

The Culture

Noted Australian historian Sean Fagan's latest meticulously researched book - currently only available down under - recounts the first British Lions rugby tour in 1888, a full seven years before the great split.

It was a high-risk, non-sanctioned trip that took in 54 matches across Australia and New Zealand. The squad turned a hand to Aussie Rules too, taking on top clubs in Melbourne and Adelaide and stepping into a turf war as the codes battled for ascendancy.

There was tragedy among the controversy. Skipper Bob Seddon - Salford-born, name made with Broughton Rangers and Swinton - drowned in a terrible accident in the Hunter River at Maitland but, despite their grief, his team-mates decided to carry on.

According to Fagan in his introduction: "There was no going back to the old ways, there was no slow evolution. The game dramatically, radically, and irrevocably changed for the better - for both the player and the spectator."

The tour was actually organised by the English cricketers Arthur Shrewsbury, Alfred Shaw and James Lillywhite in an effort to recover losses from a disastrous cricket tour the season before. Crowds were dwindling in the summer sport just as they were starting to take off in the winter one, and all the codes saw tours as being vital to establishing growth and widening their appeal at home and abroad.

Tours had been mooted since 1879, but with most of the protagonists being working men, costs were too prohibitive.



Tragedy and controversy: A scene from the very first Lions rugby tour in 1888

Rugby's first Lions

PHIL CAPLAN browses through a history of huge relevance to rugby league



Come 1888, politics began to play its part, the English RFU claiming it should have more say on organisation and selection as they were supplying the bulk of the players, but the organisers wanting a British feel.

A statement was issued: "The RFU do not consider it within their province to forbid their players joining the undertaking, but they feel it their duty to let gentlemen who may be thinking of going know that they must be careful in any arrangements... players must not be compensated for loss of time."

Nevertheless a squad was selected that included players from Batley, Swinton, Runcorn Salford, Rochdale, Bramley, Halifax and Dewsbury all of whom were to be founder members of the Northern Union.

The obstacles put in their way before departure, principally by the RFU, a tortuous journey, disputes over the rules to be played, the wonderful welcomes received and match details are expertly recalled along with some astonishing contemporary images.

With appendices covering games played - won 33, lost 14, drawn 7 - and a post-tour timeline showing the subsequent development of international competition and the two branches of the Lions in league and union, this a fascinating account and vital historical record.

According to Fagan: "Ironically, or regrettably, however you wish to frame it, that staggering success (and the resulting build up of gate-taking money) caused deep divisions, envy, opportunism and questions of equity and fairness that brought forth ... the arrival of rugby league."