

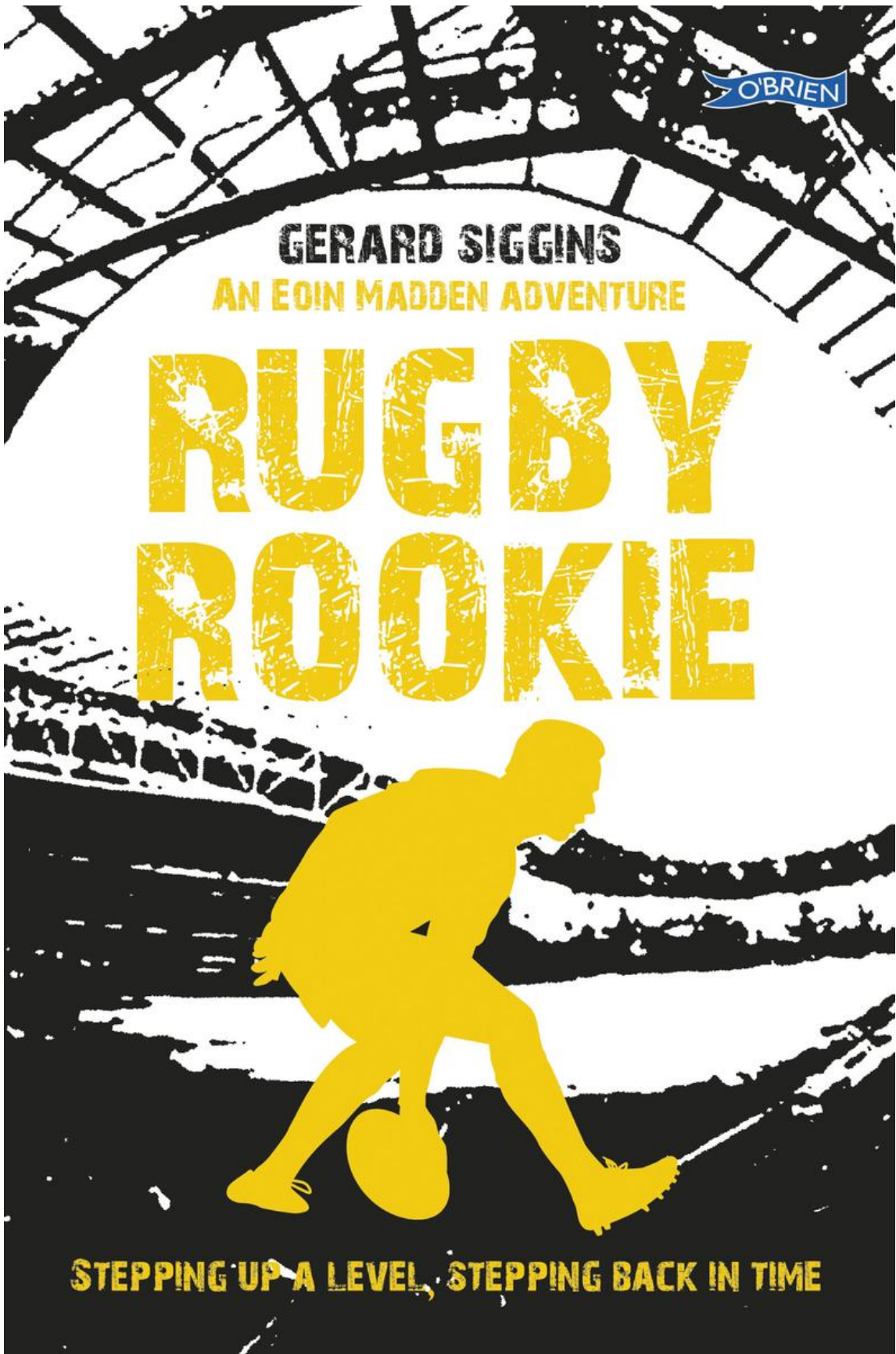
O'BRIEN

GERARD SIGGINS
AN EGIN MADDEN ADVENTURE

RUGBY ROOKIE



STEPPING UP A LEVEL, STEPPING BACK IN TIME



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Praise for Gerard Siggins' books

'Superbly written ... well worth a read ... Perfect for
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'a brilliant read'

Sunday World

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GERARD SIGGINS



THE O'BRIEN PRESS
DUBLIN

Dedication

When I wrote *Rugby Spirit* ten years ago I thought it was a stand-alone, once-off novel. But one man convinced me it was the first of a series and encouraged me to go on writing about Eoin Madden and his adventures.

Rugby Rookie is the tenth book in the series and that is only because Michael O'Brien believed in Eoin. This book is respectfully dedicated to his memory.

Acknowledgements

Thanks as always to Martha, Jack, Lucy and Billy, and to my mother for all their unfailing support. Thanks also to all at O'Brien Press, especially my brilliant editor Helen Carr who makes all my books better.

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Chapter 1

Although he had hardly played any sport at all in the first term at Castlerock College this year, Eoin Madden ached when he got out of bed. Happily, he no longer had pain in his ankle, which had been broken in a rugby game six weeks before.

The discomfort he felt all across his back was from the slaps of his football team-mates as they congratulated him on his shoot-out penalty that won Castlerock Red Rockets an FAI cup in Dalymount Park.

Eoin smiled at the memory. He had been out injured for the earlier games in the competition, but came on as a late sub to play his role in the triumph.

‘Heeee-ro, heeee-ro,’ sang his pal Alan, with whom he shared a dorm in the boarding school of Castlerock College, just outside Dublin.

‘Stop that!’ Eoin snapped. ‘Even you did more than I did to win the Cup. I hope the junior years don’t give me any of that hero worship stuff. I got enough of it after the Triple Crown.’

Eoin had been a star of the Castlerock Junior Cup rugby team, and had gone on to play for Leinster, Ireland and the British and Irish Lion Cubs.

‘I signed a load of programmes for the First Years after our FAI win,’ Alan replied with a grin, ‘I really enjoyed the attention, to be fair.’

‘It wears off, I assure you,’ sighed Eoin. ‘But anyway, we’ve a day off today. Have you any plans?’

‘I was thinking we could head into town to do a bit of Christmas shopping,’ suggested Alan. ‘We could stop off and see how the rebuilding of the Aviva is getting on.’

They could all thank you for getting them jobs after you discovered the place was about to fall into a sinkhole.'

The stadium had been closed for some months after Eoin discovered one of the grandstands was on the verge of collapsing.

'That would be nice,' he replied. 'Brian might be around too.'

Brian Hanrahan was a friend of the boys who lived in the old rugby ground on Lansdowne Road – but he was not a normal type of friend. Brian was a ghost. Nearly a hundred years before he had been badly injured in a match at the ground and died later in hospital. His spirit lived on in Lansdowne Road and Brian was there to witness all of the great occasions the stadium hosted.

Eoin always got a shiver up his spine when he saw the stadium appear on the horizon as he neared the ground. Many of his happiest memories were tied to this special place and he smiled as he got off the train at Lansdowne Road station.

'Wow,' said Alan as he looked across at the stadium. 'There's an awful lot of trucks and diggers around, isn't there?'

They walked down Lansdowne Road towards the stadium shop where they noticed the grandstands at the far end had been demolished and new foundations were being put in. Hundreds of workers buzzed around the place in yellow coats and helmets.

Eoin signalled to Alan that they should head into the stadium.

'We could try to get in the big tunnel, we'd get a better view from there.'

The boys slipped inside the entrance and made their way down towards the pitch. As they were watching the construction work a man called out as he walked briskly towards them.

'Hey, you boys, what are you doing here?'

Alan turned to leave, but Eoin decided to answer.

'I'm sorry,' he replied. 'We just wanted to see how the rebuilding was going, we didn't know it wasn't open to the public.'

'It's a building site, son,' replied the man, 'it can be a dangerous place...'

The man stopped and stared at Eoin.

'You're him...' he said, pointing at the youngster.

'Who?' asked Eoin.

'You're that Madden lad, the one who found the cracks in the stand.'

Eoin nodded.

'Well, in that case I apologise for shouting at you,' the man said. 'Only for you my company wouldn't have had a huge job like this to work on. And, of course, you probably saved lives that might have been lost if you hadn't spotted the problem in time. The least I can do is give you a tour.'

Chapter 2

The man introduced himself to the boys as Billy and explained that he was the engineer in charge of the stadium rebuilding job. After organising a pair of yellow hard hats for them, he showed Eoin and Alan where the new stand would be sited.

He then brought the boys under the railway line around the back where men were putting tiles on the roof of a small block that had been built in the old car park.

‘This is where the new rugby museum will be,’ he explained. ‘I’d say they’ll be looking for a pair of your old boots in there some day,’ he added with a laugh.

‘A rugby museum?’ asked Alan. ‘That would be really cool.’

‘Yes, I’ve seen some of the stuff they have to put in it, very interesting indeed,’ Billy told them. ‘They have one of the first jerseys Ireland played in – it was green hooped, the hoops were not as thick as your Castlerock shirts, more like that Celtic soccer team. And the balls they used were much rounder than modern rugby balls, though not quite as round as a football.’

‘Is there anything in there now?’ asked Alan.

‘No, we haven’t finished fixing it up inside yet,’ replied one of the men working on the museum, who introduced himself as Simon. ‘But we’re hoping to have it soon enough.’

‘And when will that be?’ asked Eoin.

‘It will open the same day the stadium opens, I think, it will be part of the whole new package,’ replied Billy. ‘Early next year we hope. Simon here is going to be managing the museum, so he’ll show you around when you come back.’

‘I’ll give you a special tour of course,’ said Simon, a small man with glasses and red hair. ‘So do bring your old boots around!’

They walked back to the entrance where the boys handed back their yellow hats and thanked Billy for the tour.

‘I’m sure you’ll get a special invite when it opens,’ he grinned. ‘Sure we wouldn’t be here at all if it wasn’t for you.’

The boys decided to walk the rest of the way into the city, a distance of about a mile. As they walked, the chatted about what they had seen, and who they hadn’t.

‘It’s a pity we didn’t run into Brian, but I suppose he would have steered clear of us with Billy around,’ said Alan.

‘Yeah, and I guess he’s probably feeling a bit uncomfortable with all the building going on,’ added Eoin. ‘I’d say he’d love that museum though – he’s seen most of the history in that ground since he’s been around there nearly a hundred years.’

It was a crisp, sunny day and the morning had flown by the time they reached the city centre. The boys were hungry after their walk and went for a sandwich and to make plans and lists for their shopping expedition. After a ten-minute discussion they both realised that the very best presents they could get all the members of their families could be found under one roof – the big bookshop near Trinity College.

Eoin’s list was short – a book of travel writing for his mam, and a historical biography for his dad. Grandad was tricky, but a helpful assistant called Lucy suggested a biography of a rugby player who Eoin knew was one of Dixie’s favourites.

‘He’d love that,’ agreed Alan. ‘Do you think he might lend it to me when he’s finished?’

Eoin laughed. 'Ask him yourself. Will you come down for a few days?'

'Yes, please,' replied Alan. 'Christmas is really boring at home. I'll be on the first train on St Stephen's Day, if that's OK?'

Eoin laughed. 'I can see you now, nibbling on your turkey sandwiches as the train pulls in to Ormondstown Station.'

Alan picked up a few books as well – and a book token for his sister as he hadn't a clue what she was interested in – and the boys hopped on the bus back to the school.

They chatted about the soccer tournament they had just won – it had kept everyone occupied for most of the first term, but after the Christmas holidays there would only be one topic of conversation in Castlerock – Senior Cup rugby.

The school had a long tradition of success in the competition, but it had been more than a decade since the famous Cup had come back to Castlerock. And Eoin had got the impression from the headmaster that he would hold him personally responsible if that trophy famine was extended.