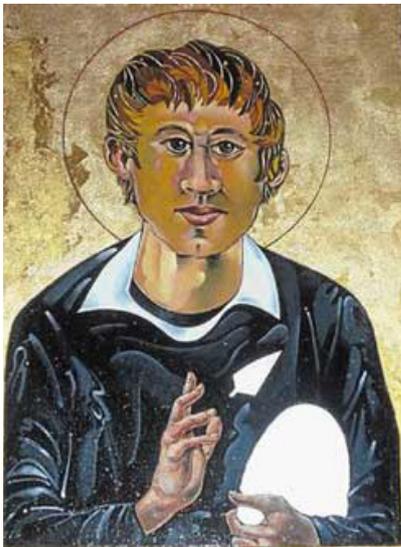


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ESSAY 9

ALL THE SUFFERING ON OUR BACKS

Rugby, religion and redemption amid the ruins

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Painting by Don Little¹
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INTRODUCTION

New Zealand's All Black rugby team is a national icon, an affirmation of the manly, self-reliant and resilient virtues which New Zealanders like to think they possess. In times of national peril, economic uncertainty and disaster they remain a pillar of certainty and inspiration, present in almost every television news bulletin and daily newspaper.²

1 www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/jesus-black-cathedral-seeks-divine-1812091

2 This essay grew out of a paper presented to the Media Asia conference in Osaka in November 2011. I would like to thank postgraduate Communication Studies student Jonathan Waugh for his contribution to the original conference presentation and Fumiko Goodhue for translating Japanese sources.

At other times the All Blacks – whether current players or not - have also provided the media with a frame of reference for explaining significant international events to New Zealand audiences. In 2011 the All Blacks were used prominently to report on the Christchurch earthquake and the much greater seismic devastation experienced in Japan. However, as the Rugby World Cup approached both New Zealand and international media also began to invest the performance of rugby players with a quasi-religious expectation that they would somehow provide catharsis and healing for the earthquake victims in New Zealand and Japan. In doing so they reflected processes that had occurred elsewhere, notably in New Orleans after Cyclone Katrina, the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa and London after the July 2007 terrorist attacks.

Rugby has been described as a religion in New Zealand. It is certainly an obsession. Located on the fringes of the north Antarctic and exercising little global economic, political or military influence, New Zealand constantly seeks to mark a space for itself on the world stage through sport. Despite the success of its sportsmen and women in a variety of competitions, rugby remains the central, if not the driving force, in New Zealand sport and in its quest for global recognition. New Zealand's national team, the All Blacks, is freighted with all sorts of social, cultural and quasi-political expectations. (Crawford, 1986; Massey University, 2011). Hope (2002, p. 236) argues that:

From 1905 to about 1960, rugby union was a defining feature of regional identity and New Zealand national consciousness. To actually play for the All Blacks was to enter national service. In each physical encounter, the reputation of New Zealand was at stake. This responsibility was reiterated by press and radio coverage nationwide.

While Hope says the nature of New Zealand identity (and thus, by implication, the role of the All Blacks in forming that identity) was questioned in the 1960s and 70s, the media have continued to use the All Blacks as a useful, if simplistic, frame for explaining significant local and international events, especially natural or man-made catastrophes, to New Zealand audiences. As we shall see, during the Christchurch and Japanese earthquakes in 2011 they were used to represent certainty and inspiration in dozens of television news bulletins and newspaper reports.

New Zealand coverage of the Christchurch earthquake tended to focus on the heroic and on the survivors. The media used football players as iconic figures, especially as inspiration for survivors or because they were personally involved. Rugby players, especially All Blacks, are often used by the New Zealand media as a frame for narrating difficult or complicated stories, especially when they happen overseas. Why the views, thoughts or experiences of football players should be regarded as being important enough to be constantly paraded before the public can only be explained by considering the history of the game in the country.

In New Zealand rugby began as an elite sport imported from Oxford, but became part of mainstream culture. In early colonial societies survival was often seen as depending on obedience, team work and the suppression of the desires of the individual to the needs of the community. In the 19th Century the British promoted - at home and in the Dominions - the ideals of 'manliness,' 'team spirit' and the notion that what really mattered was to take part and, if you couldn't win, to still feel superior to your opponents because you had lost gallantly.³ In such societies conformity and discipline were emphasised⁴ (Crawford, 1985, 1986; Grainger, 2008; Nauright, 1999; Minogue, 1965). However, early literature refers to the role of rugby as a social leveller in colonial New Zealand.

Pioneering rugby in New Zealand helped create a sense of community and identification in a society experiencing rapid urban development and the growth of civic consciousness. The game was one answer to the industrial anomie in the 1880s. Many of the factory workers in Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington in the 1880s were only a generation or so removed from their former roles as suburban shopkeepers, village dwellers and farm labourers. The enthusiastic following for rugby made possible "a new sense of belonging, a ritualistic involvement in a larger group" (Crawford, 1985, p 79). It is possible to speculate on the notion of a strategy to engage the masses in activities which would inculcate sound moral values, divert energy from harmful pursuits and breed the physical and mental toughness needed to strengthen national fibre.

This belief that rugby players exemplify desirable national characteristics may explain why it sometimes appears that parts of the New Zealand media think New Zealanders will be unable to comprehend a major story unless there is the familiar figure of a rugby player or some connection with rugby to make the story somehow understandable and appealing.

Early in 2011, for instance, New Idea carried a front page story about former All Black Frank Bunce and his 'escape' from Cairo during the beginning of the Arab Spring. Told in breathless tones, the story presented Bunce as the central figure and told of his experiences in trying to get on a plane in an airport terminal full of panic stricken people:

'We made a narrow escape,' the father of five says. 'There was no order. [Airport authorities] closed the doors and started cancelling flights. It was bedlam. 'It's almost like being in a scrum. People were arguing and physically fighting,' he adds. 'You were at the mercy of the mob' (Botting, 2011).

Bunce was in fact a long way from the main action at Tahrir Square and his experiences were not unlike those of most other people at the airport. While Bunce expressed sympathy for the Egyptians, little attempt was made in the

³ Such views being most famously expressed, of course, in Sir Henry Newbolt's poem *Vitae Lampada*.

⁴ Sport performed a similar function elsewhere. One thinks, for instance, of the "virtuous manliness" of Gaelic sports described by McDevitt (1997).

story to put the Egyptian situation in perspective and the magazine's cover promoted the piece as being about a heroic All Black escaping from the clutches of a mob of excitable foreigners. The coverage of the Japanese and Christchurch earthquakes was little different.

THE CHRISTCHURCH EARTHQUAKE

The Christchurch earthquake struck the Canterbury region in the central south island of New Zealand at 12:51pm local time on February 22, 2011, with a magnitude of 6.3. The epicentre of the earthquake was situated two kilometres west of the town of Lyttelton, the main port for the Canterbury Region, and 10 kilometres south-east of Christchurch's city centre at a depth of about five kilometres. The earthquake resulted in 181 deaths and 1500-2000 injuries, 164 of them serious. Aftershocks caused an estimated US\$12-13 billion worth of damages. The February earthquake was New Zealand's second-deadliest recorded natural disaster after the 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake (Vaidyanathan, 2011).

What became known as the Great East Japan Disaster struck the Tōhoku region of eastern Japan at 2:46pm local time on March 11, 2011, with a magnitude of 9.0. The epicentre for the earthquake was about 70 kilometres east of the Oshika Peninsula, Miyagi Prefecture, in the Pacific Ocean at a depth of about 32 kilometres. The initial earthquake resulted in the formation of tsunami waves of up to 40.5 metres, some of which travelled up to 10 kilometres inland and which, in turn, caused a number of accidents at nuclear power plants in the affected areas. The simultaneous disasters resulted in 15,799 confirmed deaths, 5,297 injuries, and 4,041 missing people. Aftershocks and the nuclear incidents caused to date an estimated US\$122 billion worth of damages. The Great East Japan disaster is Japan's most powerful recorded earthquake to date and one of the deadliest natural disasters to have struck Japan. It is the fifth most powerful recorded earthquake in the world (Siddique, *The Guardian*; Department of International Affairs, Japan Science and Technology Agency, 2011; Risk Management Solutions, n.d).

Initial media reports about the February earthquake in New Zealand international media tended to focus on the overall destruction of the city centre of Christchurch, paying particular attention to the destruction of the Anglican Cathedral and other heritage buildings and city landmarks (McMorran, 2011; Swami, 2011). Particular attention was paid to damage done in and around the central city district of Christchurch, especially that which occurred in the exclusion zone of what has come to be known as the Red Zone.

Early coverage of the February earthquake also concentrated on the collapse of the CTV building and gave an even handed account of the effect of the quake on Cantabrians as a whole. The focus on the CTV building may have been because it

was home to Canterbury Television and therefore many of the dead were known to the media in the rest of New Zealand. It can be assumed, however, that the concentration of coverage was also due to the large number of foreign students – including many Japanese – who were killed when the language school in the building collapsed. A significant proportion of the death toll from the February earthquake came from the collapse of the CTV Building.

The damaged AMI Stadium at Lancaster Park received a lot of attention (Ford, 2011; Mairs, 2011; Tonkin & Taylor, 2011). Although, Lancaster Park and AMI Stadium are not actually located within the Red Zone, the complex is considered the home of rugby in the Canterbury region. It is the home stadium for the local Super Rugby franchise, the Canterbury Crusaders, and was originally one of the intended host stadiums for seven matches of the 2011 Rugby World Cup competition. Reports on the damage to the AMI Stadium at Lancaster Park focused not so much on the actual structure of the stadium buildings as on the damage to the uninsured main playing field due to the mass liquefaction of the soil. Concern about the condition of the stadium was magnified by the fact that it had been designated as a host stadium for seven matches in the Rugby World Cup which New Zealand was hosting later that year.

New Zealand's hosting of the Rugby World Cup was a perfect example of what Black and Van Der Westhuizen (2004) describe as attempts by semi-peripheral polities to promote themselves or seek global recognition by hosting international sporting events they believe will bring them respect, recognition and wealth. Hosting - and winning - the Rugby World Cup was important psychologically to many New Zealanders and the media played up this angle for all it was worth.

When it was found that the field had become too damaged by liquefaction to be played on, a fresh angle was developed about the anguish that would be felt by Cantabrians not only deprived of their home team, but of the chance to host any Rugby World Cup matches. This became a continuing theme in media coverage of Christchurch and became even more pronounced as the eve of the Rugby World Cup approached.

Canadian sports psychologist Lise Valcour declared that there was a definite link between the mental wellbeing of Cantabrians and their lost stadium (Fuseworks Media, 2011). She went on to say that success in the world cup offered the battered city a chance to heal, as if every homeless, freezing, unemployed Christchurch inhabitant would find solace in the outcome of a sporting tournament.

Valcour said Christchurch people had not fully comprehended the damage to their city and the impact of missing out on hosting Rugby World Cup games. She said becoming aware the psychological reactions of earthquake survivors was important, especially at a time like the 2011 Rugby World Cup:

Watching World Cup games in the Christchurch stadium is now only a shattered dream. Sadly, Christchurch people will not see their leading All Blacks perform in their own city this year - only on TV. Earthquake

devastations have left over 400,000 Christchurch people in a surreal state. A city left with a deflated sense of pride, a diminished sense of joy, uncertainty, fear, sorrow, pain and suffering. No more eyes of the world upon its amazing rugby team but eyes of the world on people who have lost their city, their homes, their stadium, their games. What is there left? (Fuseworks Media, 2011; The Press, 2011)

As the RWC drew closer, the media's focus shifted from the actual damage and reconstruction efforts to the number of tourist dollars that would not now come to Christchurch. The media also began to focus on stories about rugby teams visiting Christchurch, charity matches and fund raising events and other items designed to boost the morale of Cantabrians.

While fund raisers might be seen as a fairly normal kind of story to run in the aftermath of a natural disaster, the attention paid to visits to Christchurch by other teams took on the air of religious reporting, as if the players were making a pilgrimage to Christchurch to heal the city. This aspect of the reporting was something that grew steadily over the months following the quake. Initial reports about All Black players who were also members of the Crusaders, such as Kieran Read and Andrew Ellis, had depicted them as ordinary blokes lending a hand and as people who recognised that the earthquake was more important than rugby. AFP reported:

This is a bigger thing than footy at the moment, it was the only way to go for us, to be honest," Read told the New Zealand Herald as he worked to remove silt and debris from quake-hit properties Thursday. "We are just wanting to help out in our community, and are doing whatever we can." The loose forward said New Zealand's second city resembled a "war zone" after suffering its second major quake in six months (Tip News, 2011).

LOURDES IN REVERSE

From the moment the AMI stadium was declared out of action, elements of the New Zealand and international media began to report as if the function of the teams gathered for the World Cup was to fulfil a semi-divine function, with Christchurch acting as a sort of Lourdes in reverse. The New Zealand Herald described one such visit as "an emotional pilgrimage," (Bayer, 2011) but made it clear that it was the All Blacks who were there to heal the city as they met with "hundreds of adoring fans" (ibid, 2011). The English team also visited and in its coverage of their visit the religious imagery was made even more explicit as the devastation of the Lancaster Park stadium was contrasted with the destruction of the city's Anglican cathedral.

England's team manager Martin Johnson, the Guardian reported, "Could only gaze at the liquefaction-scarred surface of the old Lancaster Park and extend his sympathy to those suffering far greater trauma" (Kitson, 2011). Then the Australian team visited and the ABC joined other news organisations in describing the loss of the stadium and the subsequent re-scheduling of Rugby World Cup gains as an emotional – if not quite spiritual – loss:

People have watched the parties that have gone on in other cities with the Rugby World Cup games and I think it's more the sort of feeling that we're not part of the party is the thing that's affected people more rather than money (Colvin, 2011).

Rugby provides sporting links between New Zealand and Japan, through competition and the second careers as coaches and players that Japan offers to former All Blacks. It was therefore not entirely unexpected that in their coverage of the Japanese earthquake, the New Zealand media resorted to rugby players to give their coverage a local angle. This story from The Southland Times, offers a good example:

Former All Black Paul Miller watched his television in horror on Friday night as the country he has strong ties to was struck by a devastating earthquake and tsunamis. Waikaka's favourite son carved out an impressive career with Southland and Otago but for the past five years has been playing his rugby in Japan. He said watching many parts of the Japanese landscape which he knew so well go under water was devastating and surreal. The hardest-hit area, Sendai, was where Miller's team use to hold their preseason training camps (Savory, 2011).

Finding a local angle in international stories is a normal practice, but the fact that the media focussed on rugby players can perhaps be an indication that for some sections of the media only a sporting hero will do. The danger of course is that the stories of New Zealanders who are not rugby players might go unreported, thus reinforcing the notion that only the presence of a rugby player can make a story worthwhile or comprehensible.

As with Read and Ellis, the media also looked for stories about rugby players helping out and found them in Pita Alatini, captain of the Kamaishi Seawaves, who stayed on with other expatriate players to help in the aftermath of the quake. The New Zealand Herald reported that Alatini "could easily have fled his adopted home town," but "stayed on to help rebuild the port town he has called home for the past six years" (AFP, 2011). While in no way belittling Alatini's efforts, many foreigners in Japan will have made the same decision. Yet it seems that for some parts of the New Zealand media such actions were only worth reporting if made by a rugby player.

The natural disaster that became known as the Great East Japan Earthquake affected rugby in Japan as much as the Christchurch earthquake did in New

Zealand. A number of events were put off or cancelled altogether during 2011. Among them were the Tri-Regions Tournament scheduled for the middle of March, the YC&AC Japan Sevens competition, which had been set for early April, the Tokyo Sevens which had been scheduled for mid-April and numerous individual games, open days and carnivals. A tour of Japan that was to include four matches with a New Zealand Universities team in April and May was called off (Rugby International, 2011).

In Japan, the actions of Japanese rugby teams in organising fund raising events and dedicating particular contests to earthquake victims were reported. However, the Japanese media tended to report the views of senior team management and concentrate on the efforts of the team and the competition as a whole, rather than singling out individual players for attention as was the case in the New Zealand media. This report from the Asahi Shimbun provides a good example. It reports on the first match played by the Kamaishi Seawaves after the earthquake and uses the same redemptive imagery and quotations as the New Zealand media:

This might have helped Kamaishi take one step closer to recovery', said Seawaves general manager Yoshiyuki Takahashi after seeing the smiling faces of the fans (Asahi Shimbun, 2011).

Later the article reports on the team's involvement immediately after the earthquake. In doing so it presents the work done by players to help in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake as an organised, group effort:

When Takahashi found out that his employer, Nippon Steel's Kamaishi steel mill, was looking for men who could do manual labour, he called on all his players.... 'There are things that we can do using our physical skills,' he told his team, and sent young players out to help carry relief supplies and assist evacuee wheelchair users (Asahi Shimbun, 2011)

TO INSPIRE A NATION ●

Quasi-religious imagery and ideas of catharsis and healing crept into coverage of rugby after the Japanese earthquake as well. In September 2011, during the Rugby World Cup in Auckland, the Rugby News Service reported that Japan hoped:

To inspire a nation with a courageous performance against France ... almost exactly six months after a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and a tsunami devastated eastern Japan (Rugby News Service, 2011).

Former all Black John Kirwan, who was then coach of the Japanese team, was reported as saying the Japanese team:

- would play for all those who suffered in the March 11 disaster, as well as earthquake victims in Christchurch ... He added: "We're going to be taking (on our backs) all the people who are suffering in Japan and also a little thought to the Christchurch people as well (Japan determined to inspire quake victims, 2011).

It is uncommon for a rugby coach to claim that his team is going to carry the suffering of a whole people on its backs. It is not clear whether Kirwan was conscious of the religious allusion, nor whether he saw himself as Jesus or Simon of Cyrene. One wonders whether a Japanese coach would have made the same speech or deified rugby and its players in the same way.

The deification of rugby in the run-up to the Rugby World Cup reached its peak when the Anglican Cathedral in Wellington displayed an icon by the artist Don Little of Jesus dressed as an All Black. The Dean, the very Reverend Frank Nelson, told the Dominion Post the image "was appropriate because of the quasi-religious status that rugby holds in New Zealand" (Wales Online, n.d.).

How then to explain the expectations heaped upon rugby by the media? The simplest answer is that journalists felt that if New Zealand won the world cup it would release all their post-earthquake anguish and pent up emotion and that they would thereafter feel much better. First year drama students will tell you that this process is called catharsis and that the idea dates back to ancient Greek drama, which was in any case a quasi-religious event. Replace the battles of Ajax and Achilles with those of the All Blacks and there, simplistically, you have it.

Sporting events have been presented as a form of national catharsis after a disaster (or at least to be perceived as such afterwards) in many countries⁵. Many American observers have claimed to see just such a process at work in New Orleans, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. There, the return of the National Football League and the hosting of the Super Bowl have been hailed as signs of the city's catharsis, recovery and redemption. Some academics have criticised the media for pushing this particular idea, while others have argued that football is not 'just sport' and that the city's residents benefited enormously from these sporting events. In any case, there was a clear acceptance that some people at least believed that the return of NFL had allowed them to feel better and run joyously through the streets of their wrecked neighbourhoods.

⁵ The 2012 London Olympics, for instance, had a particular resonance with the 2007 London bombings, an idea explored in the 2012 BBC documentary 7/7: One Day in London (Anthony, 2012).

Serazio (2010) argues that even though the city still needed real, concrete solutions to the long term effects of the hurricane, sports journalists were peddling the notion that having the Super Bowl played in the city provided some sort of mystical, mythical triumph. The local media, he claims:

Relentlessly employed a winning team as the trope for metaphorical recovery and a means of the collective simultaneously coping with and escaping from traumatic memory... Through a return to the dome, this story held, traumatic memory could be expunged with almost religious fervour (Serazio, 2010 p.156).

This kind of boosterism was also found in other newspapers. This article from the New York Times is probably as good an example as any:

The Super Bowl has returned to New Orleans this week and it is an event, for now at least, that is the last act of a magnificent comeback by a truly great American city. New Orleans officially shows the country and the world that is all the way back now from Katrina (Lupica, 2013).⁶

DANCING IN THE STREETS

Academics, such as Geary (2012) argue that the healing and redemptive powers of the National Football League (NFL) are real, citing the holding of the Super Bowl in the city as “a moment when seemingly every New Orleanian ran celebrating into the streets, whether their houses were new or still covered by tarps” (<http://edwp.educ.msu.edu/new-educator/2012/recovering-home-from-the-storm-to-the-super-bowl/>).

Geary argues that sport is not ‘just a game’ and cites researcher Marita Gilbert as saying that “... the game allows people the opportunity to have catharsis. It’s not just a release, it’s a culturally specific practice.”

South Africa’s World Rugby Cup victory in 1995 was also presented by the media in a similar manner as a token of the healing of the wounds of apartheid, with pictures of Nelson Mandela handing the cup to Springbok captain Francois Pienaar. Even Hollywood took an interest (Corrigan, 2010) and Clint Eastwood dramatised the event in his film *Invictus* (Eastwood, 2009).

As the Rugby World Cup in Auckland approached, Time magazine’s Matt McAllester drew a link between South Africa’s victory and the potential for a New Zealand win to have a similar effect: “The ultimate salve for the city’s and

⁶ It is worth noting, however, that while sections of the media were boosting the virtues of the NFL, researchers such as Matheson and Baade (2006) argued that although having major league football back in the city might make people feel better, the cost of attracting national league teams back to the city would detract from the money needed to build new houses. Gavin (2007) also pointed out the inordinate cost of returning the NFL and NBA to New Orleans and argued that money should have been spent on housing rather than refurbishing the city’s superdome.

the country's wounds would be for ... the All Blacks ... to lift the Cup after the final game" (McAllester, 2011).

Some commentators saw a clear quasi-religious dimension to the expectations that were being piled on top of the game as the competition progressed. According to Professor Peter Lineham:

The dream and ambition of a sporting triumph, especially on our own shores, is an extraordinary way to create a national religion." This 'quasi-religious' status of rugby, manifested in the contagious nationwide cup mania, has its roots in the days when men lived for the weekend rugby match ... For many, it gave their lives meaning and significance. What becomes religious about this is when rugby starts carrying a value that it can't possibly fulfil and is not designed to provide for. So it becomes a quasi-religion, a substitute for religion ... This notion of the simple saviour, and the heroism of the simple bloke was part of New Zealand's early identity and was a striking feature of rugby ... In practice nobody pretends the All Blacks are gods and we tend to abandon them fairly quickly if they lose. They don't generate genuine moral, ethical principles. Their status is out of all proportion with reality" (Massey University News, 2011).

Out of proportion it may be, but the semi-divine status accorded to rugby by the media and its fans has deeper antecedents and, as we have seen, is not confined to New Zealand. According to Mazur and McCarthy (2011, p12) the rejection of institutional religion by younger Americans has made sport, among other activities, an "alternative site for meaning-making."

Citing pioneer works by Geertz, others see religions as fulfilling a group, rather than an individual function and working to maintain groups and society (Geary, 2012). In this view religion is not a personal matter, but one which supports society through ritual and performs the socially specific function (Eller, 2007; Swatos, 1998). Certain aspects of sport might be seen as mimicking religious rituals and if we accept this premise then we might understand why some fans, players and sections of the media expect (and accept) that a sporting event will have the same power to order the universe and motivate its devotees as the most profound religious experiences (Kunin, 2006).

Unfortunately, however, for all the post-match euphoria that may have been felt after the Rugby World Cups of 1995 or 2011, or after the Super Bowl returned to New Orleans, that city, Christchurch, South Africa and parts of Japan still face serious problems. Two years after the Japanese earthquake many areas remain uninhabited and there are still debates about the long-term effects of radiation, although a recent UN report claims there are no long-term health risks (Asian Scientist, 2013).

In New Orleans, the population had only returned to 81 percent of its pre-Katrina levels by 2012 and seven years after the hurricane devastated the poorer parts of the city, 20 percent of the damaged housing stock has still not been rebuilt.

(Egglar, 2013; Webster, 2014). Jonassen (2012) paints a grim picture of a city still in a fragile state, its streets marked by crime, rotting houses and packs of wild dogs.

The situation in Christchurch is less grim, with tourists now riding busses through the ruins in the centre of the city and real estate agents claiming that things aren't as bad as they seem, but many people are facing a third winter in trailers or houses that have still not been repaired because, it is claimed, insurance companies and the government bureaucracy have not acted quickly enough (Unknown author, 2013; www.news.com.au/world-news/two-years-later-christchurch-quake-recovery-slow/story-fndir2ev-1226582311033).

The reality, of course, is that the catharsis, the high, the feeling of relief from suffering that might be engendered by a victory in a Rugby World Cup or a Super Bowl game, is transient. It is the momentary elation of mob hysteria, the euphoria of a revival meeting that permits those crippled by arthritis to think they can walk again, only to wake the next day still bed ridden and in pain.⁷

When Geary (2012) asserts that sport is 'not just a game' she is wrong. Football games do not repair damaged houses or shelter the homeless or bring back the dead. To borrow a phrase from Lineham, such beliefs are out of all proportion with reality. Neither the All Blacks nor any other sportsman could bear the weight of the semi, quasi, or pseudo-religious expectations piled upon them by the media and nor should they. New Zealanders are proud of the All Blacks, but the next time there is a national or international catastrophe the New Zealand media should treat them as the highly skilled sportsmen they are and not as semi-divine beings who can work miracles.

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⁷ Since the metaphors of redemption and re-birth surrounding sport and the devastation of Christchurch, Fukushima and New Orleans borrow so heavily from Christianity, it is worth, perhaps, noting the words of the Book of Kings (1 Kings 19-12):

...a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

If God is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, one might ask whether He is really is to be found barracking in the football stadium.

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