

Lies, Myths and History: from Rugby and Baseball to Champagne and Bordeaux Wines

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There is a stone plaque on a wall by the playing fields of the famous English public school at Rugby, which reads as follows: “This stone commemorates the exploit of William Webb Ellis, who, with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature of the Rugby Game. AD. 1823.” There also stands, in front of the school, a statue of William running with an oval-shaped ball, and on the plinth at the base of the statue there is another plaque which reads: “The local boy who inspired the game of rugby football on the close at Rugby School in 1823.” Far away from the cold, damp climate of an East Midlands English winter in AD. 1823, beneath the azure skies of Menton, in south-east France, in a cemetery on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean, is a grave with a headstone inscribed: “... to William Webb Ellis, who gave rugby to his school in 1823, and then to the world”. And of course the trophy presented to the winners of the Rugby World Cup since 1987 is called, in honour of the local Rugby boy who started the game “The William Webb Ellis Trophy”. Perhaps some future archeologists, several thousand years from now, unearthing a wall-plaque, then a statue, then a faraway tombstone, and finally a silver trophy, will conclude that here is irrefutable concurring evidence of the veracity of this founding incident. And perhaps historians in some distant future will find more supporting evidence as they read the works of serious historians writing in the twentieth century – one hundred years or more after the event – corroborating the story of William Webb Ellis’s “fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his

time”, and his invention of the new game of rugby. There might even be some future archivists of the ether, who will discover that in December 2004, for example, according to the search engine “Google” there were about 325,000 websites mentioning William Webb Ellis. Many of these sites recount the 1823 incident. For example on www.XVdesgaulois.com : “William Webb Ellis était un sacré garnement qui n’en faisait qu’à sa tête. Lassé sans doute de taper dans le ballon, au beau milieu d’un match de football, il saisit la balle ronde à deux mains, la serra de toutes ses forces contre sa poitrine et courut la déposer dans l’embut adverse. Il venait d’inventer un nouveau sport, c’était en 1823, il jouait pour l’école de la bonne ville de Rugby en Angleterre”.

Unfortunately, the story of William Webb Ellis picking up the ball, running with it, and inventing the game of rugby, is false. It is perhaps a lie, at best a myth, despite the plaques and the stones and the statue and the documents. Here I am concerned not so much with the ‘grand architecture’ of historiography and sophisticated questions like the construction of meaning, but with the ‘building blocks’ of history, more specifically with the question of historical accuracy, and inaccuracy, over basic data. The true history of how rugby became a distinct game, indeed how all six different versions of football – association football or soccer, rugby union, rugby league, American football, Australian Rules football, and Gaelic or Irish football – emerged at specific times and under specific circumstances from what had been a common ancestor, is very interesting as a model of how cultural institutions develop. But not everyone is fascinated by the minutiae of sports history, and so I shall simply summarise what is of special relevance to the theme of “lies, myths, and history”.

The evidence that the William Webb Ellis incident ever took place is at best flimsy. The first-ever reference to it came over fifty years later, in 1876, and was made by an old gentleman called Matthew Bloxam who had not been present. He was an old boy of Rugby school but he had left three years earlier. Bloxam actually changed his story several times in different versions he gave between 1876 and 1880, and he never gave any source. In his first account, in 1876, he wrote a letter to the Rugby school magazine, *The Meteor*, contradicting what he had read in the *London Standard*, that the game of rugby was “... of great and unknown antiquity”. Very significantly, Bloxam was responding to this statement made in the 1870s, just five years after the game of rugby had at last been codified, and when it seemed as if the role of Rugby School was being overlooked. Bloxam at first stated that the game had originated during the 1830s. Only later did he change his mind and, without giving any

source, he changed his story and recounted the William Webb Ellis incident. Ellis himself was by now in no position to comment, for he had died in 1872 and was already resting under the blue skies of Menton. But former Rugby pupils who were still alive after Bloxam's story emerged, and who had been at the school in 1823 with Ellis, later had no recollection of the incident, and some denied it. So, that one reference, nearly sixty years later, by someone who was not there, who gave no sources, who changed his mind and who was contradicted by the memories of some who were there, is the very shaky origin of the Webb Ellis story, which has been perpetuated with such enthusiasm by historians and, especially, fans of rugby.

However, much more importantly in terms of the construction of history, even if Bloxam had unearthed from someone a story that was true, even if Ellis did pick up the ball and run with it in AD 1823, such an incident had no impact! Firstly, it did not create a new game at the school of Rugby. Nor, secondly, did it have any influence on the later emergence of a distinct game called rugby. According to the plaque, inscribed in stone, Ellis showed "a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time"; but in 1823 there was no game of football in the modern sense, there were no rules of any such game. To make this claim is in fact to show a fine disregard for an elementary rule of the construction of history, it is to commit the sin of anachronism. The distinction between soccer and rugby did not come about until the 1860s and 1870s. In the 1820s, every public school had its own version of a basically common game called football, in which both feet and hands could be used, and in which the aim was to keep possession of the ball and advance through a scrimmage (a pile of bodies); both feet and hands could be used to stop and control the ball, and to propel it towards the opponents goal. This game looked like a mixture of today's soccer and rugby, which is not surprising, because it was the ancestor of both games. Two points of historical fact are important here:

(1) The first practice of running with the ball at Rugby School, which then became accepted as part of the School game, occurred in 1838 when a boy called Jem Mackie tried and tested the idea, which was accepted by the other boys. This practice was incorporated in the first written rules of the Rugby School game, recorded in 1841. So there should be a plaque and a statue and a trophy commemorating Jem Mackie, dated AD 1838! 'History' has produced the wrong hero, at the wrong time, although, significantly, in the right place. Incidentally, we have a very detailed report of the game as played at Rugby school in the mid-1830s – after Webb but before Mackie – in Tom Brown's Schooldays by Thomas Hughes,

first published in 1857, and describing the game as played in Hughes' first year at the school, where he was a pupil from 1834 to 1842: there is a whole chapter devoted to a game in which there is no catching, holding, and running with the ball, no trace of any influence of a supposed Ellis incident eleven years before. But there are a lot of fascinating details for the historians of early rugby...

(2) Of interest to sports historians, football the kicking game and rugby the handling code as they are today diverged during the years between 1863, when the rules of the Football Association were written, and 1871, when the Rugby Union codified its rules. At that time, the split between the two games was not caused by a disagreement about handling the ball or running with it. For a while, in both games, handling and kicking the ball were allowed. Indeed, some games in the early 1870s played one half under association rules and the other half under rugby union rules, and the first international football series between England and Scotland consisted of two games under one set of rules and one under the other. It was only in November 1880 that an editorial in *The Times* was able to claim, "People now regard the two games as both good of their kind, but quite distinct."¹ The original difference between soccer and rugby, and the reason for the split into two distinct sports, was not about hands or feet. It came about because the Association or soccer rules of 1863 outlawed hacking (kicking the shins of your opponents) and tripping. It was the soccer rules forbidding these two 'manly' techniques for tackling an opponent that provoked the representative of Blackheath football club to refuse to play according to association rules and, with a handful of other clubs, to start the move towards what eight years later became rugby union.

The 'evidence' relating to William Webb Ellis was distorted over twenty years after Bloxam had first produced his story, when a sub-committee of the Old Rugbeians Society was set up, in 1895, to settle the question of the origins of rugby. They reported in 1897, and they it was who in 1900 (not in "AD 1823") had the William Webb Ellis plaque put up at Rugby school. They accepted Bloxam's final account of the Ellis incident (though by this time Bloxam himself had died), and they ignored all evidence to the contrary in letters from several old Rugby boys who were there at the time. The committee actually asked one witness to change his testimony about Ellis. Most of the evidence was quoted in detail in their report, which survives today in the Rugby School archives, and which was more balanced than the

¹ *The Times*, November 12 1880, page 4, column E.

plaque that they had put up would suggest. Surely, the plaque was installed in an over-enthusiastic attempt to prove beyond doubt that the game of rugby had originated at Rugby School, which is broadly speaking true – the game did evolve from that practised at Rugby School from the early 1840s onwards, but it happened neither in the way nor when the plaque states. Unfortunately for ‘History’, the Webb ‘lie’ or ‘myth’ has often been accepted as fact and has been maintained in many accounts ever since.

Abner Doubleday and the invention of baseball

If we now cross the Atlantic in search of the origins of that most American of sports, baseball, we find a story that almost exactly replicates that of William Webb Ellis and rugby. In Cooperstown in the state of New York, there is a stadium, a baseball museum, a Hall of Fame and a National Baseball Library, all erected to mark the spot and commemorate the centenary of the invention of baseball by a young man called Abner Doubleday, who in later years was to become a hero in the American Civil War.² It was on a field by the river in Cooperstown that, one summer morning in 1839, Doubleday had organised the first game of baseball. This ‘fact’ was later attested in a report published by ... a committee of enquiry into the origins of the game, a committee set up ... 65 years later: the Mills Commission of seven men chaired by the president of the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs. Their report concluded “... *that baseball was a purely American game ; that it owed nothing to any other game... ; that it had been invented by Abner Doubleday... while he was a boy at Cooperstown, New York, in the year 1839.*”³ The baseball World Series is not called the Abner Doubleday Trophy, but the online catalogue for the research library at the museum at Cooperstown is called the “ABNER Library Catalog” and the stadium is called “Doubleday Field”.

Unfortunately, the whole story is a myth, a lie: the committee of enquiry doctored the evidence, there is a better claimant for an individual who invented the sport, and in any case

² At least, a hero for one side: having been a cadet at West Point, he rose to become a successful general in the Union army.

³ This is a paraphrase in Nigel VINEY & Neil GRANT, *An Illustrated History of Ball Games*, London: Heinemann, 1978, p. 90.

baseball developed gradually over time. Actually – here is perhaps the root of the problem – it originated in an English school game called “rounders”.⁴ What happened?

The 1903 edition of the *Baseball Guide* published an article stating that baseball was derived from rounders. This led to the setting up of the Mills Commission, which somehow discovered in Abner Doubleday a more suitably heroic American as the inventor of baseball. But then, the Commission’s findings were immediately demonstrated to be false: a New York librarian showed that a set of rules for baseball had actually been published five years before the supposed Cooperstown incident, and, even more embarrassing, that they had been copied – an exact, word for word copy – from the rules of rounders published in *The Boys’ Own Book* in London in 1828.

To summarize very briefly, baseball had a much older history. The word ‘baseball’ occurs in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1803, where the 14-year-old Catherine Morland preferred, we are told, “*cricket, baseball, riding on horseback and running about the country... to books*”, and there are references to games of ‘base’, ‘baste ball’ and, discovered only in 2004, ‘baseball’ played in North America in the 1770s, 80s and 90s. All these games were, however, very close to rounders, and the best claim to the invention of *real* baseball is the American Alexander Cartwright who, in 1845, drew up in New York a set of rules introducing some specifics of the modern game, and from which the modern rules historically descend. He defined for the first time the standard field with its diamond pattern and the ninety-foot distance between the bases, nine players per side, and he disallowed throwing the ball at the batsman’s body, which was and still is a feature of rounders (its abolition in baseball allowed the use of the hard ball, which also still distinguishes baseball from rounders). There are many other fascinating details of the game and its evolution, but suffice to say that Cartwright’s club – the rather inelegantly named “Knickerbockers” – had been playing their games on the site of Madison Square Garden since 1842. So, the Hall of Fame, the Museum and the research catalog commemorate the wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong place: they should be at Madison Square Garden, named after Alexander Cartwright, and dated AD 1842!⁵

⁴ Not, as other myths have it, from cricket. Cricket, rounders and baseball all have a common ancestor, a game of bat and ball, with many local variations.

⁵ There is a thriving “Society for American Baseball Research”, as well as two scholarly journals devoted solely to baseball history: a quarterly (1986-8) then annual *Baseball History*, and *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Social Policy Perspectives*, which started in 1992.

Dom Pérignon and the invention of champagne

If we now turn from sport to the history and historiography of wine, there are some interesting similarities, and some differences. Champagne is perhaps the only wine that has ever been credited with one inventor: Dom Pérignon, who was in charge of the vineyards and wine cellars at the Abbey of Hautvillers in the Marne valley opposite Épernay, from 1668 until his death in 1715. Today, there is a museum at the abbey where you can see Father Pérignon surrounded by his materials, there is a statue of him outside the Épernay headquarters of Moët & Chandon (the company now owns the abbey and the museum), and there is a prestige Moët cuvée called “Dom Pérignon”. In the history books, he has been credited with almost all of the many processes, in both vineyard and cellar, that the production of champagne today requires (modern champagne is a manufactured product which goes through about twenty distinct processes on the production line). Pérignon is also supposed to have been blind, to have been able to identify a plot of land by tasting a single grape, and to have invented the champagne flûte, the ‘coupe’, the special bottles, the corks, everything!

Sadly, most of this is demonstrably false, and there is no hard evidence for any of it. It is possible, probable even, that Dom Pérignon’s life-long ambition was to *eliminate the bubbles from champagne*. Yet he still finds a place in the history books, in the brochures and the guided tours and the websites which promote this special wine. There seems to be an almost desperate need to cling on to father Pérignon, and when the absence of evidence is manifest, he is described as ‘le père spirituel du champagne’ – he didn’t actually invent it, but he was the inspirational force. That phrase is used in the guided tours of the Mercier champagne cellars, and also in the *Reader’s Digest* wine encyclopedia, *Sur les chemins des vignobles de France*.⁶ In fact, the recipe for inducing the second fermentation in the bottle (which produces the bubbles) is to be found in a paper presented in London to the Royal Society by Christopher Merret in 1662 (six years before Pérignon arrived at Hautvillers), and it was the English plutocracy who in the 1660s and 1670s created the taste for white champagne with bubbles. The French were horrified by this new drink: it was the English Restoration grandees who first made sparkling champagne when they bottled and corked in their own cellars the wine they had imported in barrels from Champagne. There were at the time no bottles in France strong enough to make *sparkling* champagne, and in any case French law did not

⁶ Paris: Sélection du Reader’s Digest, 1984.

allow Champagne wines to be transported in bottles until 1728, sixty years after it was invented, and more than a decade after Dom Pérignon's death.

To cut a long story short, champagne as we know it today is the result of a series of innovations, inventions and influences which can be attributed to English, Russian, and Austrian markets or demand, to the German founders of champagne 'houses' or companies,⁷ to many anonymous Champenois at the time of Dom Pérignon (he may, or may not, have played a leading role in what was essentially a collective enterprise of discovery and experiment). Crucially, champagne today is the result of nineteenth-century inventions which can be attributed to specific Champenois, like Mme Ponsardin veuve Cliquot and her employees (Antoine Müller who introduced remuage, Monsieur Bohm who was her salesman in Moscow), and a man called André François from Chalon who defined the exact 'liqueur de dosage' necessary to create properly sparkling champagne.

Finally, two important observations: on the different wines known as champagne, and on the historiography of sparkling champagne, "le champagne mousseux". Until the twentieth century, there were five quite different types of "Champagne" wine: a very ordinary red (by far the most common in terms of the quantities produced and sold); a good quality red (which would never be quite as good as its rival from Beaune); some poor quality rather murky, slimy, yellowy white (this was the wine that Dom Pérignon wanted to improve, by making it clearer and eliminating the bubbles); a high quality still white wine (called 'Sillery') and, finally, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a small amount of bubbly white (which we today would probably not even recognize as champagne, it was more like a very sweet fizzy sorbet). Today, only two of those wines still exist: sparkling white, and a high quality red labelled "Bouzy rouge", at its best a very fine, ethereal pinot noir, red Burgundy but not quite red Burgundy, a ghost of a wine...

As for the historiography of champagne, the precious archives of the abbey at Hautvillers were destroyed at the time of the French Revolution, so, as far as Dom Pérignon is concerned, we can't prove one way or the other what his contribution really was. The historical 'evidence' comes from four sources:

(1) An anonymous memoir written in 1718, three years after Pérignon's death, which for some reason is commonly attributed to one Abbé Godinot. I can find no evidence of his

⁷ Krug, Roederer, Bollinger...

authorship, and in any case the memoir never mentions Dom Pérignon,⁸ but is always *assumed* to be a description of his work, and his work alone.

(2) The recollections (according to Hugh Johnson's *The Story of Wine*, 'fantasies' would be a more appropriate term) of Dom Grossard, who had been in charge of wine at the abbey when the Revolution destroyed the records. Unfortunately, Grossard's memories were recorded many years after the French Revolution, *more than a century after Pérignon's death*. Grossard is to champagne historiography what Matthew Bloxam was to that of rugby.

(3) A few eighteenth-century indirect or secondary sources on Dom Pérignon.⁹

(4) A remarkable work of very scrupulous archival research and writing by René Gandilhon, who was head archivist in the département de la Marne. He found scattered remnants of the abbey's records, and carefully reconstructed the history of champagne in his book *Naissance du Champagne* (1968).¹⁰ Today's historians all pay tribute to Gandilhon, but unfortunately many of them claim that he establishes Dom Pérignon's contribution. He doesn't: a close reading of Gandilhon and all his footnotes and sources shows that Pérignon *perhaps* played an influential role in *part* of the gradual emergence of sparkling white champagne. But Gandilhon often only guesses what Pérignon might have done, or surmises, or imagines – and he does not pretend otherwise. The problem is that Gandilhon's guesses and surmises are, because he was such a meticulous and scrupulous archivist and researcher, transformed into historical truths by later historians. Here is something different from the histories of rugby and baseball: a substantial, honest, meticulous work, but it is not used honestly by other historians.

“Quand les Anglais vendangeaient l'Aquitaine”

Before formulating some conclusions and questions, what about the view, frequently repeated in France, that the English were the inventors of the wines of Bordeaux? How many times have I been told “*C'est à vous qu'on doit nos vins de Bordeaux*”, a notion based on the

⁸ Or rather, just once, in the second edition, when it claims he did not hold the famous 'secret' of sparkling champagne, and ascribes to him what sounds today like some highly questionable adulteration, adding milk and various concoctions to eliminate the wine's natural defects.

⁹ The two most interesting were an abbot called Pluche and a young Benedictine monk called Frère Pierre.

¹⁰ René GANDILHON, *Naissance du champagne : Dom Pierre Pérignon*, Paris: Hachette, 1968, 288 p.

three hundred years when Aquitaine was a possession of the English Crown (1152-1453), and when, to quote the title of one book “*les Anglais vendangeaient l’Aquitaine*”. In fact, with very few exceptions, ... *les Anglais n’ont jamais vendangé l’Aquitaine*. I will simply make five basic points:

(1) We must distinguish different wines, both from Bordeaux (St-Émilion for example, dates from Roman times) and from the South-West (Gaillac, Moissac, and Béarn wines are even older, and clearly pre-date any possible English influence).

(2) It is true that English monarchs, starting with Richard 1st (but was he really English?) played a crucial role in developing Bordeaux as a port for wine in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The French crown gave preference to La Rochelle, and it was English support that made Bordeaux as opposed to La Rochelle *the* port for south-west wine.

(3) It was the English market and English merchants who encouraged for three hundred years the wines of Bordeaux and what was then called ‘le haut pays’ (roughly equivalent to what we label today ‘le sud-ouest’).¹¹ However, what the English demanded and drank in those days bore no relation whatsoever to any Bordeaux wines produced today. The English drank ‘clairet’, about as different from ‘claret’ as could be: it was a pale undistinguished ‘plonk’, which turned to vinegar in less than a year and was adulterated and doctored with all kinds of pleasant and not so pleasant additives, often *after* it had arrived in England.

(4) As with sparkling champagne, it was the demand in the seventeenth century of the English Restoration grandees that created the market for what were to become the ‘grands crus’ of the Médoc.

(5) Other influences here are usually overlooked: the Bordelais themselves, especially, that ‘noblesse de robe’ who invested so heavily in what had been the marshlands of the Médoc; one Bordelais in particular, Arnaud de Pontac who marketed two brands: a kind of generic Bordeaux, which he labelled ‘Pontac’, and an ‘estate’ wine (he in fact invented the notion of the ‘château’), a wine which Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary for April 11th 1663: “*Drank a sort of French wine, called Ho Bryan, that hath a good and most particular taste*

¹¹ All these wines passed through Bordeaux and went to England, and some appellations were specifically favoured by the English presence (Bergerac and Gaillac were; Cahors sometimes was and sometimes was not). So, here as elsewhere in the world, English influences were responsible for launching or developing viticulture and traditions of winemaking. In this context one is reminded of one of the most misquoted pieces of literature, often confused with Keats, but in fact from Byron’s Don Juan VI 607-8: *‘If Britain mourn her bleakness we can tell her, the very best of vineyards is the cellar’*.

that I ever met with” (today Haut-Brion still has “*a good and most particular taste*”...).¹² Nor should we forget the Dutch engineers who drained the land in the Médoc and created the vineyards from swamps. Indeed, the Dutch influence in the south-west was remarkable: they it was (the Dutch market, merchants, traders, and exiles) whose initiatives created Cognac, Armagnac, *les pruneaux d'Agen*, the strong ‘black’ wines of Cahors, and the sweet white wines of Sauternes and Monbazillac (the English got theirs from Spain); it was the Dutch who first used sulphur to stabilize sweet wines which otherwise would have refermented ... like champagne! Nor should we forget the market that stimulated demand for another wine which is famous today but was long neglected: Pomerol blossomed in the nineteenth century in response to the demands of the *Belgian* market.

The origins of history

To conclude, a number of warnings, questions, and suggestions. I have chosen to talk about lies and myths in the history of sport and wines because I don't think it really matters who invented rugby or baseball or champagne. There is a question of national pride, certainly, and I have had some difficulties when querying Dom Pérignon's invention of champagne or, more precisely, when suggesting that the English were responsible. But these are relatively unserious subjects which I choose to analyse because it is so much more controversial, difficult, and at times impossible, even in an academic context, to probe the historiography of occupations, liberations, empires, and “who did what” at difficult moments in our history. I think the historiography of sports and wines does help us, in a non-controversial way, to understand what happens in more problematic areas.

Sport and wine are also good models of how cultural history can be constructed and misconstrued. Should we not distinguish between invention and innovation? Are not collective and gradual processes more relevant than the spectacular individual exploit? The close study of artefacts is essential groundwork (what we might in the context of wine and sport call the “balls, bars and bottles” question: before the india-rubber bladders introduced in the 1860s no ball could have a clear round or oval shape; when and where did the fixed crossbar on the goals originate? the fundamentals of champagne bottle making make it almost impossible that Pérignon 'invented' the sparkling wine...).

¹² Pontac opened a restaurant called Pontack's Head in Abchurch Street London, though Pepys had drunk his “Ho Bryan” at the Royal Oak Tavern, in Lombard Street.

I stress that although questions of the grand architecture are more interesting – why have different social groups taken up different sports at various times? why are certain wines produced and consumed in specific contexts? etc. etc. – getting the building blocks right is a basic pre-requisite, and discovering why some people get them wrong is a fruitful exercise. There are the obvious warnings: beware of inscriptions and of documents, often produced years after the event and sometimes deliberately misleading; warnings also about anachronism, about the changing meanings of words (“claret”, “football”, “baseball”, ...), about the (sometimes) innocent tricks of memory, about stressing the wrong incident and misunderstanding consequences or impact, about being influenced by one historical period in interpreting another (a particularly pernicious and often hidden form of anachronism).

We might begin to construct a typology of explanations for lies and myths and their perpetuation: ideology, passion and especially different forms of 'patriotism' (national, local, of school, or sport, or party, ...), financial gain (commerce, tourism based on local myths and heroes), and a preference for the romantic over the historical. These are four quite distinct types of explanation or motivations, all of which operate in the examples I have used as well as in more serious contexts. And of course there is the fundamental question: who writes history and why? My examples of rugby, baseball, champagne and the wines of the South-West all seem to demonstrate that **history is written in terms of the needs – sometimes the very specific needs – that arise from the controversies of today.**

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