EDITED BY **STEWART McKINNEY**

# ROARS FROM THE BACK OF THE BUS

## Rugby tales of life with THE LIONS

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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# INTRODUCTION

The game against the Orange Free State was the closest the 1974 Lions came to defeat. The Free State players had prepared for months under the expert coaching of Nelie Smith. They understood, as we had destroyed every opposition scrum so far, the importance of matching us in that department. Their answer was to scrummage against a tractor.

It was a totally committed Orange Free State who faced the Lions, ready to die for their province. All afternoon they put their bodies on the line and with the help of a 'sympathetic' referee almost pulled off a famous victory. They killed the ball in the rucks but no matter how much we hammered and pummelled them, they stuck to their game plan and in injury time the body of their huge second row Stoffie Botha could take no more. His legs buckled like a punch-drunk boxer as the ambulance crew helped him off the pitch. One last scrum, Free State put in and the game was over. We rocketed them off the ball, Mervyn Davies picked up, fed Gareth Edwards who couldn't quite make the line on a diagonal run to the corner but J.J. Williams scooped it up to score: 11–9. I never saw a team play with such bravery as the Orange Free State that day and at the after-match function their battered pack looked as if it had gone 15 rounds with Joe Frazier.

Thirty-five years later I was back in South Africa to watch some of the games during the 2009 Lions tour. I was invited to a function in Bloemfontein before the game against the Orange Free State (now the Cheetahs), not realising it was a

reunion of the side who had faced us in 1974. Stoffie Botha, who had reeled off the pitch before that fateful last scrum, was there along with the flankers, captain Jake Swart and Harold Verster and the hooker, Andre Bestbier (the huge one-eyed Johann De Bruyn was meeting up with them later). Unfortunately, three of the forwards had passed away – Rompie Stander, Martiens Le Roux and Ken Grobler. I was a little apprehensive at first – how might most folk react when faced with a bunch of guys who on your last encounter had tried to kick the stuffing out of you? Still, I swallowed hard and hoped they appreciated the skill behind the penalty I had kicked that made a difference in 1974 (only because Ian McGeechan and J.P.R. Williams had missed everything up to then and Willie John McBride had given me the kick as a last resort) – we're all lovers of the game, after all.

I needn't have worried. With the true hospitality and camaraderie that is unique to rugby football I was given a wonderful welcome and we were soon swapping 'war stories'. I remarked to Andre Bestbier that the last time I saw him he was sporting the best black eye I had ever seen and that Bobby Windsor was a dirty bastard. He laughed and said that Windsor wasn't responsible but the 'Mighty Mouse' Ian McLauchlan, and he was a dirty bastard too.

Syd Millar, in *Voices from the Back of the Bus*, stated that rugby once tasted can become addictive. I am still addicted to the game and the last time I spoke to that wonderful person, England and Lions number 8 Andy Ripley, three weeks before his death, he – as only Andy could – put it so simply: 'Stewart, rugby was a love story, the love of your team-mates, the love of the opposition after you knocked lumps out of them and the love of a great game.'

I know of no other game where you could have 80 minutes of pure attrition against your opposite number, search him out in the clubhouse and have a pint with him and revel in the physicality of the recent afternoon. I don't know if the modern professional player has the time or inclination to

indulge in post-match rituals, but if not, they are missing out on a very special friendship, as rugby friendships are for ever. Character and characters were created on the rugby pitch, an amazing arena for displaying skill and courage, where committing assault – if well-executed – received applause.

Rugby football! Yes, Mr Ripley, it was a love story. Even after 55 years of participation, I still adore the game.

The rugby I first played in 1957 would be unrecognisable to the modern aficionado. As the game has evolved, gone are the three/two/three scrum, the striking hooker, the clump lineout, the compressed lineout, the throwing-in wing, the dive-passing scrum-half, the spinning maul à la France), the classical crash tackle, the dribble, the dynamic New Zealand-style ruck, the drop and place kicking at goal from the mark, the three-point try, the four-point drop goal and – most importantly – kicking directly to touch from outside the 22 and the offside line from scrum and lineout.

As the beauty of the old game fades, the beauty of the modern game emerges and long may each generation enjoy ‘their game’.

As I fast approach three score years and ten, just as the rotten summers of childhood have disappeared in my mind and I recall the sunny ones, I now only remember the winning games I played in. I can vividly recount France v Ireland in Paris in 1972, but the terrible defeat in 1976 is totally erased. However, I will never, ever, forget the fun and friendship I have enjoyed through partaking in the game.

At Andy Ripley’s memorial service at Southwark Cathedral in 2010, full of nostalgia and red wine kindly supplied by the one and only Terry O’Connor (the oldest living rugby correspondent, ex-*Daily Mail*) and surrounded by rugby folk from all over the world, a lot of them friends from my era, I agreed to compile another book, a follow-up to *Voices From the Back of the Bus*. This book is not a history of the British

and Irish Lions; rather it is a collection of stories, long past and recent, many of which have been gleaned from archive material, personal letters and diaries as well as anecdotes recalled by 60 years of Lions players, which show the colour and the calibre of men who play this fabulous game.

# 1

# TOURISTS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

## *A.E. Stoddart*
## *Inaugural Australia and New Zealand tour 1888*
## *England 1885–93, 10 caps*

### The Original Superstar

Arguably one of the finest all-round sportsmen ever was A.E. Stoddart, the only man to have captained England at both cricket and rugby. Born in South Shields in 1865, he played cricket for Hampstead, Middlesex, the Gentlemen and England. He scored 215 not out for Middlesex v Lancashire in 1891; 151 for England v MCC at Lord's in 1887; and 485 for Hampstead v Stoics in 1886 (at the time the highest individual score on record). His highest county score was his last innings – 221 v Somerset in 1890. Stoddart never believed in coaching. He said 'if a game was within one, it would come out'.

In 1888, Stoddart, who had previously been on cricket tours to Australia along with two entrepreneurial promoters, Alfred Shaw and Arthur Shrewsbury, arranged a rugby tour to Australia and New Zealand although the Rugby Union refused to give it official backing.

The team departed for the tour on 8 March 1888 and returned on 11 November, having played 35 games, winning 27, drawing 6 and losing 2. To the fury of the Rugby Union, 18 extra games under Aussie Rules were played, mainly in Victoria, to raise money for the promoters. The Corinthian spirit so admired at this time had been ignored. Perhaps they should have stuck to Union games, as their results in the Aussie Rules matches resulted in only six wins and a draw out of the eighteen games played.

Stoddart, in particular, was extraordinarily quick at developing mastery even in these exhibition games, especially popular in places like Victoria where there was scant rugby available to watch. He became extremely popular with the colonials because of his remarkable skill in both codes, and he was the undoubted hero of the tour. Stoddart adapted quickly to the ‘foreign game’ and excelled at it, impressing the Australian crowds with his speed and skills. The whole team performed well, but had the RFU sanctioned this tour, doubtless no such matches would have ever been played.

Rumours circulated that players of this predominantly English side had been paid expenses for clothes and suchlike. The returning players were made to sign an affidavit that they had not received pecuniary benefit from the tour, and there the matter ended. The only player to admit to it, Jack Clowes (Halifax), was declared a professional by the RFU and banned.

At the beginning of the tour, the captain, Bob Seddon, was drowned in a boating accident on the Hunter River, and Stoddart took over the captaincy with great flair and aplomb. He became secretary of the Queen’s Club and lost his money at the outset of the 1914–18 war, when he sadly took his own life.

*The Times*
Tuesday, 6 April 1915

# SUICIDE of MR A.E. STODDART

## A GREAT CRICKETER

## PLAYER IN TEN RUGBY ‘INTERNATIONALS’

We regret to announce that Mr. Andrew Ernest Stoddart committed suicide by shooting himself with a revolver on Saturday night at his residence in St. John’s Wood.

Stoddart’s name will always live as one of the really great players of cricket and Rugby football – the only man who has ever captained England both in a Test Match and a ‘Rugger’ International. Born at South Shields in 1863, he was in his prime as a cricketer in a great heyday of cricket popularity – the late ’eighties and early ’nineties. Middlesex, the Gentlemen, and England – he did great work for all. It was as a batsman that he was most famous, and a beautiful bat he was, scoring fast in the old-fashioned, attacking style, with all the shots, drive, cut and glance, and yet with quite a sound defence. He could hit balls of all paces and all lengths, and he dearly loved a duel with a fast bowler.

Among his most famous innings were 215 not out, against Lancashire at Manchester in 1891, and 151 for England against the MCC at Lord’s in 1887, when he and Arthur Shrewsbury raised the total to 266 for the first wicket. In 1886, for Hampstead against the Stoics, he played an innings of 485 – at the time the highest individual score on record. He was a great favourite of the Lord’s crowd in the palmy days of Middlesex cricket, when his friend Mr. A. J. Webbe was captain of the side, and truly did Mr. Norman Galo write of him:– ‘When Stoddart makes her hum up at Lord’s.’

## VISITS TO AUSTRALIA

In Australia his name was a household word, and his happiest recollections were of his Australian trips. He paid four visits to Australia – in 1887, 1891, 1894 and 1897 – on the last two occasions taking out his own team. He was a fine field, and a well-known professional once said to him:– ‘Mr. Stoddart, if you had been a professional you would have been a great bowler.’ But he was a much better bowler than many people imagined: In 1899 – his last full season – his batting average was 52.

Brilliant as he was at cricket, he was equally so as a three-quarter; his play at Blackheath, when he was captain of ‘the Club’ for some years, and for England was a household word. Between 1886 and 1893 he played in ten Rugby internationals, and would certainly have played in more but for the fact that in two of the intermediate seasons England, owing to a dispute with the other unions, had no international matches. He was fast, full of resource, and a splendid kick. It was a memorable drop kick that he made against a gale of wind that, giving Middlesex victory over Yorkshire by a goal to four tries, led to the rules of the game being altered. At that time a goal counted more than any number of tries.

Stoddart never believed in coaching. He never paid much attention to coaches himself, and he was a great example of a born player of games. One of the kindest of friends and most sympathetic, he was always encouraging to and thoughtful for the young player and his loss will be widely missed.

THE INQUEST

At the inquest held at Marylebone yesterday Mrs Ethel Stoddart said that last year her husband had to give up his secretaryship of Queen's Club on account of bad health and nervous breakdown, and had done nothing since. He was a temperate man but lately had been depressed, and said that life was not worth living. Last year he was treated for an attack of influenza and a sea voyage was arranged for him, but it did not take place. Lately he had been very moody. He was in financial difficulties and lost all his money through the war, and that had preyed on his mind and worried him.

Late on Saturday night he took a pistol out of his pocket, laid it on the table and said he was tired of it all and was going to finish it. The witness advised him to wait until they could consult their friends the next day. She picked the pistol up and they had a slight struggle for it, but she gave it back to him after having found it was unloaded, and took from him a full box of cartridges. He then put the pistol into his pocket and later went to bed. Before midnight she went to his room and saw him in bed. There was blood on his cheek. She called for help and then found that he was dead. There was no smoke in the room, and no report had been heard. Lately he had been forgetful and irritable, and even when she had rustled a paper he asked her not to do so, saying it would drive him mad. It was afterwards discovered that he had another box of cartridges in his possession.

Isabel Dalton, a friend, also said Mr Stoddart was moody and restless. He was happy at home but had had a good deal of money trouble. The witness was called by Mrs Stoddart on Saturday night, and saw him in bed with a revolver in his right hand. She had heard no report, and was certain that his mind was affected by his troubles.

Dr Lindsey Saunders, of Maida Vale, said he was called late on Saturday night. Stoddart had a bullet wound in the brain on the right side, and the bullet was found embedded in the skull on the opposite side of the head. The heart was enlarged, as was usual in the case of athletes, and the lungs showed commencing pneumonia, which would increase despondency owing to its depressing effect. Death was due to the bullet wound, which, in the opinion of the witness, was self-inflicted.

The jury returned a verdict of 'Suicide while of unsound mind.'

## *Harry Vassall*
## *Administrator and British Team Selector 1891*
## *England 1881–3, 5 caps*

## The First British Selector

Cambridge University has always provided a wealth of international rugby players. Robert Thompson followed in the footsteps of William Harry Thomas, the Welsh and Cambridge University forward, when he embarked on the 1891 tour to South Africa. The first overseas British tour of 1888 had not been sanctioned by the RFU and is often not recognised as an official Lions tour, so the South African Tests were in reality the first matches that allowed British players to be awarded international caps. In 1889, following the formation of the South African Rugby Board, the committee decided that a good way to encourage the game would be to invite a British side to visit, similar to the British Isles tour of Australia and New Zealand the year before. The notion developed into a fully sanctioned invitation, backed by Cecil Rhodes as guarantor against any financial loss the tour might suffer.

In all, 11 players from Cambridge made the trip: both full-backs William Grant Mitchell and Edward Bromet, the huge (6 ft 2 in.) three-quarter Randolph Aston who played every game and scored 30 out of the 89 tries of the tour, half-backs Arthur Rotherham and William Wotherspoon, and forwards Johnny Hammond, Edwin Mayfield, Clement Pearson, Aubone Surtees and William Henry Thorman. With the familiarity of varsity rugby they were joined also by Edward Bromet's brother, William, in the forwards and Douglas Marshall, 1891 Lion, his Oxford University team-mate and three-quarter Paul Robert Clauss. The remainder of the party was made up of the team captain, the experienced international Bill Maclagan, and Robert MacMillan, both from London Scottish, Howard Marshall (Richmond), B.G. Roscoe (Lancashire), John Harding Gould (Old Leysians), Froude Hancock (Somerset), Walter Jesse Jackson (Gloucester) and Thomas Sherren Whittaker

(Lancashire). This was a tight squad of young men, four of whom were used to playing alongside each other.

The Rugby Union supported and approved the 1891 British Tour to South Africa. They believed that the amateur ethics had been flouted by the 1888 tour and they were determined that the situation would not arise again. A committee was formed and the most influential rugby figure of his day, Harry Vassall, was a member. A great innovator and forward thinker, his theories and ideals in *Rugby Football* (published in 1886) have merit today, as many of the principles still apply.

An extremely strong player, weighing close to 16 stone, Vassall was reported to have had an individual maul with a certain Charles Gurdon that lasted five minutes. He played in the formative years when the sides were reduced from 20 to 15 a side and saw the possibility of the game becoming much more attractive and skilful than the previous free-for-all shoving and wrestling match.

His coaching manual dealt with the development of the play, captaincy and the role of the full-back, three-quarter back, half-back and forward. Here, I include some examples of his thinking.

> The change from twenty to fifteen a side, which was started by club secretaries because of the difficulty of putting twenty men in to the field, was officially adopted by the Union in 1877, at the request of Scotland. A more open style of play naturally followed, which was so much appreciated that the laws were soon altered to suit it by insisting on the ball being put down immediately it was held; and this led to the increase in the number of three-quarter backs, first from one to two, with two full-backs and then to three, with one full-back in other words, three-quarter back became the main line of defence against the rush of opposing forwards.
>
> Meanwhile the advantages of passing the ball were becoming apparent, and a system of short passing, amongst the forwards only, was brought to a considerable pitch of perfection by Blackheath and a few other clubs, but it was not until 1882 that the Oxford team took up a suggestion made by Mr A. Budd in a magazine article, and developed the modern system of long, low passing to the open by both backs and forwards alike with

such success that they kept an unbeaten record for nearly three seasons against the best clubs in the country.

## The captain’s role was paramount when there were no coaches in the game.

After thoroughly mastering all the laws, our captain must next make up his mind as to what style of play he means his team to adopt, and by personal instruction, both on the field of play and off it, he must see that his men fully understand that style and carry it out in all its details. Of course his selection of a style may be limited by the traditions of his club, if those traditions are sound, in which case he will be wise not to attempt more than the introduction of any modifications which seem to him necessary, or again by the capacity of the men at his disposal. It is his business to get out of his men absolutely all that they are worth, and a great deal can be done, by skilful education, with what looks like poor material at the start; but it is no use to adopt a style for which his men are physically unsuited. And here we may remark that it is of the utmost importance that the captain should have the unfettered selection of his team whenever such a course is possible. At schools, universities, and any other places where there is a large field to select from, this rule should be absolute, and we must trust to the pressure of public opinion as a guarantee against unfair selections.

Granted, then, that the captain’s power is practically absolute, after deciding on what is to be the dominant style of his team, he must see that they are able to adapt their style to any emergencies that arise owing to variations in the weather, or the strength and style of teams opposed to him. If, for instance, he has adopted the long-passing game he will probably find it useless in wet weather, and must make his men dribble instead.

If he is playing four three-quarters and finds his eight forwards are swamped by the opposing nine, he must make his extra three-quarter go forward. If, when playing against a strong wind, he finds his backs unable to check the attack of his opponents, he may sometimes be justified in playing an extra man behind for the time, provided that the forwards can spare the man; or if his team are accustomed to playing an offensive game, he may have to make them adopt defensive tactics, such as keeping the ball tight in the scrummage, or punting it constantly into touch for a while; but we hope that no captain will ever make his team adopt the tight game as their regular style of play.

The object of the game is not merely to avoid being beaten, but to win the match, and to get as much enjoyment out of the process as possible. Defensive tactics are quite justifiable in special cases, but we should be very sorry to be a member whether forward or behind of a team whose ambition was to make a draw of every match, or at most to win by a dropped goal with luck.

## Full-back tackling:

There is one elementary rule about tackling under all circumstances, and that is, to go at your man low to aim at the hips and not at the shoulder. In the latter case the tackler can always be shoved off and the try is a certainty; in the former case, provided the tackler knows the right moment to go for his man, he is certain to hold him and the ball. But how he knows the right moment is a mystery which we have never been able to understand.

We can only suppose that it comes by instinct to some and not to others. It is easy enough to learn to tackle as a forward, where you can go at your man with a rush, but it is quite another matter to stand the last man on your side, and to feel that you must bring the runner down at all costs. Some backs seem to exercise a sort of fascination over you, and you feel bound to run into their clutches. We have a lively recollection in this respect of the play of A.S. Taylor of Cambridge, and we believe that others felt much the same about H.B. Tristram of Oxford.

## Three-quarters:

Coming next to the three-quarter backs, the captain has to settle how many of them he means to play. Since the introduction of the open passing game the orthodox number has been three; but Cardiff and a few other clubs have played four with such success as to make it an open question whether the odd man is of more use as a ninth forward or as a fourth three-quarter.

Supposing that only three are played, the next question to be decided is which of them to put in the centre, and which on the wings. In our opinion, the best player of the three should always be in the centre – mere sprinters will do for the wings, if nothing better can be secured; but the centre must have a head on his shoulders, as he is the man who has not only to bear the brunt of the attack, but also to give the wings their openings, and sometimes to win the match himself by dropping a goal. To fulfil these requirements he must throw himself without hesitation on to the ball at the feet of the opponent’s forwards when they are dribbling down upon him, a task which is not half so difficult as it looks, if done fearlessly.

In wing three-quarters, on the other hand, pace is the first essential, because they should be the chief try-getters in the team. Their principal work consists of getting into position in the open for receiving passes from the centre, and sometimes direct from the halves, and then running as hard as they can run. In this way sprinters, pure and simple, have often earned for themselves great reputations; but a real player will make much more out of the post than the best sprinter.

He will allow himself to be run into touch or tackled by the last of his opponents, as the sprinter so often does, but will pass back again whilst still engaging the attention of that last man, and so make a try a

certainty for his side. Many a glorious chance of winning a match has been thrown away by wings holding on to the ball just too long, in the hopes of getting through themselves.

## Half-backs:

The whole machinery of the passing game breaks down unless the halves are smart and unremitting in starting passes; therefore, if a captain has no better material to start upon, he must try forward after forward at the post, until he finds one who is quick on to the ball, and quicker still in getting rid of it. The first mark of a good half is that he gets the ball when it comes out of the scrummage oftener than his opponent.

## Forward:

The work of the forward can be suitably divided into two branches, play in the open and play in the scrummage. It is given to very few to be equally good at both; but as every player, however good he may be in the open, has to go into scrummages whether he likes it or not, he can at least learn not to spoil the play of the genuine scrummagers; and as every scrummager has to make a show in the open, he can learn to follow up and to tackle, even if nature has not intended him to shine in the finer arts of passing and dribbling.

Supposing, first, that the passing game is adopted, forwards must remember that a series of passes is hardly ever brought to a successful issue without their aid. It is true that the half-back will start the passing whilst the scrummage is still breaking up, but directly they can free themselves from the scrummage, it is their business to spread out over the ground at some distance from one another, so as to be ready to take up the passing as soon as the three-quarter gets into difficulties with his opponents.

## Regarding scrummage work:

It must not for a moment be supposed that shoving is all that is wanted. It is a great thing no doubt to get the first shove, and for that reason forwards cannot be too quick in packing; but scrummage work had been of late years reduced to such a science that mere shoving will be of very little avail against a team of skilled scrummagers. Most teams have recognised leaders in the scrummage such as J.G. Walker of Oxford, Gurdon of Richmond and many others, who keep careful watch over the whereabouts of the ball; the usual plan nowadays being to keep it just behind the first row of legs, so as to retain command of it until the opponents have been worked off it to one side or the other, when with a final effort the scrummage is ‘screwed’ or ‘swung’ and the team breaks away with the ball at their feet.

It may perhaps be considered that we have already sketched out sufficient work to occupy most of a forward's time; but there still remain the duties of tackling any and every opponent who happens to be in possession of the ball, of following up every kick-off and kick-out, and of marking his man at every lineout, with which to fill up his spare moments. It will thus be inferred that no one can hope to be a good forward who is not in good training. We are no advocates for stopping a man's beer or his pipe, we do not want the training of an athlete preparing for a race, but we do hold it to be the imperative duty of every member of every team, however humble, to keep in good condition.

No doubt some men are much more favourably situated than others for getting regular exercise; but every man can find time to use light dumb-bells and clubs, to indulge in an occasional bout of boxing and wrestling, and to go for a sharp walk varied by occasional sprints in the evening after his work.

## *Tom Crean*
## *South Africa 1896, 4 caps*
## *Ireland 1894–6, 9 caps*

### Brother in Arms, Brother-in-law

At the height of the Battle of the Somme, as the artillery shells exploded around him, Tom Crean calmly lit a cigarette and stood up to attend to the injured and the dying. From the deeper shelter of the trench, his commanding officer lambasted him as a fool. 'I forbid it,' the general fumed. 'You'll most certainly be killed if you attempt to reach the forward line. You'll be no earthly use to us if you are killed. I order you to stay here.'

Crean, a giant of a man with a will strong enough to match any badge of rank, was unperturbed. His men were dying, he explained. He was their medic. He would go where needed. 'It's written that I'm to die in my bed,' he said. 'My boys need me. Go I must.'

There is a vigorous, uncomplicated, almost schoolboy heroism to the tale of Tom Crean and how he came to win Britain's highest award for valour. Irish rugby's greatest star at the close of the nineteenth century, Crean set his fate by remaining in South Africa after a 1896 tour. At heart, Crean

was an adventurer, and wild Africa seemed to offer far more than a doctor's life in Dublin. The most dashing player of his generation, Crean admitted that his early life consisted of wine, women, song and rugby.

'Tom Crean would have been a rich man if he'd been born a hundred years later,' suggests Gavin Mortimer in *Fields of Glory*, an account of how sports heroes fared on the world's battlefields. 'A talent such as his would have been rewarded handsomely by professional rugby union . . . Crean, however, would have hated professional rugby.'

Tom, at 6 ft 2 in., was a fine sprinter, a decent middle-distance runner and a determined force in a rugby scrum. He won nine caps for Ireland, his looks and fearsome appetite for action generating 'a raging, tearing, rampaging, terrible opponent,' one contemporary recalled. 'His six feet of brawn, handsomely proportioned, his fair hair and his always laughing face gave him the semblance of a Greek god or an outsize naughty cherub.'

He was also a very strong swimmer and in September of 1891 when swimming with a group of fellow students he and another saved an arts student called William Ahern from drowning off Blackrock, Co. Dublin. So at the age of 18 he won the first of his medals for bravery when awarded the Royal Humane Society's medal for saving a life at sea.

The strength of Irish rugby was reflected in the Anglo-Irish team selected to tour South Africa in 1896. Tom was one of nine Irishmen selected. Seven – Crean, Louis Magee, J. Sealy, L. Bulger, A.D. Clinch, A. Meares and R. Johnson – were internationals, the last having played in 1893. They were joined by Jim Magee, a brother of Louis, and the as yet uncapped Trinity student C. V. Boyd. Tom played in all four Tests, scoring a try in the second. Tour captain Johnny Hammond played only seven of the twenty-one games. It was said the real captain was Tom Crean.

Yet for all his sporting gifts, the rugby pitch seemed too small to accommodate Tom Crean's talents. In South Africa,

the pioneer spirit appeared to match his mood and when the tour finished he stayed on, working in the Johannesburg Hospital and playing for the Johannesburg Wanderers club. War proved to be both the making and the ultimate downfall of Tom Crean. He was still in South Africa when the Boer War broke out, and he enlisted as a trooper on the side of the British in the Imperial Light Horse, becoming the brigade's Medical Officer in 1901. He immediately became a regimental favourite for his irreverent approach.

One story tells amply of Crean's panache. Working as a general practitioner, he was outraged when a pushy patient burst in on him as he stood shaving. Crean, dressed only in a vest and with a shaving brush in his hand, roared at the man for his lack of manners. 'Your face is a cruel one,' he told his intruder. 'It needs hitting. Will you fight me?' When the man ran, Crean followed him, laying siege to the would-be patient's house. He eventually retired from the scene, his dignity protected by a borrowed jacket, wrapped around him like a kilt.

Tales of Crean's army life are legion. One tells of how he acted as Cupid for a tongue-tied soldier friend and was eventually sent with a diamond ring to seal the match. He returned with no bride and no ring. 'I've saved you,' he told his friend. 'She's a withered crone, of no intelligence, and I've decided she's unworthy of you.'

Shocked, the soldier stood speechless. Crean offered his explanation for the ring's absence and the mysterious sight of a small truckload of alcohol that arrived with him. 'I knew your heart would be breaking with sadness,' he said, 'so I sold the ring and I've come to help you drown your sorrows.'

On 18 December 1901, at the Battle of Tygerkloof, Tom won his Victoria Cross when he successfully attended the wounds of two soldiers and a fellow officer under heavy enemy fire. He was wounded in the stomach and arm during these encounters and was invalided back to England where he made a full recovery. On 13 March 1902, King Edward VII

presented him with the VC and he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland in the same year.

He became a popular figure on the social circuit. In 1905, he married Victoria, the beautiful daughter of a Spanish don. They lived comfortably and well, but Crean clearly hungered for action. When the First World War broke out, he enlisted after a week and set sail for France. Tom rejoined the Royal Army Medical Corps and served with the 1st Cavalry Brigade. Wounded several times and 'mentioned in dispatches', he won a Distinguished Service Order in June 1915. In February 1916, he was promoted Major and commanded the 44th Field Ambulance, British Expeditionary Force, in France.

The grim impersonalities of war in the trenches quenched what remained of Crean's lust for adventure. This was no hero's war, where strong character could prevail against adversity. Instead, he daily witnessed senseless massacre. The trenches were not his idea of the military life, and his exit from them – sent home with diabetes – he found dispiriting.

The years before his death in 1923 brought a tarnished final chapter to Tom Crean's gilded life. He began to spend too freely and was plunged into debt. He struggled to maintain his Mayfair practice and was taken to the bankruptcy courts. The adventuring was over, and Crean died at only 49, a shadow of the free spirit he had once been. He died in bed. His boast to a Somme general had come ironically true.

Only four rugby internationals were awarded the Victoria Cross and three of them came from Wanderers. Tom Crean was one.

The Dublin-born man is buried in St Mary's RC Cemetery, Kensal Green, London. His VC can be seen at the Army Medical Services Museum, Keogh Barracks, Aldershot.

For ‘rugby theme’ stamp collectors, it is interesting to note that the South African Post Office launched their third stamp issue – ‘Angels of Mercy’, in a series commemorating the Anglo-Boer War on 1 August 2000. They produced a set of two stamps – one of the Rev. Kestell, a Dutch Reform Church minister who served with the Boer Commando, and the other of Capt. Thomas Crean VC.

With special thanks to archivist Willow Murray and rugby historian Paul Dobson, Cape Town.

## *Robert Johnson*
## *South Africa 1896, 2 caps*
## *Ireland 1893, 2 caps*

### An Intrepid Wanderer

Robert Johnson, who played with Crean at Wanderers and on the South Africa tour of 1896 when he was 24 years of age, was another rugby player to be awarded the VC. Originally from Kilkenny, like Thomas Crean he stayed on in South Africa when the tour was over and played rugby for Transvaal.

He enlisted in the Imperial Horse Brigade and won his VC at Elandslaagte on 21 October 1899. His former team-mate, Crean, attended to him after he was injured under heavy fire at point-blank range. Capt. Johnson was not a man to cross or mess with. Continuing to charge at the enemy along with Capt. Charles Herbert Mullins, also mentioned in the citation for the VC, they enabled a flanking movement that secured their position and decided the outcome of the battle. Capt. Charles Mullins was a brother of one of Johnson’s team-mates on the Lions tour three years earlier.

One can only speculate about the parallels of combat on the pitch and the camaraderie and allegiance later displayed when fighting in the Second Boer War. Rugby featured strongly in Johnson’s family; two of his brothers

also represented Ireland at the game. It would appear that bravery and loyalty developed through rugby readily transferred to the battlefield. Apart from the VC awarded to him, Robert Johnson also received the Queen's South Africa medal and bars and the King's South Africa medal for his service following his roles as Commandant at a concentration camp at Middelburg, Mpumalanga, in 1902 and as Eastern Transvaal District Commissioner, 1903.

Discipline and determination continued to dominate Johnson's later life as he joined the Prison Service on his return to Ireland in 1911 when he turned 40. He became Commandant of the POW camp at Oldcastle 1914–15, and was appointed Governor of His Majesty's Convict Prison at Maryborough, Portlaoise, in 1915, before returning to Oldcastle in 1916. In 1918 he was appointed a Resident Magistrate. He returned to Kilkenny in later years and that is where he died.

## *Alexander Findlater Todd*
## *South Africa 1896, 4 caps*
## *England 1900, 2 caps*

### An Early Performer

In 1896, Alexander Findlater Todd, son of a wealthy wine merchant, set sail for South Africa to play on the rugby tour that would keep him away from home for three months. The trip not only provided him with great contacts for the family business, but he was travelling with Thomas Crean and in 1902 would marry his sister, Alice Mary Crean.

His letters home, a selection of which follows, show the lifestyle of those who could afford to travel in those days and they provide great social commentary on the period. He wrote often and gave frank observations on South Africa, which was not much more than frontier country at the time, very much like the Wild West in places. These Tourists knew

how to have fun – wine, women and song often the backdrop to their training schedules. Yet, despite the high jinks of youth and the privilege of position, Alexander Findlater Todd was another young rugby-playing man who gave his life for his country when he died of injuries resulting from wounds inflicted during the action of the British assault on Hill 60 at Ypres Salient in 1915. He had survived the Boer War although wounded in action during that campaign too.

By Alexander Findlater Todd (22 years of age):

6 June 1896 – on board the Union Steam Ship *Tartar*

As we are arriving at Madeira tomorrow morning, I thought perhaps you would like to hear from him [*sic*]. So far everything has been first rate and the sea is somewhat like a millpond; the consequence is that everybody is extraordinarily cheerful; in fact such has been the case ever since we started. Among the first class passengers, there are very few of the latter besides the twenty odd of the team. Only about half a dozen of us were badly afflicted, your affectionate son *not* being among their number, though after oversleeping himself rather badly and not waking up until well inside the Bay of Biscay, it took him rather a long time to get up; nevertheless, his internal arrangements have in no way suffered, judging by the heated appearance of the stewards who run about for his 'wittles'.

Sports were started yesterday afternoon, of course, and everyone felt fit and strong, and some surprising talent was shown, the 'present scribe' distinguishing himself from all competitors by the number of times he missed the pail. I have always heard that being on board for a long voyage rather tends to make one sentimental, but the Steamship Company didn't look after us in that respect, as I don't think there are more than two unmarried ladies in our part, and they seem pretty full up with acquaintances already.

14 July

As I suppose you have already seen in the papers that we arrived all safe here, you are no longer anxious. Our boat missed the homeward bound mail by two hours; in fact we passed it almost within speaking distance a few miles out from the Cape. So again if you wrote out by the mail I left, I shall most probably get your letter about a few hours after this leaves. In my last epistle I recounted the meagre events of the voyage to Madeira. We all went ashore there and walked up an enormous hill with the sun between 90 and 100, and consequently arrived at the top several pounds lighter than we started, but we consoled ourselves with the idea that it

was ‘good for training’, and came down in about ten minutes from the top in a toboggan, the recognised method of progression there, where all the streets are cobbles worn smooth as glass. Then we sampled the wine and fruit of the country and walked about under palm trees, picking bananas and tropical orchids.

Against Cape Town Clubs I managed to score the second try of the tour; hooray for Taymount, that is fourteen points to nine. After the match we came to the conclusion that three weeks on board ship, lying on one’s back, coming after a hot English summer (including items such as May week festivities) is not conducive to good training. In the last ten minutes I would gladly have changed places with a corpse; the papers gave us rather a slating next day, but how on earth did they expect us to get fit. Everybody thinks we did well to win at all, as the others are much better than any London team bar Blackheath, and had been training for five weeks for us. I think five weeks training is better than two days at it.

On Sunday, after going to early service, we drove out to a lovely place called Hout Bay; about fourteen miles out from the town, and had a sort of picnic. Mr Barney Barnato [mining entrepreneur] turned up just as we finished lunch. Another celebrity in the form of Melton Prior, the war artist of *The Graphic*, was there also. That just reminds me that we came out on the *Tartar* with Captain F.E. Younghusband, one of the first two men to get to Chitral and who has explored all sorts of unheard of places; he was an awfully nice little chap – he’s been sent out here to discover the truth about Jameson [British colonial statesman Leander Starr Jameson]. We also made friends with a millionaire on board named Bertram, who owns a place called Bertram’s Township, practically inclusive of half of Johannesburg.

On Monday we drove out to Cecil Rhodes’ place where Miss Rhodes took us in hand and showed us all over the house, a lovely old Dutch mansion right under the shadow of Table Mountain. Rhodes is not here now, as he’s watching the Matabele war, so she has invited us to lunch out there tomorrow. (We’re doing ourselves pretty proud with our millionaire acquaintances, aren’t we?)

In the afternoon we played our second match, against the Suburban teams, the first being against the Town teams, and won by a goal and a try (8 pts.) to nil. It was one of the hardest games I’ve ever played, especially as one of our men, Mackie, got his nose broken and had to go off for about ten minutes. But he came round afterwards and finished the game. The ground was even harder than before, and we’ve lost square yards of skin between us.

In the evening we (one or two of us, I mean) were asked to perform at a smoker [a room set aside for smokers]. I consented with the other songsters as we thought there would only be about 40 or 50 people present and no formality. Judge of our horror when we’re taken to a place larger than the Queen’s Hall in Regent Street, with the best part of a thousand people there, and told that that was the smoker. We were after thinking that we had been directed to the Albert Hall or a Handel Festival by mistake, but in we walked, being directed to seats at the top end. We

walked up, the whole place rising and cheering like mad, and to think that we'd got to *sing* to them on a raised platform. I wished my boots had been sizes larger so that I could have sunk into them and disappeared, but it was not to be and we had to go through with it.

Last night, feeling sore and out of sorts, I was asked round to a meeting of the Orols Club (it corresponds in a way to the Savage Club, London) in order to meet Mark Twain, who has just completed a tour round the world. They gave him a book of photos and the old chap made an awfully good speech in reply. Then blow me, if they didn't make me sing again; my inside was all topsy-turvy and I never thought I should get through it, especially as it ended up on top A, but I managed it somehow and then went to bed and dreamt of foghorns and steam whistles.

July – Grahamstown

I don't think any of you are great letter writers at home. I think I am creating a record, having written home every mail so far, as well as from Madeira.

We had an awfully good time at Port Elizabeth, an awfully good dance among other things. They also gave us an evening performance of *The Mikado* by amateurs, which was distinctly good although Ko-Ko, the chief man, had a shocking cold; yet it was the best amateur theatrical show I was ever at. After the performance we went behind the scene, pulled up the curtain and had an impromptu dance, which must have looked rather funny.

The day after next there was some shooting, but I didn't go as I was quite done up after the ball the night before, and should have had to do with two hours' sleep, which was hardly good enough. At the Ball, the show of beauty was much better than before, likewise the dresses, but about the latter I don't know much. The supper, done by five energetic ladies, was just immense and the lady and her mother whom I took up to it were blessed with fairly healthy appetites and drinkitites, so I got enough to keep going on. My opinion of colonial dancing has not deteriorated one bit; they knock the homeborns into fits. One old sportsman we met here gave us ½ doz. ostrich feathers each, and as he said that if we wanted any more we could have them at trade price, I did a small deal; if you want any more you had better write and let me know, as there is no import duty and these enthusiasts out here practically give them to us.

On Tuesday last we played the Eastern Province XV and won by three goals and a try to nil, although we played badly.

On Thursday we played South Africa and simply sponged up the non-existent puddles with them, although we only won by one goal and a try. Their forwards were laid out absolutely flat several times, although they were heavier than we were. It was the finest forward game I've ever played.

On Friday morning we came on here after a miserable railway journey from 11.50 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. and have got into a beastly hotel where

there is no water to be had for baths. Grahamstown seems a very nice place but not much in the hotel line.

20 July – Kimberley

After sending off your letter I went to lunch with the rest of the team to Cecil Rhodes' place near Cape Town which I described to you in my last letter. Miss Rhodes, his sister, presided and gave us a very good spread, with Veuve Clicquot '89 to drink. It was a good job that we had an hour or two to spare after lunch before playing.

The third match took place the same afternoon against the Western Province XV and, after a tremendous tussle, ended in a draw.

The same evening we embarked on the train for Kimberley, and after two nights and a day spent in smoking &c. managed to arrive here on Friday morning. The same afternoon we were taken to see the big Bultfontein and Premier mines, and managed to spoil all our hats and bruise our noddles in going through the low working tunnels. There's really very little to see in one of these diamond mines except a lot of dirt-covered natives digging and shovelling. The earth-decomposing machines are much more interesting, especially an electric revolving cylinder which is full of strong magnets and picks out all the diamonds with a smallish amount of rubbish which has to be sorted out afterwards by hand. In the sorting they find millions of tiny garnets and green stones too small for setting up and consequently worthless.

Kimberley is mostly built of very rusty, discoloured, corrugated iron. The land is as flat as a pancake and about six inches deep in dust.

The football ground has absolutely not one blade of grass on or near it; it is exceedingly flat which is a good point (its only one). Before playing they have to put a sort of harrow on it which scrapes up the hard surface to a depth of about six inches and then they water it.

We beat Kimberley, or rather Griqualand West, by 11 points to 9, so we have only lost a lot of skin so far, nothing else.

27 July – Bunton's Grand Hotel,
Port Elizabeth

As you may perceive from the above heading, we are still on the travel round. This is about the nicest place we have been to yet, and is distinctly English in every way; our journey here from Kimberley was awfully dreary as we started on Thursday afternoon about 4.30 or 5.00 and didn't get here till 9 o'clock the following night, merely three hours late.

We had a day's buck-coursing at Kimberley on the open veldt or prairie, and had some rather good sport. The buck were mostly a kind of small antelope and go like the wind; we weren't allowed to ride as we had a stiff match on the next day, so our energy was confined to carts from which there wasn't much to see after the first few seconds unless the buck ran in a circle. We had to get up at six in the morning which came rather hard as we had had a dance the night before and didn't get to bed till the small hours. The ladies of Kimberley aren't much to look at, my

first three introductions being ladies of distinctly mature age, consequently relegated to the after part of the programme when I was a mile or two away from the scene of the dance. Still the people here are about the best dancers I have ever seen.

The Griqualand West return match was looked forward to by the townspeople as a good thing for the local team, as they had kept in good training whilst we had had picnics, dances, hunting &c. but unfortunately for them we played a great game and won easily by two goals and two tries to nil, which they didn't like at all.

We went down to the big De Beers mine and saw the natives working for the diamonds a thousand feet below the surface; the passages are made for people about 4 ft 9 in. or 5 ft high and we walked about three miles along the various levels; I was rather cute so got behind a man about the same size as myself, and whenever I heard his head bang against the top I forthwith ducked mine, and so escaped concussion of the brain. It was so hot that I must have lost nearly six pounds, and my clothes were nearly dropping off me when I came up. We also went and saw about £500, 000 worth of diamonds, cut and otherwise, of all colours, black, green, blue, orange, white, pink &c. the best being bluish white and a dark orange one. We were each presented with a pocketful of small garnets which I am afraid aren't of much value, but useful curiosities.

A gloom has just fallen on us as Roger Walker, our Manager and President of the English Rugby Union, has just had a cablegram to say his eldest daughter is dying, so he's off home, poor chap. He lives in Pangbourne.

17 August – Rand Club,
Johannesburg (the Club I am writing
from has an entrance fee of £100!!)

My last letter was from Queenstown, where we had horrid weather and had nothing to do but sit in a smoky little sitting room all day and look at one another.

We started away from there at 9.30 on Sunday night and arrived here at Johannesburg on Tuesday morning about 11 o'clock, just about sick of the journey.

We had a fair sample of Johannesburg prices at Breakfast on Tuesday morning, as after gaily eating half a dozen cheese sandwiches we were informed they were only 1/-, and a large bottle of beer 4/-! Thank goodness most things are paid for us here.

I got my money up here at last, having to wire Cape Town for it.

This place is simple marvel considering that only ten years ago there was exactly one house here in the middle of a desolate prairie – it's far and away the biggest place in S Africa, and they've got everything here that it's possible to have.

Yesterday we drove out to Doornkop where Jameson had his fight; it's about 15 miles from here and is the most one-sided position imaginable. The Boers were all behind rocks and had all Jameson's men against the skyline. Of course we all went trophy hunting; one or two managed to get

cartridges, but the rest had to be content with horses' shin bones &c. It was awfully interesting (especially when we got left behind on the veldt and had to walk eight miles to the station).

We played the Diggers on Wednesday and beat them by seven points to nil (one goal from mark and one try). The ground is *just the road* with most of the stones taken off.

On Sunday we played the Transvaal, supposed to be our hardest match, and beat them by three goals (one penalty) and a try to one try (16 points to 3). We were told that if they won, the Dutch would consider it another international victory, so we bucked up a bit.

For the match today there are only ten able-bodied men, four crocks and one invalid playing for us!

2 September – Royal Hotel, Cape Town

I missed the last mail by a few minutes, owing to mistaking the time; that's the very first opportunity I've missed for three months of writing to you, and I feel very good indeed just now. This is the last letter you will have from me from these parts, as I arrive a week after it in good old England again, and I shan't be sorry either. We're all just about played out now, having played nineteen matches and travelled ten thousand miles in ten weeks. The day I sent my last mail to you we played against Johannesburg town and could only with the greatest difficulty manage to raise 15 men to take the field; in fact one had fever all the morning before playing, but we won easily all the same.

We also won our return matches with Transvaal and S Africa. In the last match, quite unknowingly, I did a neat bit of gallery play, as I got a try and got winded at the same time and learnt afterwards that it happened within about 20 yards of my favourite partner at a dance the night before. I think it was rather neat as I was unconscious of the fair lady's presence. I shan't forget that dance in a hurry; there were about 450 to 500 people there instead of 300 and I had 26 dances down on my programme; that holds the record for the tour so far. Johannesburg people are absolutely the most untiring lot in their hospitality that I ever hope to come across. From nine in the morning till midnight they did us as proud as they could; they never left us, they wouldn't allow us to pay a thing – dances, dinner, concerts, native war dances, mines, picnics, tennis parties, drives, theatres, variety entertainment, in fact absolutely everything to make us enjoy ourselves, and they did their best to keep us fit all the way through and never forced us to do anything we didn't want to, if it was bad for training.

Going back to Kimberley, which someone described as the 'last place God made', was just too awful after Johannesburg. We won our two matches there against Cape Colony and S Africa again. We've only got two more matches now, and we want a rest badly.

You'll see me a week after the arrival of this letter; we sail on the *Mexican* on 9 September.