when ‘New Age’ rugby was introduced and all of the city’s rugby clubs began to offer primary school level competition. By then, however, the OSPSSA had had a change of heart. At its annual meeting in 1977 it was agreed that private and independent schools should be allowed to affiliate. ‘State’ was removed from the Association’s title. Within months a dozen Catholic schools had joined (as well as the Anglican St Hilda’s). The benefit of their participation was quickly appreciated, adding ‘very challenging competition’ to the weekly sports.

What did it all mean? Immediately, in 1922, it was a sharp reminder to Dunedin’s Catholic population that claiming a special place within New Zealand society had its costs. Brother Bowler told the special meeting of Christian Brothers’ supporters of just that morning having heard an exchange in the street with a state school boy jibing a smaller Christian Brothers’ pupil with ‘You can’t play rugby’. It was an apt symbol of the Catholic position. Without the goodwill of their fellow Protestant citizens, self-segregation could be detrimental to the Catholic community’s civic wellbeing. As with previous episodes of sectarian discord – the Fenian procession on the West Coast in 1869, the Boxing Day riots in Timaru and Christchurch in 1879, Catholic Federation agitation over the schools in 1913, the conscription controversy in 1917 – creating a stir was never likely to benefit the Catholic position. Rather it exposed the weakness of a minority group at odds with the majority population. Perhaps for that reason the Catholic approach tended to be one of passive resignation

71 This letter is very much a ‘smoking gun’, confirming that the exclusion policy was directed against the Christian Brothers’ School and based on grievances over their supposedly over-sized boys going back to the earliest rugby competitions. ‘A brief account of the reasons leading to the formation of the Otago State Primary Schools’ Sports Association’, David Forsyth, 5 May 1960. (Hocken Collections, OPSSA Records, 96-207/7).
72 The decision to accept independent schools, prompted in part by the impending integration of Catholic schools into the state system, was not unanimous. One delegate maintained that even 55 years after the original exclusive policy ‘the time was not yet ripe for this action’. OPSSA Minutes, 22 March 1977.
73 OPSSA annual report, 1979-80. It was particularly noted in netball how the ‘highly-skilled smaller Catholic schools’ played at a much higher standard than the state schools.
74 ODT, 13 April 1922.
and even something of a withdrawal into a communal shell.\(^{75}\) The 55-year-long exclusion from Dunedin primary school sports was essentially ignored and Catholics found alternative opportunities for sports competition.\(^{76}\) Once ‘the gloves came off’, Catholics simply had to absorb the blows and wait for better times ahead.

\(^{75}\) This thesis is convincingly advanced by Peter and Denis Lenihan, ‘Southland’s Transplanted Galway’: One Family’s Story, unpublished manuscript, 2005, (copy in author’s possession). Commenting on the consequences of the sectarianism of the 1920s, they suggest:

\>[It seems to us looking back that Irish Catholics stayed in their shells for a generation. What happened with the Invercargill Catholic sporting clubs is one example, but on a wider front there were other characteristics of life in the 1940s and 1950s that seem odd by later standards. Very few Catholics in Invercargill took part in the life of the community - in local government, or in political parties, or in other community groups; there were only a handful of Catholic Irish in the professions or running businesses. Although there may have been other factors at work here such as lack of educational opportunities or lack of capital, there seemed also to have been a lack of will, an overabundance of caution. The atmosphere in which we grew up was such as to implicitly encourage keeping the head down in public so as not to attract attention as Catholic or Irish, the obverse of that being to emphasise the Irishness or Catholicity of an individual who was successful say in the sporting arena, which was of course one area where excellence was encouraged and there was a level playing field.]

\(^{76}\) References to the sports exclusions are strikingly sparse in Catholic histories. There seems almost to have been a voluntary communal amnesia about such incidents. I was too late to find any surviving Catholic rugby players from the 1920s or ‘30s to discuss this with. Two Dunedin Catholic rugby stalwarts from later eras interviewed for this article had little idea that their respective generations were operating under any such disadvantage. John Dowling played rugby at Christian Brothers’ school 1948-57. Subsequently he was an administrator of the Dunedin Rugby Club, and an executive member of the Otago Rugby Union, the New Zealand Rugby Union, and the International Rugby Board. Ross O’Connell was at St Patrick’s, South Dunedin, and St Edmund’s (Christian Brothers’ junior school) in the early 1970s. He has subsequently been a player and committee member of the Dunedin Rugby Club, Club Captain (2007-9) and is incoming president for 2010. John Dowling, interviewed by the author, 12 October 2009. Ross O’Connell, 1 November 2009.