

CHAPTER I – THE TRIPLE CROWN

HEN'S TEETH

Contrary to popular belief, there *is* a Triple Crown trophy. It's kept in the Museum of Rugby at Twickenham. It's an odd-looking thing, around 450 millimetres tall, and carved out of ... coal. The catalogue may describe it as 'burnished anthracite' but that doesn't stop it being a lump of coal hewn from the Haig Colliery in Cumbria in 1975. A retired miner by the name of Dave Marrington got to work with his penknife and turned it into a surprisingly ornate work, with a crown (surprise, surprise) sitting on a four-sided base on which are represented a rose, a shamrock, a thistle and the Prince of Wales feathers.

It ain't pretty. Tudor Jones liked it, though. Jones was sports editor of *Coal News*, a weekly publication with a circulation of just under half a million readers across the UK in the mid-70s. Tudor thought Marrington's creation was an appropriate prize for a Crown-winning team (in those days, that only meant Wales) and waged a campaign to have it accepted by officialdom. He lugged the thing to Edinburgh, Twickenham and Dublin, and wrote prolifically on the subject. He received polite rejection slips from all four home unions. He tried to enlist the support of Welsh players but had no joy. As he wrote: 'Gareth [Edwards] and Gerald [Davies] have told me that they preserve, even protect, the Triple Crown myth. They see beauty in their piece of rugby make-believe. I have no wish to spoil their dream either. After all, they are miners' sons, proud and true, to the roots. In a nice way, I can keep my coal.' Nice try, Tudor.

As to the provenance of the name 'Triple Crown', no-one is altogether sure, though it's generally assumed that a journalist is responsible. Several

rugby histories state that it was first used in the *South Wales Daily News*, a forerunner of the *Western Mail*, on 20 March 1899. In fact, *The Irish Times* got there at least five years earlier. Witness the introduction to the newspaper's Ireland v Wales match report on Monday, 12 March 1894: 'After long years of seemingly hopeless struggle Ireland has achieved the triple crown honours of Rugby football. For the first time in the annals of the game have the Hibernians proved beyond cavil or doubt their right to be dubbed champions of the nations and that the Irishmen fully deserve the great distinction no one will deny ...' Hurrah for Hibernia!

We'll probably never know whether this is the first written reference to the Triple Crown. It doesn't really matter. It's a wizard place to start.

1894

It's appropriate to use the *Irish Times* archives as a source for anything to do with Irish rugby in the 'gay '90s'. Rugby was primarily a game for the Protestant middle class, whose attitudes were reflected by that newspaper. The only Catholic in Edmund Forrest's 1894 team was Tom Crean – no relation to the famous explorer – who had been educated by the Jesuits at Clongowes Wood and who went on to earn the Victoria Cross for services rendered to the British Empire in the Boer War.

Of the eighteen players used in the three games, thirteen were from three Dublin clubs – Wanderers, Dublin University and Bective Rangers – and the remaining five were from Ulster. They had a variety of occupations: doctors, clergymen, a university lecturer, a detective, an auctioneer, a solicitor, merchants and company directors. When, on Monday, 12 March, the Dublin contingent opened their *Irish Times*, their eyes might briefly have been distracted by advertisements for department stores like Clery's, Switzer's, McBirney's and Brown Thomas. They would have skipped over the ad for Congreve's Balsamic Elixir ('The World's Grand Remedy'), but maybe paused to read a forecast of Queen Victoria's speech for the opening of parliament. The editorial writer believed 'things in Ireland' had improved considerably since Mr Gladstone had been removed from office



The Ireland team that beat England 7–5 at Blackheath, 3 February 1894. *Back row:* James Lytle, Tom Crean, Harry Lindsay, R Garrett (President, IRFU), Charles Rooke, Walter Brown, Lucius Gwynn, E McAlister (Honorary Secretary, IRFU); *Seated:* Bertie Wells, Willie Gardiner, Edmund Forrest (captain), John O'Connor, Sam Lee; *Front:* Ben Tuke, George Walmsley, William Sparrow, Jack Lytle.

for the fourth and, given his failing health, surely the last time. This, he assumed, would be the end of that Home Rule nonsense. Eventually, on page five, the reader would find a lively report on events in Ballynafeigh, Belfast, the previous Saturday.

You need to use your imagination to get a picture of what rugby union was like in 1894. It's worth remembering that it was a relatively new sport. Ireland had played its first international game a mere nineteen years previously and this was only the eighth season they had fixtures against all three

THE FULL BAG OF CHIPS

of the other 'home nations'. You have to wonder about the standard of organisation when it's reported that Ireland turned up two men short for their game in Cardiff in 1884 and had to borrow a couple of Welsh players. You have to wonder about the quality of the tackling when it emerges that D B Walkington, Ireland's full-back in the late 1880s, wore a monocle while playing. Scores were infrequent – Ireland's 'for and against' aggregate for their three victories in 1894 was just 15–5. It was, as Bective forward John O'Connor later recorded in his diary, attritional stuff:

'In those days, handling was not developed to the same extent that came later. The game was left almost entirely to the forwards and the scrums were grim affairs, with all their forwards giving full weight to the shove. There were no specialised positions such as hooker or wing forward, and every forward was expected to be an accomplished hooker. First up, first down was the rule. The backs were used mainly in defence.'

There were a couple of changes for the 1894 championship. For the first time, Ireland followed the Welsh model of using seven backs instead of six. The selection committee was reduced from ten to six, while this was also the first championship when referees were given full powers and no longer had to wait for appeals from players. Quite how much all of this had to do with Ireland winning the Triple Crown is uncertain. What's clear is that they weren't expected to win it.

Ireland were installed as 5/1 outsiders for the opener at Blackheath against England. They won 7–5 but left it late. Trailing 3–5 in the dying minutes, they had Forrest to thank for a late drop-goal, then worth four points. They left it late three weeks later at Lansdowne Road too, when Bective's winger Bertie Wells scored the decisive try against Scotland in front of a crowd of 10,000.

The championship was still at stake when Wales, the Triple Crown holders, arrived at the 'Ulster Cricket Club enclosure' following a 7–0 victory over Scotland in Newport. Our enthusiastic *Irish Times* correspondent reported that there was controversy even before kickoff: 'The occasion under notice was the first on which the Welsh match was played in Belfast

and if the Taffies can possibly do anything to prevent it, it will be the last. The venue is by no means an ideal football ground and the visitors showed lively dissatisfaction with it, and before the commencement of the game entered a protest against the match being played. Their contention was that the ground was not of the required measurement, being some eight yards too narrow and six yards short of the standard dimensions, in addition to which they considered the corners bordering on the cinder track were decidedly dangerous.'

The rain of the preceding days had also left the surface sodden, forcing the club executive to start carrying out impromptu draining operations at six in the morning. But there was no thought of postponement – two Great Northern Company trains had brought 800 spectators from Dublin, which 'considerably augmented the company, which at the commencement of hostilities could not have been far short of 6,000 – a very respectable figure for Belfast, where the association game is most thought of'.

God love our saturated scribe, who produced an exhaustively descriptive account of what was, by common consent, a dreadful contest played in dire conditions. The game's one score came early and was described thus: 'Escott was quickly brought to book by the referee and as events proved, he cost his side the match. A "scrum" was being fought out midway between the Taffies' 25 and the line when the Cardiff half-back picked the ball out, for which, of course, Mr Rainie awarded Ireland a penalty free, and John Lyttle kicking a magnificent goal, the cheering was loud and prolonged.'

The anonymous writer maintained a degree of objectivity, noting that it was 'very tantalising to the Taffies' to lose by a solitary score. But fair is fair – 'We said the Hibernians were lucky to win but no-one will grudge them this slice of fortune's favour, remembering, as all footballers must, the cruel hard lines we have had in previous years.'